

A CATHOLIC VIEW ON POPULATION

In recent years, the strong consensus in Australia that the nation needed a larger population has broken down, causing major problems for governments in determining immigration policy especially.

Among the factors undermining the consensus about the need for a growing population are:

- the prolonged unemployment over the last few decades, giving rise to a mistaken belief that immigrants take jobs from Australians;
- fears that increasing numbers of Asians coming through immigration would permanently alter the ethnic and cultural balance, causing racial tensions and damaging social cohesion; and
- claims that Australia has too many people already, as evidenced by perceptions of overcrowding in the major cities.

Debate about Australia's population policy needs to consider the wider context of global population growth and widespread misunderstanding of problems of international development. Most people are aware of the continuing desperate plight of many millions of people in developing countries. But few Australians seem to realise that we have the resources and technology to eliminate the worst forms of hunger and poverty within a generation, as the 1997 UN *Human Development Report* (p. iii) insisted. What is lacking is the political will to marshal our energies against poverty.

Indeed, there are startling good news stories on many fronts, including improvements in food production, life expectancies and education levels. The Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, wrote in *Development as freedom*, that there is 'no significant crisis in world food production at this time'. Indeed, 'Famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all' (Oxford University Press, 1999, 206, 175).

Unfortunately, debates over world population have sometimes polarised, and official Catholic views are often entangled in debates over contraception or abortion. The classic Catholic statement on population came in Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical, *Development of peoples* (#37), which acknowledged that 'accelerated demographic increase' can add to problems of development.

He recognised that public authorities can intervene within their competence to limit population growth, as long as the freedom of married couples is respected, for 'it is for the parents to decide, with full knowledge of the matter, on the number of their children, taking into account their responsibilities towards God, themselves, the children that have already brought into the world, and the community to which they belong.'

Against the coercive population programs in some countries, Pope Paul defended the freedom of couples to make their own decisions about the number of their children, and emphasised the centrality of their consciences and the need for people to have adequate information.

The extent of coercion and manipulation in international population programs was exposed, among others, by Donald Warwick, a prestigious scholar at the Harvard Institute for International Development. His *Bitter Pills: Population Policies and their Implementation in Eight Developing Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) chronicled the extensive violation of human rights promoted by some population programs, from outright coercion to misinformation, deceit and ethical practices which would never be tolerated in western countries. The use of population targets and quotas, with incentive payments for fieldworkers, had led to widespread abuses. The 1994 Conference on Population and Development at Cairo attempted to respond to such criticisms.

As I see it, Australia has been abundantly blessed with a huge landmass endowed with astonishing natural resources. Yet we have a population of about 18 million, comparatively tiny in relation to the Asian countries around us. We have a duty to understand how to manage this land better, and how to make it more productive not just for ourselves, but for other nations as well.

Within the constraints of resources and environment, it seems that Australia also an obligation to share its resources and enlarge its capacities by increasing population and welcoming larger numbers of immigrants. The difficulty is, of course, that we often do not know what are the environmental limits, especially since new and developing technologies can rapidly expand possibilities for further settlement.

Nevertheless some writers argue that environmental constraints already limit Australia's capacity to increase population, and our nation should rapidly move to limit population growth or even reduce current population levels.

Such arguments need to be considered fairly but critically. Australia does face some major environmental problems. But to what extent can these be managed or solved with existing or developing technologies?

The history of the world population debate gives reason for caution in too readily concluding that

environmental factors prohibit further population growth in Australia.

As some authors have shown, (see Frank Furedi, *Population and development: a critical introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell/Polity Press, 1997), alarm about world population growth developed in the early twentieth century out of eugenic theories of Social Darwinism, and fear that the 'white race' was not breeding as quickly as colonised or 'coloured' peoples. When these racist assumptions became unacceptable after the Second World War, advocates against population growth adopted Malthusian arguments that the earth could not produce enough food.

But as food production continued greatly to outstrip population growth, it became evident that one could not argue that lack of food demanded drastic restrictions on population growth. Instead, the reason for limiting population shifted; many believed that increasing population hampered economic development and the lifting of living standards. This argument, too, was found deficient and was increasingly abandoned as development specialists could not find any necessary causal link between development and population. More recently, the population lobbies have turned to the environmental movement to support their views. Moreover, through environmental mechanisms or migration, population growth in developing countries is now portrayed as a threat even to the developed countries.

If Australians are to debate adequately their population policy, it is particularly important that the media improve their reporting and commentary on population issues, and especially the global picture. The visual media are especially vulnerable to over-simplifying matters. Graphic images of starving Africans crowding into food distribution centres readily give the impression that the problem stems from too many people. How can television news also communicate that such emotive scenes often occur in a sparsely populated countryside and that the reasons for these tragedies often have little to do with lack of resources? Africa is immensely rich and with improved management is capable of supporting a vastly increased population.

Even much of the quality print media offer very little good analysis of progress and problems in world development and the link with population. Sometimes sensational claims by population agencies are reported without any critical evaluation. For instance, Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute regularly issues his apocalyptic prognostications, which are dutifully reported, partly because they are so sensational. But how is an ordinary reader to know that many development experts and demographers would regard them as unlikely or even quite propagandist? Wouldn't it be interesting to evaluate how accurate have been Worldwatch's predictions over the years? Some of the population agencies rely on public funding and need to accentuate crises to maintain their funding streams.

To remedy such distortions, the media could locate well regarded specialists in development and population studies who can evaluate sensational claims. In addition, it would help greatly if media networks could promote their own specialists in these complex and contested areas.

To argue that Australia is facing its population limits

seems to fly in the face of common sense. With one of the largest landmasses on the planet, Australia is sparsely populated, with the overwhelming majority of its people concentrated into a few narrow coastal strips, comprising about 3.5% of its land area. As any traveller knows, the rest of the continent is largely empty. If one moves west from Adelaide around the coast, there is only one substantial city, Perth, and a few provincial towns, including Darwin, in the thousands of kilometres before reaching Cairns and Townsville. It seems quite unreasonable to assume that major new cities and industries cannot be developed in these regions, or in the millions of square kilometres of our inland.

In addition, many of our country towns are dying for want of population, and Tasmania, Western Australian, South Australia and the Northern Territory are all searching for further population.

From a geopolitical viewpoint, a greater population would give Australia a greater profile in regional affairs, increase its economic strength and enhance its defence capabilities. In coming years, population movements will continue throughout the Asian-Pacific region, and it will be in Australia's interests that such movements accord with our own priorities, and are not forced upon us. Whatever we can do to increase our links with the region and consolidate goodwill can only redound to our long-term advantage.

Australians need to recover a new consensus on the benefits of population growth,

- by clarifying that immigration does not cost Australians their jobs;
- that our future lies in becoming a more cosmopolitan nation, embracing ethnic and cultural diversity founded on the strong foundations of social equity and opportunities for all; and
- by tackling the perception of overcrowding in major cities with resolute new efforts to decentralise our population. ■

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