



ACCI POLICY STATEMENT

POPULATION POLICY

PRINCIPLES OF POPULATION POLICY

Australia's economic prospects and social fabric are dependent upon the level and composition of the resident population.

The age profile and the education/training standards of Australia's population will underpin our economic competitiveness, while the cultural mix and spatial distribution of the populace will have a powerful influence on our society.

Successive Australian governments traditionally have not pursued explicit, extensive or transparent population policies. Rather, 'population policy' in Australia has been conducted implicitly through various mixes of immigration, education and training, regional development and infrastructure policies.

While continuation of the implicit approach to population policy may be the preferred approach of policy-makers, it is important population policy has a high degree of consistency, cohesion and transparency, as a sound approach to such an important area of public policy.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

ACCI's overarching population policy objectives are:

- to encourage the Australian Government to produce on a regular basis, explicit, integrated and transparent statements on population policy;
 - such policy statements should address, and be informed by, the broad range of issues linked to and associated with population policy (over a medium to longer term time horizon); and
 - these issues include immigration, education and training, health, indigenous peoples, regional development, infrastructure and transport.
- governments can legitimately pursue a more active role in elements of population policy such as immigration, education and health, and infrastructure supply, however, natural increase and internal migration are properly the sole and unfettered prerogative of the individual;
- while not endorsing a deterministic approach to population policy, commerce and industry would generally prefer a nation with a growing, rather than a declining, resident population;
 - beyond that inclination, commerce and industry does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, racial, religious, or ethnic profile, while the internal geographic distribution of the resident population should be at the choice of the individual.

THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Successive Australian governments of both political persuasions have pursued implicit population policies through channels such as immigration, education, urban and regional development and retirement income policies. The Australian

approach to population policy can be likened to loosely linking pieces of a fragmented jigsaw.

These policy approaches have tended to be responsive to population change and, with the exception of the migration component, have not sought to influence its direction or composition.

While such policy approaches may have the advantage of recognising the limited role for government in population policy, they have the disadvantage of lacking cohesion and transparency.

The better and preferred approach is for the Australian Government, in consultation with the State and Territory governments (recognising their direct responsibilities in key aspects of population policy e.g. education and health), to enunciate an explicit, extensive and transparent population policy.

The central thrust of such a population policy must be to influence and respond to population change in ways which advance Australia's national interests. Similarly, population policy must be viewed and pursued over a longer (generational), not a short-term, time frame.

Operating a Population Policy

The role of government in population policy must be a judicious mix of seeking to determine and influence the relevant components of population policy and to clearly understand the appropriate role for government in each case (i.e. where and when it has an active and deterministic role and where and when it has an influential role).

Governments can legitimately play a more active and deterministic role in areas like migration, education and health, while natural increase and internal migration (i.e. location of residence) are properly the sole and unfettered prerogative of the individual.

Governments should adopt a clear anticipatory approach to population developments. The foundation for this work is the continued production by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on a triennial basis of independent and high-quality projections of the Australian resident population, both in aggregate and for key demographic parameters.

Reflecting the need for a more explicit and transparent approach to population policy, the Australian Government, at Ministerial level, should present to the Parliament within a reasonable period following the release of these projections, a formal statement on population policy including their implications for policy.

The State and Territory governments are encouraged to undertake similar initiatives for their respective jurisdictions regarding, in particular, patterns and projections of internal migration and education, health and infrastructure provision.

The Australian Government could usefully be assisted in framing its views on population policy, and in development of the triennial Ministerial Statement, by a National Population Council.

The Council would be chaired by the responsible Minister and comprise high-quality and objective individuals with expertise in relevant areas, complemented by a Key Centre on Population Research and Policy located within a suitable Australian tertiary institution.

The primary functions of the National Population Council would include coordinating the disparate work on population-related issues within government, facilitating a national perspective on population issues and coalescing the better analytical and objective thinking on population issues within the Australian economy and society.

ACCI recognises the value of the National Population (Borrie) Inquiry undertaken almost a quarter of a century ago and considers it may be timely to initiate a similar inquiry. Any such inquiry would be worthwhile provided it was independent and analytically rigorous, with broad and objective terms of reference.

The Components of Population Policy

Australia's population is likely to evolve in reasonably predictable ways over the next half-century.

Advances in demographic methods mean, excepting war and famine, the main characteristics of population growth through natural increase (e.g. numbers, age, gender) can be projected with a relatively high degree of confidence. Net migration is also relatively easily predictable, given its largely managed nature.

National governments can play a more deterministic role in the migration intake, through their capacity and prerogative to manage the numbers and composition of the intake (i.e. how many, where from, what economic and/or social characteristics).

Australian governments should continue to manage carefully and sensitively our national migration program, both for its economic and social contribution to the nation and for its role within a wider population policy.

However, immigration is not, and must not be, regarded as the totality of population policy. Immigration cannot be a complete substitute for continuing declines in fertility rates (which are expected to remain below replacement well into the foreseeable future).

Governments, however, have a much lesser policy role in determining the natural increase component of population policy.

While governments may wish to pursue an influential or persuasive role in the natural increase component, this should not extend to a deterministic or heavy-handed interventionist role, such being incompatible with the civil liberties approach of Australian society. Decisions regarding natural increase should be the sole, exclusive and unfettered responsibility of the individual.

Governments can legitimately seek to understand and make appropriate resource allocation decisions for the economic and social aspects of projected fertility and mortality (e.g. for the location of schools and hospitals), but should not seek to directly and deliberately manipulate outcomes.

Issues in Population Policy

The issues of Australia's 'carrying capacity' and/or 'optimum population' have been recurrent features of past debates over the nature and thrust of a national population policy.

Commerce and industry regards both concepts as lacking precision, having variable application across the nation, and as such should be discounted in framing population policy. As such, Australian governments should not enunciate any 'optimum population' or preferred absolute (numerical) population outcome.

Given the contentious and emotional nature of the 'science' underpinning such matters, considerable care and due diligence should be used in considering environmental arguments when setting population policy.

Environmental issues should no more than lightly inform population policy. Many of the environmental issues which are often linked to population are more the legacy of inadequate land management policies and/or practices and should properly be dealt with directly through separate policy mechanisms.

Population policy extends beyond mere quantitative measures of human beings living within our national borders. It must also include qualitative aspects.

The associated dimensions of the compositional issues (i.e. 'who are they') and the locational issues (i.e. 'where do they live') can be equally, if not more, important than the quantitative issues (i.e. 'how many') of population policy.

The geographic distribution of the population across the continent has traditionally been a focus of policy-makers for reasons of economic and social development and national defence. Population movements from rural to provincial, inland to coastal and provincial to urban areas are also of significance for infrastructure provision and regional development.

While commerce and industry supports the freedom of the individual to reside where they wish, policy-makers will need a clear understanding of the causes of the various patterns of internal migration, with governments focusing on policy-based causes of these movements, for example in infrastructure supply.

Other qualitative aspects of population policy, such as health, education and training, employment and indigenous peoples are addressed in other, discrete elements of the Chamber's policy platform.

While Australia is an island and sovereign nation, our national population policies must be developed and operate in cognisance of global trends - economic, population, social and strategic. Australia must not seek to practice isolationism in any aspect of policy, including population policy.

Nevertheless, commerce and industry considers immigration policy an inappropriate mechanism for dealing with population pressures in other parts of the world. Insofar as the Australian Government identifies or is called upon to play a role in global population matters, this is best done through our foreign aid program working in conjunction with like-minded countries in the best interests of the recipients. An orientation in our aid program, in relevant countries, towards education and health could be particularly useful from a global population perspective.

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