

Department of State Growth
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By email: consultation@stategrowth.tas.gov.au

Dear Department of State Growth,

Submission on *Refreshing Tasmania's Population Strategy*

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to 'Refreshing Tasmania's Population Strategy'. Such public consultation helps to produce good democratic government in this State and I very much appreciate it.

My submission does not review the policies in your strategy but inspects your *process* of drafting and refreshing it. In 'Diagnosis' below, I submit that your process is defective for such a complex issue as population and has therefore not only produced defective policies (as will, no doubt, be pointed out by submissions from others), but is also unable to competently 'refresh' them. In my subsequent 'Prescription', I therefore propose a new process that is designed to democratically and competently address all long-term issues (including those concerning population). In this way, I address your strategy at a fundamental level that opens up the possibility for Tasmanians to make truly constructive contributions to it. Until your process is reformed in this way, citizens will be unable to make such contributions, largely because of an addiction by them and their government to growth, as explained below under 'Diagnosis'. I choose the word 'addiction' carefully, as its sense of 'a compulsive engagement in rewarding stimuli despite adverse consequences' is arguably accurate, in this situation.

Both the diagnosis and the prescription given below are described in detail in my 2016 book *Rescuing Democracy: How Public Deliberation Can Curb Government Failure* (hereafter, *RD*). I attach a pdf of this as you may wish to look at those details, which are referred to below with their chapter, section and page numbers in *RD*.

Diagnosis: Defects in the current process of policy making

The current process of developing policy such as your Population Growth Strategy is corrupted by the incentives given to politicians by their need to win elections. Those elections also create incentives for citizens to remain badly informed on public policy issues, a problem known to economists as 'rational ignorance'. These democratic defects have been identified especially by economists working in the research program of 'public choice' and also by political scientists working on 'public deliberation'. They are summarized in *RD* on **pages 19-22** and at length in **Chapter 2**.

A major symptom of this government failure (explained as 'triple dysfunction' in **Chapter 2 on pages 126-9**) is an addiction by both citizens and their government to economic growth (which includes growth of population). This addiction is named the 'scarcity multiplier' and its mechanism explained in **Chapter 5**.

It is this addiction that cripples your Population Strategy. It has done this in its initial drafting and is set to do so again in its current 'refreshing'. Your Consultation Paper has many assumptions and assertions that attest to this addiction. For example, its 'Scope' (page 8) prohibits any suggestion in submissions that the population should not grow (or be made smaller). Another example is that your

'Challenges' (to growth) on page 4 neglects to mention one of the biggest: the environmental destruction that causes environmental battles in Tasmania. This 'environmental destruction' may be better described as 'erosion of the ratio of natural capital to population', because it is not only a matter of depleting environmental and natural resource assets but an increase in crowding effects as more and more citizens try to enjoy those assets that remain. You may say that your government is not addicted to growth, because Tasmanians demand it and the government is responding to them. I agree that Tasmanians want economic growth more than they want natural assets to be protected as this was demonstrated by a poll of almost 3,000 of them in 2014, just before the Liberal government was elected: 52% of respondents considered the top issue that would determine their vote was growth of the economy, compared with 11% who chose the environment as their top concern. But this result may indicate that voters are indeed addicted to growth and therefore make sure that their government is as well. The scarcity multiplier theory mentioned above provides the reasoning that this is in fact the case: Both citizens and their government are addicted.

To overcome this addiction in a democratic manner, we need a process of public deliberation that enables citizens to see what they are doing when they try to satisfy their wants in ways that create those wants. Such a process would be capable of addressing complex, long-term issues such as the desirable size and composition of the population. It would be a long lasting, even permanent, process that assists not only the current generation of citizens to understand these issues, but also helps new generations to understand them, as they mature.

This addiction is not new. As we might expect from triple dysfunction theory, the electoral process that produces it means that Tasmanians have been addicted to growth for decades, as we can see from half a century of environmental disputes (which still continue) along with struggles on other long-term issues.

Prescription: A new policy-making process - the People's Forum

A new institution is described in **Part 2** of *RD* that appears to be the best one to provide the process needed to replace your current one for developing a population strategy (and all other government strategies for Tasmania). This institution is called the Peoples Forum (PF). It is compared in *RD* with eight other designs of similar purpose. It would cost about as much as was spent by the Jim Bacon Labour government in the early 2000s, to run it for the decade it may take to prove itself, i.e., around \$10 million. Unfortunately, the Tasmania *Together* experiment was very badly designed, with no preliminary diagnosis of the problem it tried to fix. As is evident from *RD*, the PF is much more carefully thought through, and that thinking is laid out there for other social scientists to evaluate and improve on if they can, before it is tested in the real world of politics. The book *Addicted to Growth* by Robert Costanza (2023) describes the symptoms of the addiction and suggests that motivational interviewing at a society-wide form of participatory governance should be an effective remedy. The PF is designed to do this.

Establishing a People's Forum requires no change in the existing institutions of government, just an addition to what is already there. It therefore does not threaten the careers of current political representatives. Indeed, it should help them, by generating more public respect for them as political servants as it would improve the quality of their communication with citizens and with each other. An institutional innovation that may prove superior to the PF is 'multi-body sortition' (MBS), a design that was published by Terrill Bouricius in the spring of 2013 in the *Journal of Public Deliberation* and summarized by David Van Reybrouck in *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* (2016). However,

establishing MBS may be much more difficult than establishing the PF as its full deployment would completely replace existing elected politicians and many of their institutions. Even if this replacement was done, however, the PF is still likely to be needed to be run alongside it as an antidote to the exclusionary effect on citizens, of sortition as a means of selecting their representatives. The PF design is inclusive in that its polling process is open to all citizens of voting age.

As for the capability of the People's Forum to address the issue at hand ('Refreshing Tasmania's Population Strategy') I draw your attention to **section 7.3 of RD (pages 372-380)** as this indicates how a PF ballot paper might treat this particular issue. In writing *RD*, I selected this topic as one that was both fundamentally important and so complex that to democratically address it, something like a PF process was essential. That attempt to identify and describe the relevant population issues, to select the crucial, long-running questions on each of these, and to provide adequate menus of answers for the voter's choice, is merely a preliminary, indicative draft. It needs review by other experts. You will notice that the population issue needs questions on national as well as State policy and that implies a need for a national PF as well as a State one. But as section 7.3 shows, a State PF can do both jobs by asking questions for both jurisdictions.

My recommendations

1. Have both *RD* and its PF design evaluated by social scientists.

I suggest that you have *RD* reviewed by several social scientists and in particular, have them check the design of the People's Forum and assess whether it is the best and most practical way to improve the capability of democratic governments to design and implement strategic policy, at both State and Federal levels. It may be reassuring to note that before its publication, *RD* was reviewed by two anonymous social scientists at Johns Hopkins University, who advised the publisher that 'this work has merit and should be published without revision'.

2. Establish a Tasmanian PF and fund it for a decade-long trial.

The concern evinced by Premier Jim Bacon about the strategic capability of government in Tasmania has not been successfully addressed, as his '*Tasmania Together*' attempt proved futile. But the problem remains. Worldwide, similar problems are indicated by the malfunctioning and backsliding of many democracies, not least with Trump and crippling polarization in the USA. In this State, following the abortive but visionary attempt of *Tasmania Together*, we have the opportunity to learn from that experience and make a more effective effort to improve our institutions of government. And this time, as the effort would come from a Liberal government, the continuation of this attempt would make it a bipartisan venture, offering another prospect for bringing Tasmanians together.

I hope you find this submission helpful for 'refreshing' not only your population strategy, but your approach to all other strategic concerns in this State. At this time of increasing complexity both nationally and internationally, with the transition to renewable energy creating conflict with environmental protection and contests between democracy and authoritarianism, democratic governments must urgently lift their game. We could help, here in Tasmania, by exploring a new approach.

If you wish to discuss this with me, I would be very pleased to do that.

Yours sincerely,
Paul E. Smith.

5 March, 2023.

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