Refreshing Tasmania's Population Strategy
Consultation paper – January 2023

Background

What evidence would suggest Tasmania was overpopulated given our current levels of production and consumption? If not overpopulated today, how far off are we? Why do we have a crisis in almost every sector of society and the natural environment? These are some of the questions to keep in mind while reading this submission. Mainstream economics seems incapable of supplying the answers – while supplying the world with dangerous climate change, the sixth mass extinction crisis, increasing pandemics and other existential threats.

It is assumed by all governments in Australia that continued increases in Gross Domestic Product (and therefore Gross State Product) have more benefits than costs. The same thinking applies to population increases where, all else equal, the latter will drive the former. Moreover, governments apparently see no end to this situation. If the choice is between GDP increases and recession, they will choose the former. It is assumed the costs of growth, especially environmental destruction, can be contained by technological solutions, human ingenuity, and sheer determination. And, after all, history is on growth's side if we consider certain successes of high-growth nations, and ignore failures, in the post-World War II era. The binary choice I have mentioned – growth or recession – is largely determined by the so-called 'Overton window': i.e., those subjects and theories that power elites deem acceptable for investigation and discussion. No third choice is allowed. 'Green growth' is acceptable because it is still growth.

Debt – whether private or public – also suggests that continual increases in GDP (national and state income) is needed to service the debts. This is a technical matter beyond the scope of this submission, other than to say that the Australian government, as long as it doesn't borrow foreign currencies, has no real debt burden, regardless of its budget (fiscal balance) position (Mitchell et al. 2019). This is because the Australian government does not borrow the money it has already issued – regardless of Treasury's bond sales or Reserve Bank of Australia bond purchases. Federal government debt is best seen as money it has spent into the economy and not yet taxed back out, bond sales notwithstanding. The Australian government is in a unique position as the currency issuer, as opposed to the Tasmanian government as a currency user, so different rules apply. On the other hand, private debt is a critical problem in Australia thanks to mainstream economists' favouring of federal budget surpluses.

The focus for governments in recent decades has been how to reduce the increasingly obvious costs of its *a priori* desirable growth: hence the label 'Department of State Growth' (where growth is *a priori* always good rather than proven to be appropriate today). The Tasmanian government's community outreach on this occasion – the Consultation Paper – seeks ideas on reducing the costs of population growth rather than seeking attitudes to the growth itself. Attitudes of citizens are at best ambivalent (TAPRI 2017-21). Many expert attitudes are damning (Lowe 2022; Lawn & Williams 2022; Rees 2022; Washington & Kopnina 2022).

There is a considerable and growing literature that strongly challenges the binary choice between growth and recession. This is collectively called post-growth literature. It finds that general wellbeing will eventually peak, if it hasn't already, and then decline in nations that breach their biocapacity, producing 'overshoot' and the further loss of natural capital, even if anaemic growth continues in the short term (Rees 2022). If unchecked, this '*uneconomic'* growth leads to collapse, with mass morbidity and mortality. For general wellbeing to improve, nations should not breach their measured biocapacity. This means creating a dynamic steady-state economy at an optimum level or accepting temporary degrowth down to the optimum level (Daly 2015).

Of course, a nation might import real resources from abroad if it encounters resource scarcity at home – except the rest-of-the-world is in a worse position than Australia (GFN 2023). Even so, high-income nations find unconscionable ways to strip more needy nations of resources (Hickel et al. 2022).

The above is true because biophysical resources are quantitatively fixed and cheap, new resources are extremely limited in 2023. Nations can grow successfully as long as they do not breach their biocapacity. Technological efficiencies and productivity improvements can theoretically delay the breach to some extent, with more output and less waste per unit of input, but can just as easily accelerate the breach as more resources can be harvested more quickly. Successful past growth has led to foolish assumptions that growth can continue indefinitely, and, furthermore, the belief there is no viable alternative anyway. Worse, a fixed rate of annual growth, say 3%, is in fact exponential growth: absolute growth increases every year even though the rate may be constant. 3% growth has a doubling time of about 23 years, producing ridiculous amounts of absolute growth as the decades go by. This explains 'the great acceleration' in the post-World War II period leading to today's dangerous Anthropocene where consumption of raw materials is now record-breaking – despite tremendous improvements in efficiency (Steffen 2022). (More production and waste despite efficiency gains is known as the 'rebound effect' or 'Jevons paradox'.)

Post-growth literature, from *Limits to Growth* (1972) onwards, finds that business-as-usual has a high probability of causing collapse in most nations, and probably before 2050 (Turner 2014). This partly explains why almost every sector of Australia's society is in crisis, with no viable solutions from the mainstream – except for the three Ps: population, participation and productivity. Indeed, these 'solutions' have the potential to make things worse, including unusually high immigration to solve an alleged 'skills shortage', an 'ageing' problem, and as a hedge against recession.

Standard growth economics has been made even worse since the 1980s in Australia and elsewhere by neoliberalism, producing a concentration of wealth to the already wealthy via unearned income (economic rents); corrupt behaviour by financial institutions through deregulation; an unstable financial system; and faulty macroeconomics, as exposed by modern monetary theory (Mitchell et al. 2019).

The present Consultation Paper reads as politically charged: it uses the pejorative population '*decline'* rather than the more neutral *'decrease'*. It continually mentions 'sustainable population growth' without any evidence to support the normal meaning of those words (Williams & Taylor 2022). Instead, it defines the term as achieving a balanced age structure regardless of total numbers. This definition defies logic on the main island of Tasmania just as it doesn't on King or Flinders islands. Total numbers obviously do matter as the identity I = PAT encapsulates (where I is environmental Impact; P is Population; A is Affluence; and T is Technology). This is similar to the Kaya identity used by Climate scientists since 1995: F = P x (G/P) x (E/G) x (F/E) where F is carbon dioxide emissions; P is global population growth; G is global GDP; and E is global energy consumption (ScienceDirect).

The document also suffers from anthropocentrism, despite its blithe mentioning of a healthy natural environment.

The many problems Tasmania faces, as with other states, are almost certainly caused by excessive growth itself – both GSP and population – and no amount of band-aids will fix what may well be *uneconomic* growth (costs greater than benefits).

The Tasmanian government's promise to more explicitly measure wellbeing indicators – as the federal government is promising – is welcome and we will await the detail. Properly measured, general welfare will almost certainly decrease if physical throughput in the economy breaches our biocapacity for long enough, producing biophysical 'overshoot' and the continued destruction of natural capital. This decrease in welfare could be ameliorated temporarily if there was wealth and income redistribution such that people were lifted out of poverty and there were other reductions in inequality, but even this progressive measure would ultimately fail if growth continued unchecked.

An increase in GSP is only desirable if it is an increase in *real GSP per capita*, and that is obviously harder to achieve as the population increases beyond a certain point. Even so, an increase in real GSP per capita is still only desirable if the state's natural capital is not continually eroded. Note that the Tasmanian government's State of the Environment Report was due in 2014, so is now more than eight years late. The Australian government's latest State of the Environment Report (2021) repeatedly made the point that both economic and population growth were main drivers of biodiversity loss (SoE Report 2021). There is no strong evidence that we can decouple economic growth from environmental harm – for instance via a complete circular economy (Jackson 2009; EEB 2019; Hickel & Kallis 2020; Lehmann et al. 2022). Even if that was possible, the increase in GSP and population should only come after it was shown that resource throughput was less than the sustainable maximum and there was room for an increase in production-consumption.

Even Australian conservative economic commentators like Judith Sloan, without overt regard for ecological limits, find plenty of flaws in a high-population-growth strategy (Sloan 2023).

In short, economic growth beyond a certain point turns into *uneconomic* growth and the costs outweigh the benefits. If allowed to continue, the environment and society has a high probability of collapse as the history of civilisation shows (Tainter 1990; Diamond 2005; Turner 2014; Ripple et al. 2017; Bradshaw et al. 2021). The Tasmanian government shows no evidence that it understands (i) the optimum economic scale; (ii) the maximum sustainable economic scale; and (3) irreversible tipping points where society could continue to collapse regardless of strong remedial action.

All governments in Australia are failing to increase general wellbeing due to questionable assumptions offered by mainstream economists (Williams 2023a). These economists do not address the concerns raised by heterodox economists, seemingly preferring wilful blindness. Our current situation is unlikely to improve without a new economic paradigm. Mainstream economics is now an in-bred, siloed, degenerate discipline, dominated by groupthink, that punishes dissent and rewards conformity, with little understanding of the real world of biophysical limits that apply to every species on Earth (Galbraith 2021). The precautionary principle is nowhere to be seen.

The Consultation Paper
Table 1, (page 4): Benefits and challenges of population growth

The benefits are exaggerated and the challenges are grossly underestimated in the table.

Many "benefits" are assumed (*a priori)* benefits and may in fact be harmful (stronger economic growth may be *uneconomic* growth; increase in number of working-age people could create overpopulation; the increased tax base could also mean a larger proportional increase in government costs due to population growth). Some are highly subjective benefits such as "vibrancy" which could mean more noise and pollution but is also code for more economic activity, but not necessarily better provision of basic services or increases in wellbeing. More GST revenue is worse than useless if government costs go up equally or even more.

The “challenges” say nothing about the guaranteed further destruction of natural capital (SoE 2021; The Overpopulation Project 2023) which is the *main problem*. The reference to the likely increase in greenhouse gases seems like a token gesture to environmental concern since the environmental costs will go way beyond more greenhouse gases: scientists have highlighted *nine* planetary boundaries and climate change is only one of them (Steffen 2022). There is a reference to the housing crisis, almost certain to get worse with population growth, but no reference to the health, education, aged-care and transport crises (although some of these struggling sectors are curiously highlighted in the benefits column). In sum, continued population growth will likely make good planning outcomes impossible since they are increasingly mutually exclusive.

On climate change, targets of net zero by 2050 are inadequate and limiting warming to a 1.5 degree C rise (not safe even if achievable) is currently not plausible (Engels et al. 2023). States urgently need to set net *negative* targets rather than offer complacency because of hydroelectric generation. Energy independence is also needed which means moving beyond crude oil.

Table 2 (page 7): Factors for long-term sustainable population growth

I strongly disagree with Table 2. It implies a population can grow forever, which is false. Temporary bulges or contractions in an age cohort should be left to work their way through the population pyramid rather than artificially increasing the prime working age (or under 15s). Even the Productivity Commission acknowledges that imported prime workers eventually age and the ‘burden’ problem is compounded in a classic Ponzi scheme (PC 2016). It is well established that positive net migration cannot do much to correct an increase in the median age.

Also, the simple reference to a total fertility rate of 2.1 births per woman (the replacement rate) makes no reference to demographic momentum where a population will continue to have natural increase for decades (as in Australia) with a TFR well below 2.1.

Objectives
Planning arrangements that improve liveability (page 9)

This section seems to be mostly about the adequate provision of services usually funded or coordinated by government – but also the maintenance of (or repair towards) a “sustainable environment”. It is hard to see how increasing Tasmania’s population will result in better planning and service provision – unless it can be shown that physical economic throughput is less than the biocapacity: i.e., available water, arable land, energy resources, timber and fish resources, suitable land for housing, mineral resources, and waste assimilating capacity (all used on a sustainable basis). The argument that if only Tasmania had more people, doing more work, and paying more taxes, we would be able to build and maintain better services is not sustained. A larger population, beyond a certain point, can only make environmental sustainability harder since more resources will be needed to support them. Ethical international trade cannot help since the global population is using resources as if we had 1.75 Earths at our disposal (GFN 2023). There is no indication in this section of how far Tasmania is from achieving environmental sustainability or how it would be measured.

The state government fiscal position is unlikely to be improved by some magic economy of scale where innovation and productivity increase because of population growth (more brain power?) resulting in a net increase in tax receipts including GST – and a reduction in net state government debt. Rather, the increased need for additional infrastructure due to population growth, while simultaneously replacing and maintaining current infrastructure, will likely overwhelm any gains. Australia’s ‘polycrisis’ is likely due to migration-driven population growth overwhelming available resources and waste sinks and producing added complexity and *uneconomic* growth.

The Tasmanian government should abandon the newfangled concept of 'liveability' with its narrow definition and instead focus on improving general wellbeing – for instance by measuring the Genuine Progress Indicator (Lawn & Williams 2022).

Raising children (page 10)

In the 12 months to June 2022, Tasmania had a natural population increase of 929 people, while the total increase in Tasmania's population was 3,600 (about 2,700 from net overseas migration) giving an increase of 0.6%. This gave Tasmania a population of 571,500. Tasmania's population is presumed to increase to 646,500 by 2033, but that figure is mostly dependent on Australian government policy, which can always be changed (Centre for Population 2023).

Australia would be wise to stabilise its population as quickly as possible, if gradually, by first moving to net zero migration (emigration equals immigration, which would still allow for our humanitarian intake). Natural increase in Australia would then gradually reduce to zero, and would eventually turn negative. That is likely to be the ideal situation until Australia's population decreases to a sustainable level (given our high level of production-consumption versus available real resources).

In the above scenario people will still migrate between the states. The advantages of a stable, or gradually decreasing population will likely far outweigh the disadvantages. Populations cannot increase forever, but massive and uncontrolled decreases in population can occur due to natural disasters, famine, pandemics, war and collapse. The latter disaster is what we need to avoid.

The Tasmanian government should avoid any pronatalist position of encouraging childbirth. About half of all pregnancies in Australia are unplanned (Health Direct 2023), although some of these babies will still be wanted. The focus should be on having no unplanned and unwanted pregnancies via adequate sex education, women's health services, freely available contraception, and medical and surgical abortions as required.

A Total Fertility Rate less than 2.1 is the norm in high-income countries and Australia is no exception. As I explain elsewhere, a stabilising of the population, and even a gradual decrease, does not represent a disaster, but will make more resources available. There are genuine questions about effects on real estate prices, home equity versus mortgage debt, and the future of the building sector, but such issues are relatively small and manageable compared with the dystopian future of uneconomic growth and collapse (Bradshaw et al. 2021).

Labour market, skills shortage (page 11)

Australia, like most nations, has suffered from chronic mass unemployment since the end of full employment in the early 1970s. Australia, and of course Tasmania, still suffers from this problem despite some reduction in labour underutilisation since the closure of the international border in 2020. The private sector is unlikely to ever satisfy the demand for jobs, so the government sector must expand to provide full employment (1-2% unemployment and zero underemployment). I reject the mainstream concept of a 'natural' rate of unemployment (NAIRU).

In December 2022, Tasmania's unemployment rate was 3.8% and the underemployment rate was 7.2%. So 11% of the Tasmanian workforce had no work or were looking for more work. This is somewhat worse than the Australian average of 9.5%. Bringing in more overseas workers when 11% of the Tasmanian workforce would like more work makes little sense. High net migration in Australia over recent decades has not fixed the alleged chronic skills shortage. Insofar as there is a genuine skills shortage in some sectors, policymakers should address the causes, such as the high personal

cost of vocational training or tertiary education, failure of employers to train workers, low wages, etc.

A seeming skills shortage in the health sector may be more to do with a maldistribution of doctors in favour of the hospital system and inefficient subsidies to the private sector (Moynihan 2022).

'Creating jobs' via population growth can be worse than useless when the aim should be full employment not simply more hours worked with stable or worse labour underutilisation. High migration is associated with increased labour underutilisation, reduced real pay and conditions (the pre-Covid-19 situation) and migrant-worker exploitation. The Covid-19 international border closure and resultant negative net overseas migration resulted in less labour underutilisation, although wages are still falling or flat in real terms, given recent inflation. Labour market expert Professor William Mitchell has discussed these matters repeatedly in his blog over recent years (Mitchell 2023).

Full employment is possible almost immediately via a federal government job guarantee (Mitchell et al. 2019; Tcherneva 2020; Williams 2023a). All state governments should be pressuring the Australian government to enact such a job guarantee (and I note the Tasmanian Legislative Assembly passed a motion on this issue in September 2020).

Full-time hours should probably be reduced to four days per week (with some productivity improvements) rather than increasing total hours worked to increase GSP. Any loss in output could be partially or fully soaked up by job creation or job sharing. Wealth in Australia must therefore be shared more evenly (for example through the reduction of economic rents) rather than creating more 'wealth' to be shared between more people at the expense of natural capital.

An ageing population (page 13)

It is good that the Consultation Paper does not exaggerate potential problems associated with structural ageing in this section. Problems are likely to be mild and transient, with many benefits as well.

Much of the economic concern around the 'ageing of the population' can be traced back to the first Intergenerational Report of 2002 that convinced then prime minister John Howard to dramatically increase immigration and promote pronatalism. I reject the economic assumptions of these reports and mainstream economics in general, especially the alleged consequences of federal government fiscal deficits and subsequent federal government 'debt' (Mitchell et al. 2019; Kelton 2020).

These types of concerns caused the government to increase the age-pension age to keep people working and delay the paying of pensions. Note in France the age-pension age is now 62. A better strategy would be to lower the pension age in Australia to 60, reduce full-time hours to four days per week, while allowing more people to work if they want (especially via a minimum-waged job guarantee scheme).

The Australia Institute has found that there are many benefits to an ageing population, which would only be temporary anyway (TAI 2004). Similar results were found by O'Sullivan in a Sustainable Population Australia discussion paper (SPA 2020).

Among OECD nations, Australia is not particularly aged and can monitor how other nations experience the transition (Australia's old-age dependency ratio is 30.2 while the OECD average is 33.1).

Tasmania's median age (42) is slightly higher than the rest of Australia (38) but that could mean there are more benefits than costs if we focus on wellbeing rather than GSP or even GSP per capita.

Conclusion

In 2022 the UN General Assembly confirmed that humans have a fundamental right to a healthy natural environment (UNEP 2022). This followed its Human Rights Council finding the same, and, moreover, that all other human rights stemmed from this foundational right. The Tasmanian government must therefore prioritise the protection of the natural environment rather than pushing versions of growth that will almost certainly degrade it.

As with Gross State Product, the costs of further population increases in Tasmania may well exceed any benefits. Even so, the state's population will almost certainly increase, mainly because the Australian government is determined to increase Australia's population via net migration. This will likely make the crises in most sectors within Australia worse: the environment; housing; transport; energy; aged care; education; and health. All state governments in Australia, with the poisoned chalice of providing services in this scenario, should lobby the Australian government to stabilise our population.

Since neither population nor resource throughput can increase forever, it is vital that governments turn their minds to what an optimum (and relatively stable) population level might be. Ecological economists, in particular, can help with this. Mainstream economists are not trained to deal with these issues and simply make matter worse with delusional models divorced from reality.

Humanity is now on a precipice. The Doomsday clock has been set to 90 seconds to midnight thanks to increasing security tensions, worsening climate change, and other existential risks linked to overshoot (Bulletin of Atomic Scientists 2023). The latest UN IPCC Working Group III 'Mitigation Report', the latest UN IPBES extinction report, and the latest Australian State of the Environment Report (2021) all find that economic growth and population growth are now the main drivers of the respective life-threatening problems (Washington & Kopnina 2022; Williams 2022). To deny this is to deny some of our best science.

A future where general wellbeing can be continuously improved, without economic and population growth, has been advanced by ecological economics in general and Herman Daly in particular for decades (Daly 2015). If humanity does not recognise limits it will almost certainly be brutally crushed by bio-geophysical forces.

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