
Towards Opportunity and Prosperity

The need for a population policy

4 April 2002

Acknowledgements

Professor Alan Gilbert Vice Chancellor, University of Melbourne

David Armstrong Editor-in-Chief, The Australian

Professor Peter Dawkins, Director of the Melbourne Institute

Jenny Macklin, Deputy Leader of the Federal Opposition

Graeme Samuel, Chairman, National Competition Council

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

It's time Australia became proactive again about shaping our future population.

In Victoria, we have enjoyed two great periods of immigration – the gold rush and post-World War Two – that saw many people settle here from diverse backgrounds.

We are a much more diverse, vibrant and exciting community because of it.

By not taking a stance of deliberately guiding our population, we leave ourselves open to economic and social irrelevance with our global trading partners.

We cannot afford to let that future happen.

We cannot afford it in human terms, in economic terms or in what we have become used to as our quality of life.

Yet for too long, the important questions about the impact of our ageing population, falling fertility rates and immigration levels have gone round-and-round in a policy vacuum.

For the first time since European settlement, our population is facing decline.

In 30 years there will be more deaths than births, many more elderly people needing care and fewer taxpayers' to fund it.

Today, we have six people of working age to support every person of retirement age, but in 30 years' time, the ratio will be three workers to every retiree.

Today, the average Victorian age is 35.

By 2051, our median age will be 47 and the proportion of us aged over 65 will have doubled.

And on our current birth rates, we're not even replacing ourselves.

The national fertility rate has fallen from 2.02 children per woman in 1977 to 1.75 now. At this rate, by 2033, there will be more death notices' in the paper than birth notices.

These are not meaningless statistics. They paint a real picture.

Our taxpayer base is shrinking, making it harder to provide the same standard of services we now take for granted.

If we want a sustainable quality of life for the citizens of today and tomorrow, we're going to have to address the challenges now.

As a State Government, we have made it clear we want to take a lead role and increase our 25% share of the national immigration intake.

But the national debate must not be bogged down in immigration levels alone.

We need to look at how we can help families in practical ways to rear more children while balancing work responsibilities.

We need a policy that addresses the ability of our economy to compete globally, create interesting jobs and fund a higher standard of living.

We need to protect and sustain the environment so it can sustain us into the future.

And, we need to put life back into our small towns and regional centres, and plan a sustainable base for population and economic growth into the future.

The momentum gathered at the recent Population Summit held in Melbourne.

While immigration is primarily a Commonwealth Government responsibility, as the Premier of Victoria, I will be doing everything I can to elevate the debate and plan for a prosperous future.

A national, independent Population Council is needed to drive that agenda forward.

I will work with business leaders, community groups, other State and Territory leaders and the Commonwealth Government to establish a Population Council as an independent peak body on all matters concerning our population needs.

The Council must be a national model that effectively co-ordinates and communicates population policy Australia-wide.

We need to decide by agreement in this country on the population level we require and need.

This can be achieved through proper research and constructive debate, instead of fear and prejudice.

This Council must have intergovernmental and community membership, and conduct research and analysis on the economic, social and cultural costs and benefits of increasing our population.

It should report annually to COAG (Commonwealth of Australian Governments) and have progress reports to the public on ways forward.

As regional Australia will feel the impact of a shrinking and ageing population most sharply, the Council must also look at the distribution of population in regional areas and the possibility of incentives to attract migrants from Melbourne and Sydney to regional areas.

The Victorian Government will be addressing how we market the lifestyle and business opportunities in regional Victoria as we regenerate the economy with improved transport and communication links and health and education services.

At the start of the 21st century, we have a unique opportunity to influence how our society develops over the next 100 years and what kind of Australia we leave our children and their children.

In Victoria, we can look back to two great periods of immigration: the gold rush and the post-Second World War immigration intake.

Victoria is much richer for the amazing group of people who came from all over the world to settle here, and we want to ensure we continue to benefit from a diverse and vibrant population.

Victoria is keen to increase its share of migrants from all streams – skilled, family and humanitarian.

We are keen to maintain the flow of migrants from interstate and New Zealand, who have been coming to Victoria in record numbers over the past two years – a clear sign of the job opportunities and lifestyle available here.

And we also encourage international students to stay in Victoria when they have completed their studies, so they can enter the workforce.

We also need to do more to increase labour force participation by older workers, giving them much greater flexibility and support in their working lives.

And we must make it easier for Australian families to rear children and have flexible family-friendly employment choices.

It is no accident that countries that offer workers the greatest support to move in and out of employment – like France, Sweden and Norway – have high birth rates.

We can improve our birth rate in Australia through a combination of reforms to our tax and social security systems, better access to childcare and family friendly work practices.

Australia also needs to increase its migration intake. I believe Australia can sustain an annual population increase of **1.25% growth, which would give Australia a population of around 26 million by 2025, and Victoria a population of around 6m.**

We need to plan for this growth now.

Conclusion

Through a focus on migration, family support, better infrastructure, education and training, and promoting innovation, the Victorian Government is doing all we can to ensure that all regions of Victoria prosper into the future.

The danger for Australia is that action won't be taken at a Federal level, and we will be allowed to drift into economic stagnation and global irrelevance.

We must face up to our declining birth rate and ageing population, and be willing to work together toward a national population policy that delivers lasting economic benefits, enriches our society and provides a high quality of life for all Australians.

Ends

1,600 words