

Dear Mr. Turnbull

Views about the ideal future size of Australia's population vary significantly. Some economists and politicians believe that Australia could support a population of 25–30 million. They argue that population growth will result in resource creation and economic growth and that technology will be able to overcome the environmental problems created by any increase in population. In contrast, some scientists and ecologists argue that a population closer to 8–10 million would be more ecologically sustainable. They believe that population growth will only worsen the problems of resource depletion, water availability and quality, land degradation, pollution and habitat loss. Australia has little chance of altering its population growth rate by natural means (that is, changes in birth and death rates) in the near future, but it can decide on the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country. Without an immigration intake Australia's population would grow very slowly and may even start to decline. Economists argue that this would limit Australia's economic potential and result in a decline in living standards.

The projected growth in Australia's population presents a number of challenges. These include the implications of any growth for ecological sustainability and the demands that growth will place on urban planning. Many people argue that Australia cannot support a large population. They point to Australia's dry interior, inconsistent rainfall and poor soils as limits to growth and highlight the fear that any significant growth will worsen the continent's ecological problems, especially land degradation and access to water. Tim Flannery, and people with a similar perspective, point to the many ecological problems facing Australia. These problems would only become worse if Australia's population continued to grow. While this is a pleasant and scenic place to live, with mild climates and a range of water-based recreational activities, it is also a very fragile environment. Coastal areas are easily damaged by human activity. In our bid to live close to the sea we have destroyed many of our coastal dune systems and coastal wetlands. These important ecosystems protect the land from storm damage by absorbing the power of large waves and tides. Dunes are flattened for housing and other developments.

With almost 38 per cent of all immigrants choosing to settle in Sydney, the impacts of any future population growth will fall disproportionately on Australia's largest urban centre. Sydney grows by about 1000 people a week. Meeting the needs of the current and future population represents a major challenge requiring cooperation between all levels of government and the community. If we decide that it is right to grow our population to 25–40 million then there will be many challenges that we would need to face. These include:

Accommodating a growing population without contributing to Low-density urban sprawl and the loss of the physical environment This involves:

Providing the infrastructure (such as roads; public transport; Sewage treatment facilities; water storage, treatment and Distribution systems; hospitals; and schools) required by an Expanding population

Managing traffic congestion

Minimizing air and water pollution

Meeting the social and recreational needs of people

Promoting employment-generating economic activities. In this section of the text we focus on Sydney's ability to cope With population growth and the movement of people to Communities within a few hours' drive of Sydney.

The capacity of Sydney to accommodate the projected growth in its population is a controversial issue. Government policies have aimed to encourage higher urban densities in both new and existing areas of Sydney: a process known as urban consolidation . This includes the construction of multiunit housing developments (apartments, townhouses, villas and duplex dwellings) in areas with good access to public transport. The focus on higher residential densities has led to community concern about the potential for 'overdevelopment' of established suburbs as well as concerns regarding the design of the multi-unit developments. These concerns need to be weighed against the environmental impacts of the development of new residential areas, particularly with respect to water and air quality within the Sydney Basin. Australia, like many other countries of the developed world, has an ageing population. This means that older people make up a larger share of the population. This trend is apparent in the current age structure of the Australian population and will continue well into the future. The ageing of the population is the inevitable outcome of the declining birth rate and increasing life expectancy. The median age in 2002 of 35.9 years is expected to increase to between 40.4 years and 42.3 years in 2021 and between 46.0 and 49.9 years in 2051. Those aged 65 years and over will increase from 13 per cent of the population in 2002 to 27–32 per cent in 2051. The proportion of the population under the age of 15 years will decline from 20 per cent in 2002 to 12–15 per cent in 2051. Meeting the needs of the ageing population (especially in the area of health care and nursing homes) will be a major challenge for governments. At the moment there are about 170 000 people joining the Australian workforce annually, but by about 2025 this number will decline to an estimated 125 000. Therefore, over time, Australia's workforce will reduce in size. At present, for every person aged over 65 there are 5.3 people of working age (that is, aged 15–65 years). The federal government estimates that by 2042 this figure will have declined to just 2.5 people. This means that there will be fewer people working to pay taxes that will enable governments to provide services for the population, especially the elderly. More nursing homes, hospitals and other medical resources will be required as well as financial support, such as the age pension. One possible solution to this issue may be to encourage workers to delay their retirement.

Overall I believe Demography is the future.' The future size of the Australian population remains the subject of much debate. There are those who see population growth as being central to Australia's future economic well-being, its status as a middle-ranking world power and perhaps even its national security. Others believe that Australia cannot sustain a large population. They cite its fragile environment and scarcity of water as factors that limit its capacity to support a large population. Any future growth will impact heavily on Sydney, the nation's largest urban centre. Managing this growth will require careful planning as will the ageing of the Australian population. If you stick to my ideas pointed out above, you and your government will not have to attend to any of these management strategies.

Sincerely yours

Costa Voulgarakis