



Speech by Andrew McNamara to the Queensland Conservation Council

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THE PROBLEM IS US

Is further population growth desirable in Australia? It is a simple question and goes to the heart of whether or not we can be environmentally sustainable, economically prosperous and socially cohesive as a nation in the 21st Century.

So why then don't policy makers ask the question? More peculiarly still, having studiously avoided asking this fundamental question, why do our governments implement policies that fly in the face of the clear evidence of what Australians want, which is fewer, not more of us? Why does the bizarre suggestion that population growth is necessary for economic growth persist in the face of unambiguous evidence that it is simply not true? Why do we cling to the absurd proposition that we can lessen our impact on the environment, while continuing to tear it down to make way for more of us?

As you will have gathered from my opening remarks, what fascinates me about the population debate that we are not having, is not the question of whether or not we should encourage population growth. That is a no brainer and I will spend just a few minutes later putting to the sword the silly argument that we need population growth to grow our economy. What I find most interesting is the fundamental disconnect in our democracy on the desirability or otherwise of continuing population growth – the chasm between the individual choices of the governed, who with the advent of equal educational opportunity for women universally choose smaller families, and the policies of State and Federal governments, which overtly and covertly support unrestrained population growth.

Every day, the front pages of our papers are covered in variations on the same problem. Whether the shock/horror de jour is traffic congestion on our roads, overcrowding on our trains, waiting lists in our hospitals, housing affordability, social alienation in urban sprawl, declining koala numbers, reef runoff, food security, water security or global warming; there is only one problem – us. There are too many of us. To channel Mugatu from "Zoolander", I want to scream, "I feel like I'm taking crazy pills", as I watch billions of dollars being spent treating the symptoms of the one great problem we face – overpopulation, when the treatment is all designed to enable greater population growth, not to stabilise or reverse it.

This morning I will look firstly at the history of population policy in Australia and then compare our growth rate today with that of other nations. I will need to take a moment to demonstrate why technological efficiency improvements are a false idol, before making some observations on the futility of an emissions trading scheme that isn't allied with a population stabilization policy. Then finally, I would like to spend some time looking at the vexed issue of why politicians encourage population growth when the environment can't stand it, the economy doesn't need it and the people don't want it.

Australia has no population policy. Immigration rates are adjusted from time to time, depending on economic circumstances, but not with a view to meeting a population target based on a scientific analysis of Australia's carrying capacity. Interestingly, as the economy slows through the economic cycle, we invariably reduce immigration intakes, which is of course the opposite reaction you would expect if policy makers really believed that population growth drives economic growth.

However, we have had a population policy in the past. For 50 years until 1972 there was an explicit target of 2% growth in population per annum. The Whitlam Government abandoned that policy, but did not replace it with either a higher or lower target. Despite the absurdity of trying to undertake credible social and physical infrastructure planning in the absence of an explicit population target, both sides of politics have since operated with the same no-policy-on-population policy. Senator Robert Hill, as Minister for the Environment in the Howard Government summed up this unusual bipartisanship, saying that, the "Government's approach is to manage the consequences of population growth as it occurs". This is still the approach of the Rudd Government.

It is one of the greater ironies in Australian political life, that it is State Governments, who actually do the job of managing the consequences of unplanned population growth, that are getting belted by the public and the media for failing to meet spiraling demand for services, while putting up with the indignity of having various Commonwealth Governments muse from time to time about taking over responsibility for areas like health, when the problems stem from the total absence of leadership at the Commonwealth level on both sides on the issue of population growth.

It is, I suggest quite extraordinary that there should be a political consensus to just look the other way on this fundamental issue. Politicians of all political persuasions have simply ignored the voluminous, academic work that has been done over the last 35 years in relation to Australia's carrying capacity, in favour of a policy of trying to play catch up after the event. For so long as we have no policy on how many people can live here, our planning policies will always have their foundations laid in sand. Our population today is about 21.3 million. But how many can we hold and at what standard of living?

In 1994, the Australian Academy of Science found that a population of 23 million should be Australia's limit. More recently, Dr Tim Flannery suggested that Australia's long term carrying capacity could be as low as 8 to 12 million people. It is certainly open to suggest that since the Australian Academy of Science's calculations 15 years ago, the emergence of a clearer understanding of the impacts of peak oil and climate change could only reduce the earlier estimate of the continent's carrying capacity. The management of this issue goes to the core responsibilities of government – ensuring food, water and resource security; a reliable power supply; adequate health and educational services; and critically, a

sustainable environment. It is nothing short of scandalous that Australia's sustainable population is not the starting point in almost every policy debate.

Yet more alarmingly still, the reality is that Australia does have a population policy, by default. It is to encourage maximum population growth. And it is working a treat, without the inconvenience of asking the Australian people what they think about it. The baby bonus and high immigration rates combined in 2008 to put Australia out in front of every other nation in the developed world and a fair wack of the developing world as well.

Australia's annual population growth in 2008 stood at a developed world high of 1.7%. Compare that with .9% in the USA, .6% in France and .3% in the UK. The world average is now 1.6%. India's is 1.6%. Indonesia's is 1.2%. Australia's population at this rate of growth will pass 100 million by 2100. We will exceed 42 million people in 2050. That is another 2 Sydneys and 2 more Melbournes to feed and water, to power and manage the waste from, in just over 40 years. How can we not be talking about this?

I know that our politicians are not disinterested in the Nation's future and I acknowledge that the idea that population growth is necessary for economic growth is widely held among policy makers and strongly pushed by the housing industry. However I think it is vital that this nonsense be retired from the realm of creditable policy debate as a matter of urgency. So let me introduce some inconvenient facts into that space.

According to World Bank figures for 2008, Australia sits 13th in the world in per capita GDP, producing US\$34,882 for each of our 21.3 million people. Yet of all the nations above us, only the USA with its 304 million people has a population greater than 20 million. Indeed, the top 10 wealthiest nations in the world are characterized by populations of between 4 and 9 million people. The top 10 are:

1. Luxembourg - 491,000,
2. Norway - 4.8m,
3. Singapore - 4.8m,
4. USA - 306m,
5. Ireland - 4.5m,
6. Switzerland - 7.7m,
7. Austria - 8.3m,
8. Netherlands - 16m,
9. Iceland - 319,000, and
10. Sweden - 9.1m,

I won't labour this point, but if you would like to go to the other end of the World Bank's list, you will find that the poorest nations in the world are characterized by much larger populations, in the 50 to 200 million range. It is worth stating the obvious occasionally; the aim of the game in economic growth should be to grow the pie, not the number of mouths it is feeding.

I will concede however that a list like this is just a snapshot of now and tells us nothing about the relationship between population and GDP over time. To try and capture that dynamic, I thought it would be useful to do some comparisons between nations that had similar populations at the beginning of the 20th Century and consider where they are now. I chose Argentina, Sweden and Australia for this exercise. As I mentioned, Sweden now sits in 10th spot and Australia in 13th on the World Bank GDP per capita table for 2008. Argentina comes in at 49th, with GDP of US\$13,244 per capita, which is a little more than a third of Sweden's current per capita GDP of US\$36,365.

However, it wasn't always so. In 1900 Argentina, with its then population of 4 million was the 10th wealthiest nation in the world. It had standards of education equivalent to the richest nations of Europe and an international trading culture that made it the leading nation of the Southern Hemisphere. By 1993, Argentina's population had ballooned to 33.5 million and today, it stands at 40.6 million. At its current rate of 1.1% annual population growth, Argentina's population will reach 80 million by 2070.

Argentina has increased its population by a factor of 10 over the last century yet seen its position on the world GDP per capita table slip from 10th to 49th. Sweden on the other hand started the 20th Century with a population of 5.1 million, which by 1993 had risen to 8.9 million and today has 9.1 million. Sweden now holds down Argentina's old position at number 10 on the world GDP per capita table and its population growth rate of .3% has seen its population decline by 35,000 between 2006 and 2008.

Australia's population story has been in between the two, with our numbers rising from 3.7 million in 1900 to 21.3 million today. However that very high population growth rate of 1.7% means that we should catch up to Argentina's anticipated 80 million at around the same time, 2070. Where will we be on the World Bank's GDP per capita list then I wonder? Will we be closer to Sweden or Argentina? The evidence suggests that high population growth is associated with declining relative per capita GDP.

The unarguable truth that emerges from these three case studies is that population growth is not the harbinger of economic growth. Argentina started the 20th Century far wealthier than Australia but after doubling our population growth, today has per capita GDP worth only 40% of Australia's. Sweden finds itself entrenched in the world's top 10, while growing its population by less than 700,000 since 1980, and declining in real terms since 2006. The simple statement that population growth leads to economic growth is simply untrue. At best it would appear that strong economic growth is possible despite strong population growth, not because of it.

Before leaving matters economic, I would like to say a bit about the other supposed silver bullet for the impacts of population growth, and indeed peak oil and climate change – technologically driven efficiency gains. Don't get me wrong; there is no doubt that technology has led to extraordinary gains in efficiency in just about every aspect of our lives. It's just that efficiency increases in the use of a resource rarely if ever lead to using less of the resource. What happens is that we use energy or carbon,

more efficiently, but in greater volumes. George Monbiot in his recent book "Heat" notes that this paradox is summed up in the wonderfully named Khazzoom-Brookes Postulate.

What Khazzoom and Brookes demonstrated is that as efficiency improves, the economy will use more, rather than less of a resource such as energy. Efficiency gains, in the absence of government policies to cap the use of the resource, will paradoxically lead to greater use of energy or carbon. The Model T Ford in 1908 got 25 miles to the gallon. Today's Ford Expedition averages 15.5 miles to the gallon. The undoubted efficiency gains in engine technology over the last 100 years have been more than offset by the increased weight and comfort of vehicles, while the explosion in vehicle numbers means we continue to increase world demand for oil by 2% each year.

We have 100 years of evidence that without capping the number of vehicles, or perhaps the number of people to drive them, hopes of overall reduced fuel use as a result of efficiency gains are doomed to failure. Efficiency gains without capping of the total use of a resource inevitably makes the problem worse, not better.

Any time a politician says that we can reduce carbon dioxide emissions, or reduce energy use, by encouraging efficiency, you should politely enquire as to the cap that will come into play in order to stop us using more energy or more carbon than previously, once the efficiency gains have reduced the price of use of the resource. And when they look at you blankly, say "Kazzoom – Brookes" and be sad for our world.

So, population growth in modern economies, where productivity rather than simple production volumes is the key to wealth creation, is actually a drag on economic growth. And efficiency gains in the absence of resource use caps actually hasten resource depletion. Where does that leave us? It leaves us having to confront the reality that in the closed system that is planet Earth, we cannot go on endlessly increasing the number of people on the planet without facing serious environmental consequences.

The problem is us.

As world leaders grapple with how to find the will to cut emissions by the necessary 80 to 90% by 2050 in order to lessen the risk of a global climate catastrophe, we still can't bring ourselves to put the whole problem on the table. Donella Meadows and her colleagues in "Limits to Growth - The 30 Year Update" note that even though since 1965 the average birth rate has dropped faster than the death rate, resulting in the rate of population increase slowing considerably, the growth rate of world population continues to be exponential. We still expect the world's population to go from 6.5 billion in 2000 to 9.7 billion in 2050.

James Lovelock in his most recent book, "The Vanishing Face of Gaia – A Final Warning" puts the neglected issue of us; of people, squarely in focus in the climate change debate. He notes that "the exhalations of breath and other gaseous emissions by the nearly 7 billion people on Earth, their pets and their livestock are responsible for 23 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions". He goes on to note that when the emissions of just growing, packaging, transporting and selling our food to us are added in to the calculation, we are responsible for nearly half of total greenhouse emissions.

Lovelock notes that the increase in world population from 6.5 billion to 9.7 billion in the first half of this century that is unstoppable now locks in an almost 25% increase in emissions, that has to be factored in before we can begin to talk meaningfully about reducing emissions. We have to reduce emissions by 25% by 2050, just to stay where we are today, in terms of output from us. Not from coal fired power plants, cement factories and steel mills. Just from you and I and Fluffy and Betsy, breathing in and out.

So where does this leave emission trading schemes? Well a cap and trade system still has merit, but only if we measure total emissions. That means that the industrial emitters can't be allowed to move in and emit any gains made in the household sector as a result of efficiencies and we need to be honest about including the locked in growth in emissions from population increase in the targets we set for 2020 and 2050. Australia with its extraordinary population growth rate needs to pull its head in about increases in emissions from developing nations, particularly China, which with its sometimes brutal one child policy has made a far greater contribution to reigning in global greenhouse gas emissions than Australia ever will.

So why don't we talk about population? Are we just blind to our own impact? Lester Brown in his wonderful manifesto "Plan B Version 3.0" wonders if our fate will be like "yeast in a bucket, eating and farting until we drown in our own excrement". I hope not. I certainly don't see that it has to go that way. But until we stop seeing ourselves as somehow apart from the planet, then we cannot say that we are serious about avoiding the disaster that is on our doorstep.

I have used this quote from the eminent biologist E.O. Wilson before, but it demands repetition. He said, "The raging monster loose upon the land is overpopulation, and in its unrestrained presence, sustainability is but a fragile intellectual construct". The problem is us: our food, our pets, our cars and our cities. The problem is us.

Let me finally now turn to the issue that I find most fascinating, which is why policy makers don't consider population as the direct cause of our problems and indeed, ignore the clear preferences as expressed by individuals and households, to slow population growth. It is a subject worthy of lengthy consideration in its own right, but I would like to leave some time for questions, so I will just tip the table over and see what we wind up with.

Jarred Diamond in his monumental work "Collapse – How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive", considers this issue in detail and I particularly recommend Chapter 14 – "Why Do Some Societies Make Disastrous Decisions?" for anyone interested in this question. He notes that there are multiple reasons why societies fail to deal with problems.

They may fail to anticipate the problem at all. When the problem does show up, they may still fail to perceive it. When the problem is perceived they may still fail to try to solve it. And of course, even having tried to address the problem, they may still fail. Our lack of action today involves at least parts of the first 3 of these reasons.

The notion that nations should multiply their subjects is a very old one and was of course sanctified in the Bible. It was certainly the case that from white settlement of Australia, the prevailing wisdom was

that this continent needed people to exploit the land initially and later to defend it. The “populate or perish” mantra was deeply ingrained in our national psyche, and I suggest still resonates today, to cloud our view of the environmental challenges that we now face.

So, far from anticipating the problem, we first have to free ourselves from the notion that endless population growth is a good thing. Of course Thomas Malthus did blow the whistle on this dangerous delusion, in his “Essay on the Principle of Population” published in 1826, but who has time to read these days? Having seen the world’s population surge from 2 billion to 6 billion in the 20th Century, and the massive rise in CO2 in the atmosphere, from 300 parts per million at the start of the Industrial Revolution to 450 parts per million today, I think we can say that the problem has arrived.

Which still begs the question – given that we know beyond doubt that our impact is adversely affecting the planet and on the micro level, our enjoyment of it, why are we not addressing population growth directly? The answer here is that we are and we aren’t. Individuals and households are having fewer children, opting for sea and tree changes and calling on governments to slow the rate of growth.

Just last week the Courier Mail reported Mayor Bob Abbott from the Sunshine Coast Regional Council and Mayor Alan Sutherland from Moreton Bay Regional Council opposing plans for further expansion of the urban footprint. They are fighting a tough battle against developers who are engaged in what Diamond calls “rational bad behavior” – that is, pursuing economic self interest at the expense of long term societal good. Companies don’t actually have children to think of in their decision making, just shareholders.

Governments are trapped in the ultimate clash of interests. It is the “Tragedy of the Commons” over and over again. Even if it is obvious that our behavior in the long term is disastrous, no one wants to move first for fear that they will miss out on exploiting the commons if others don’t follow suit. In Hervey Bay I once saw Harvey Norman brow beat the Council into an absurd and even dangerous town planning decision, by implying that they might pull up stumps and leave town for somewhere with weaker town planning principles.

The tragedy of the commons affects decision makers all the way up the line, and is of course played out globally, in the suggestion that Australia shouldn’t move on greenhouse emissions until everyone else does, lest we lose economic advantage, even though we know we are collectively racing towards a global climate catastrophe. And no State wants to be the first to start identifying areas where no further development is allowed, lest they lose development dollars to rivals with shorter term thinking.

The answer here is to be clear in who our leaders serve. It is the people, not financial markets or housing construction companies who are the masters. The whole reason we have governments is to manage those big, long term risks that we as individuals can’t. The ultimate obligation of any generation of leaders is to hand on a strong, safe community to the next generation. That necessarily entails an environment that is in balance.

In my view, a failure to recognize and confront the danger of unrestrained population growth now transcends every other problem that confronts us. The idea that the world’s population will be “stable”

at 9 billion is ludicrous, as we watch refugee flows ramping up now as a result of water and food shortages. The answers to the issues of climate change, food security, energy security and water security are all to be found in acknowledging one simple fact. Acknowledge it and then deal with it.

There are too many of us.