

5 March 2023

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Comment on Tasmania's Draft Population Strategy Consultation Paper January 2023 – Robyn Lewis

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important policy initiative. I commend you on putting forward a draft population strategy, although I do not think this has been sufficiently widely advertised and needs far more lengthy, open and transparent community consultation and public debate before proceeding any further. It affects all Tasmanians, of all political persuasions, including the sometimes-apathetic majority, who still need to be informed of what is being proposed on their behalf, even if they are unmotivated or unable to respond by this deadline.

One of the key reasons why living in Tasmania is so good (and is attractive for people to move here) is that, unlike most mainland states, there is still a sense of community and people often knowing each other, plus other similar intangible benefits. This has a lot to do with the small size of our population. Grow the latter, especially in an uncontrolled/poorly planned and resourced manner, and these benefits are at high risk of destruction (along with the environment that supports it).

As our Premier notes on p 1 of this document: "it is recognised that economic growth alone does not account for a community's success or progress over time. Health, belonging and happiness are key success factors and safe and inclusive communities that attract and retain people from all walks of life are a key priority."

The nation of Costa Rica has long recognised that wellbeing and happiness are critical to developing their nation's economy and community going forward, backed by health measures, and have put these factors ahead of "economic growth at all costs" (again, especially to the environment, which they protect and rebuild, as they are acutely aware of its ability to bring in tourism \$ and to provide health and wellness benefits to their population). It is no coincidence that Costa Rica is now regarded as the happiest country in the world. Unlike their more modern approach, pursuing economic growth alone appears to follow the outmoded 1950s and 60s attitude that regrettably is still prevalent in the Tasmanian Government in 2023, despite the Premier's quotation above.

It is well past time this attitude changed. Indeed, it must change, or you will destroy, deliberately and/or inadvertently, the very fabric of what makes Tasmania special, a large part of which is our (so far) largely conserved environment, and our population's close proximity to it, and all the benefits that brings to Tasmanians, and to our visitors.

Planning in Tasmania is, in my now long and considerable experience, so far from world's best (or even Australia's best) practice that leaving this policy to our current set of planners is fraught with risk. Compare Tasmanian planning to that of Singapore, for example. Yes, their budget and future fund is a lot bigger (in the case of the latter mainly because of better planning and investment) but there they conduct 50 year plans, which are professional, encompass every aspect of planning (including re-greening their island nation, despite its large population), and which amount to a lot more than these 14 pages (much of which appears to me to be motherhood statements and other fillers). Perhaps before going any further you should consult both Singapore

and Costa Rica's long-term plans for a world-class approach that is getting great results for their citizens?

Tasmania needs to lift its planning standards before we commit to any population target, however determined and wherever the migrants are to be attracted from. (This poor planning practice is not limited to DSG – the recently-prepared draft 20-year plan for Hobart Airport was also largely unsubstantiated and with major deficiencies including lack of a full risk analysis, although that said, it is a lot better than this document).

Even NSW State planning, criticised as it often is, is far better and produces far superior outcomes than those we see almost every day here in Tasmania, which are often largely a series of ad hoc, often politically motivated and/or benefits-for-mates deals with no congruency, little heed for what makes Tasmania special, or the real, current needs of the majority of the current population apart from those of the vested interests (better health and education being high on the list), or our future. Tasmanians, and indeed Australians, are more than tired and angry about this approach, as evidenced nationally by the recent change in Federal Government. Our young people are also seriously disillusioned.

It is time this poor practice stopped in Tasmania too, and this document and what it describes is a clear and timely opportunity for us to stand back from these vested interests and powerful industry lobby groups, and look at what Tasmania and our existing population really needs, and to analyse and quantify the risks of what might go wrong should these poorly-thought-through plans go ahead. (Risk analysis overall is lacking in this paper, as it also appears to be lacking in much of the Tasmanian government's planning, again from my own direct experience).

Firstly, your document fails to address the fundamental question of what is the optimal population size for Tasmania to achieve best sustainable social, economic and environmental well-being outcomes?

To point out the obvious, unlike other Australian states, Tasmania is an island, and is relatively small. Determining the optimum population for an island community involves considering a variety of factors, including

- the size of the island
- the availability of resources
- the carrying capacity of the island's ecosystem
- the social and economic needs of the community, and
- the potential environmental impacts of human activities.

Some of the key factors to consider when determining the optimum population for an island community thus include:

Size of the island: The physical size of the island – and available land for housing and associated infrastructure, recreation areas, schools, industry, farmland etc - determines the maximum number of people that can be accommodated without causing overcrowding and other social and economic problems. A significant % of Tasmania is not capable of being developed, whether being World Heritage areas, National Parks, covenanted lands, geographically or geologically unsuitable, or etc. Certainly however there is opportunity to better develop existing developed areas, but again not by ad hoc, vested-interest-driven measures.

Natural resources: The availability of resources, such as food, water, and energy, will determine the maximum number of people that can be sustained by any island's ecosystem. In Tasmania, despite our relatively high rainfall, water is a major constraint,

due in part to a lack of infrastructure to treat our water to potable standards. Many areas of Tasmania still do not have acceptable standards of drinking or household use water. Agricultural and horticultural development is already being constrained by the lack of treatment capacity in some areas. Until this significant water issue is addressed, in my opinion, we should not be promoting population increases at all. Ditto sanitation/sewerage. For example, the Southern Beaches area SE of Hobart is still unsewered, and according to the local Mayor this is unlikely to happen for decades, and yet, let's house even more people in it?!

Resources also include human capital. With the lowest literacy and numeracy rates in Australia outside the indigenous populations of the NT, the human resources of Tasmania remain a vast untapped pool of potential. The existing population could do a lot more if people were adequately educated. This is a national and State government disgrace. Attracting more people to perform jobs that many Tasmanians could do if they were educationally equipped to do them (or to set up businesses, etc) is not the answer, not for existing Tasmanians anyway. Education needs a lot more immediate investment.

Again, look at Singapore. It has virtually no natural resources at all, but has built its entire economy by investing over time in its human resources. Malaysia, right next door and with far more natural resources, was at parity with Singapore when they both became independent, and now it is 3.5 times (or more) behind, primarily because of the same failure as we see in Tasmania, ie to invest in educating its population.

Ditto health. People cannot work to full capacity (or sometimes, cannot work at all) when they are eg in queues for years waiting to have 'non-urgent' surgery, or weeks/months to see a GP (and further years to see a specialist), or to access mental health and other treatments, the latter which particularly affect our current younger generation. Tasmania's health system needs massive investment right now to get Tasmanians the health services they need, let alone by increasing the population (especially with retirees, whom as they age will place an even greater burden on the currently hugely inadequate services). But even overseas migrants need access to health services. Fix these first.

The Government needs to look at more innovative ways to fund both of these services, and to stop the leakage of public money to ill-thought-out, unnecessary projects (eg the proposed football stadium) or to government-crony projects which benefit the few and do not address these fundamental issues. There is also leakage of government money via corruption, which needs addressing – this has grown significantly since I first left Tasmania and is now rife. This also needs addressing. No economy can prosper when government and related corruption sucks money away from where it is intended.

Carrying capacity: The carrying capacity of an island's ecosystem is the maximum number of individuals of a given species that can be supported by the available resources. This applies to humans as much as it does to any other species and is an important consideration when determining the optimum population for an island community. Certainly, we can import food, but we cannot import land for housing etc, as discussed above. Human population needs to be balance with those of our wildlife and plant habitats and maintaining biodiversity – they are in direct competition. A balance is required and these aspects cannot continue to be ignored or overruled.

Social and economic needs: As discussed above, the social and economic needs of the community, including housing, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, also play a role in determining the optimum population.

Environmental impacts: The potential environmental impacts of human activities on the island's ecosystem must be taken into account when determining the optimum

population. This includes considerations such as transport, waste disposal, pollution, and the impact of development on the island's natural habitats.

To determine the optimum population for an island community, it is important to balance all of these factors to ensure that the community can thrive without causing irreparable harm to the island's ecosystem.

This should involve conducting studies and consulting with experts in a variety of fields, including ecology, economics, and social science, to develop a comprehensive plan that takes into account all of these factors, BEFORE human population targets are set.

If the recent growth trend continues, a much higher population growth scenario is possible – Tasmania could reach far in excess of the original 650,000 2050 goal. No risk analysis of this is evident, nor any forecasting of its consequences. This is simply bad planning.

There are other, less obvious potential disadvantages of uncontrolled population growth. In addition to the major factors mentioned above, your paper also fails to take into account the impacts on

1. Democracy e.g. removing Tasmanian's right to have a say on development applications and opportunity for planning appeals. Councils and communities may have an inability to shape their future, and planning appeals are already too expensive and time consuming for the average person to even contemplate. Plus, people are clearly being kept in the dark until it is virtually too late. (This paper itself is a very good example of this lack of proper, democratic process). Planning laws themselves may become largely academic if there is substantial demand via population growth for rezoning and property development and the temptation to let them pass, regardless.
2. Cultural heritage - Aboriginal and non-aboriginal, and the potential for increased conflict with the former especially. Here we have right here what our Aboriginal population might very soon regard as Invasion 2.0, with no consultation with them apparent whatsoever. The issue of Treaty has not gone away, as evidenced by the recent Government paper on this issue, and moving/attracting more people to areas which may become very contentious in the near future (including but not limited to NE Tasmania) is not going to make finding acceptable outcomes any easier.
3. Natural heritage - As per the 2021 national State of the Environment Report, *'Human activity and population growth are major drivers of many pressures on biodiversity. Impacts are associated with urban expansion, tourism, industrial expansion, pollution, fishing, hunting and development of infrastructure. The impacts from population growth are extensive and increasing in many areas.'*

Tasmania's natural heritage is one of our key drivers of tourism, a significant industry in this state. Other countries such as New Zealand are now recognising that their natural 'assets' in fact have legal rights to exist, and Tasmania is not going to be able to sweep this legal issue under the carpet forever, either.

A proper environmental assessment of the impact of this sort of population increase is required, as it would be for any large scale development.

4. Urban amenity and quality of life, including urban sprawl, urban intensification including loss of backyards, sunshine into homes, open spaces, tree canopies, creation of heat retention in cities, increased flooding risk, stormwater, and other pollution etc need to be examined.
5. Transport - increased traffic congestion and safety considerations. All we seem capable of in Tasmania, again due to decades of poor planning and lack of consultation with world's best practice, is to build more and bigger roads. These are NOT the answer. Again, like water, transport needs to be addressed first, before we start to attract significantly more people.

Existing bottlenecks also need to be addressed. It is unacceptable that traffic in a capital city of a first-world country can be brought to a standstill, with the huge flow-on costs etc that disruption entails, by one minor traffic accident. This is not an isolated occurrence.

6. Housing – exactly the same applies. Homelessness amongst our existing population (especially women) is already increasing, plus there is demonstrated increased cost of housing and lack of housing availability either for purchase or rentals, and flow-on impacts of the housing crisis. This is or should be BASIC planning: Where will more people live? How? Will they displace Tasmanians, and if so, where will the latter find to live?

Housing is a basic human right, and cannot be ignored.

7. Loss of agricultural land. Despite current zoning regulations we are already seeing near-prime agricultural land close to Hobart (eg Pass Road Rokeby, areas around Kingston and Huonville etc) being converted into housing, a trend which also is hugely evident around Melbourne and Adelaide outskirts. At some point very soon it needs to be asked, where will local food (and other, including fish and seafood) supplies come from? – especially as we base much of our tourism branding and marketing around our 'clean, green, local' image. Again this time to do this is before increasing out population through migration.

The pressure points of competition between land uses such as between farming and residential expansion on the urban fringe have not been quantified, let alone has there been community consultation about it. Regarding the latter, you only have to look at the now extremely costly, ongoing consequences of the lack of proper initial community consultation over what seemed to be (back then) a relatively minor alteration to inbound flight paths at Hobart Airport (to bring in more tourists, and also people moving here, and their visiting friends and relatives) to see what will happen if the community feels left out of this planning process.

8. Increased land use conflict and increased inequality. Increased use pressure on recreational and protected areas, including marine and recreational fishing, including our inland fisheries. Again these are part of what currently makes Tasmania great. Ignore the large recreational fishing community at your peril.
9. Fire management, especially stresses on urban fringes and peri-urban areas.

10. Feral animal control eg shooting deer, feral cats etc. How will feral animals be controlled if houses are encroaching into the habitat that are frequenting, given shooting, baiting and other restrictions near built-up areas?

I believe these considerations and other would be echoed by a significant number of Tasmanian citizens, including by not limited to many of our young people, for whom life here is very competitive already, especially given their educational disadvantages vs the rest of Australia.

I understand that an increase in population brings the Government more tax revenue, especially via GST, but in my opinion a cost-benefit analysis and a proper, independent, professional environmental impact assessment need to be undertaken, as well as a proper assessment of other priorities above and the risks and costs to Tasmanians of not meeting these existing deficiencies.

I therefore urge you to take serious consideration to addressing the above issues in a far better, more holistic manner than is evident at present, before the thought of significantly and deliberately increasing Tasmania's population via immigration turns into policy reality.

I also support PMAT's key recommendations, namely

1. Tasmania should transition its economy from a reliance on continuous population growth towards an optimal stable population to achieve the best possible sustainable social, environmental, cultural, economic and well-being outcomes.

The Strategy should commit to engaging an independent, professional/academic research institution to determine how this could be achieved. The outcomes or well-being indicators could be linked to State of the Environment reporting.

2. The Strategy should recognise that it is better to determine a long-term sustainable population size rather than by picking an arbitrary population growth number.
3. The Tasmanian Government should ensure it has a mandate for promoting continued population growth
4. Establish a dedicated and world-class, professional Planning Department. This is beyond critical.
5. Reinstate the State Architect and introduce a design policy for high-quality urban design.
6. Reinstate the role of local Councils as 'place shapers' underpinning community well-being and enriching our cultural and natural heritage, lifestyle and democracy.
7. Recognise that with sound strategic planning, Tasmania is well-placed to become a world leader in sustainability. This would bring massive benefits to Tasmania, both economically and socially.
8. Clearly define the terminology used in the Strategy.

9. The Strategy must identify the environmental and other risks and negative impacts associated with unsustainable population growth, and include a full risk analysis.
10. The Tasmanian Government should ask the Federal Government to implement a National Population Policy which aims to stabilise Australia's population as soon as possible.
11. The Strategy should consider /question the notion that reaching population targets early is a sign of success, and
12. There should be a moratorium on Government efforts to actively promote migration to Tasmania pending:
 - Provision of clear evidence demonstrating that population growth benefits individuals and communities;
 - Definition of an optimal, sustainable stable population size for Tasmania; and
 - Evidence that a clear majority of Tasmanians support continuing population growth.

Thank you.

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