

## POPULATION GROWTH: WHAT DO AUSTRALIAN VOTERS WANT?

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*Immigration-fuelled population growth has accelerated under the Rudd Government. Recent projections suggest that Australia may grow from its current 22 million to 35.9 million by 2050. This prospect has sparked a public debate about the country's demographic future. If population growth were to become an election issue how would Australian voters respond? Relevant new data are available from the latest Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, a mailout questionnaire sent to a large random sample of voters. It was completed between December 2009 and February 2010. The results show that only 31 per cent want growth while 69 per cent want stability. This is an increase on the proportions who have been pro-stability in the past: 50 per cent in 1977 and the 65 per cent in 2001.*

### THE ROLE OF IMMIGRATION IN POPULATION GROWTH

In December 1945 there were 7.4 million people in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Since then, there has been continual growth. Table 1 shows that, in the 26 years from December 1982 to December 2008, the population grew from 15.3 million to 21.6 million, an annual average growth rate of 1.3 per cent. In the latter years of the Howard Government (2005 to 2007), numbers and rates increased sharply but, with the election of the Rudd Labor Government in November 2007, growth accelerated further. For example, in 2008–09 the population grew by 2.1 per cent, adding 443,100 people, an all-time record, with 64 per cent of the growth due to net overseas migration.<sup>2</sup>

Most voters would not be aware of the figures but, as the first decade of the new century wore on, congestion in the major cities and escalating housing prices were symptoms of growth that few could miss. At the same time, drought and water restrictions brought home some of the constraints imposed by the natural environment. And informed critics, together with growth supporters, were mostly well aware of the underlying demography. In September 2009 the projections in the Treasury's Third Intergenerational Report were announced.

These were based on assumptions shaped by current growth rates and said that Australia's population could reach 35.9 million by 2050. For the first time in many years, critics and supporters began to engage in a lively population debate in the media about the costs and benefits of population growth.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA)<sup>3</sup> was planned early in 2009 but, by the time it was in the field, from December 2009 to February 2010, many citizens would not only have been feeling the pressures of growth for some time, a number would have become interested in the debate. The demography of the period, and the media's reaction to it, therefore play a role in shaping people's attitudes to what otherwise might seem rather abstract questions: is population growth something that voters think Australia should be pursuing? Do they want it?

Recent demography has not been shaped by immigration alone. Fertility rose from a total fertility rate of around 1.72 in the early years of the decade to 1.97 in 2008–09<sup>4</sup> and life expectancy at birth also increased. From 1988 to 2006–2008 males added an extra 6.1 years and females 4.2 years.<sup>5</sup> These trends, together with a rising base population, have lifted natural increase to numbers not seen since the final years

**Table 1: Population growth, Australia, December 1982 to June 2009**

Year to 31 Dec	Natural increase	NOM <sup>1</sup>	Total increase <sup>2</sup>	Total population	Per cent growth
1982	125,100	102,700	227,800	15,288,900	1.6
1983	132,500	55,000	187,500	15,483,500	1.3
1984	126,600	59,900	186,500	15,677,300	1.3
1985	126,000	89,400	215,400	15,900,600	1.4
1986	128,400	110,800	239,200	16,138,800	1.5
1987	126,600	136,100	262,700	16,394,600	1.6
1988	126,300	172,900	292,500	16,687,100	1.8
1989	126,600	129,500	249,600	16,936,700	1.5
1990	142,600	97,200	233,100	17,169,800	1.4
1991	139,300	81,700	217,200	17,387,000	1.3
1992	139,200	51,400	194,300	17,581,300	1.1
1993	137,800	34,900	178,700	17,760,000	1.0
1994	131,500	55,600	191,500	17,951,500	1.1
1995	129,800	106,800	244,600	18,196,100	1.4
1996	124,800	97,400	224,200	18,420,300	1.2
1997	122,500	72,400	188,800	18,609,100	1.0
1998	120,800	88,800	205,200	18,814,300	1.1
1999	122,000	104,200	224,000	19,038,300	1.2
2000	120,400	111,400	234,300	19,272,600	1.2
2001	117,100	136,100	261,400	19,534,000	1.4
2002	114,600	110,500	237,000	19,771,000	1.2
2003	116,300	110,100	240,900	20,011,900	1.2
2004	116,200	106,400	240,200	20,252,100	1.2
2005	132,000	137,000	292,000	20,544,100	1.4
2006	134,000	182,200	304,700	20,848,800	1.5
2007	148,100	216,200	331,800	21,180,600	1.6
2008	152,700	253,400	406,100	21,644,000	2.2
Year to June 30					
2008-09	157,800	285,300	443,100	21,874,900	2.1

Sources: *Australian Demographic Statistics*, Time series, March 2008, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Catalogue no. 310101 for 1982 to 2007; *Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2009*, ABS December 2009, Catalogue no. 3101.0 for 2008 and 2008-09 figures.

Notes: <sup>1</sup> NOM stands for net overseas migration.

<sup>2</sup> This is natural increase plus NOM. It does not add exactly to the increase figures that can be derived from changes in the year-on-year total population figures. Minor discrepancies are in the original data; the ABS adds that differences between total growth and the sum of the components of population change prior to September quarter 2006 are due to intercensal discrepancy (ABS Catalogue no. 3101.0, December 2009, p. 10).

of the baby boom.<sup>6</sup> But as Table 1 shows, net overseas migration, the variable most directly under government control, has risen much faster and is making the more significant contribution to total growth.

Net overseas migration (NOM) counts all people arriving in Australia for stays of 12 months or more, minus all departures for 12 months or more.<sup>7</sup> This means that it is different from the formal permanent immigration program, described in Table 2. The latter only counts new settlers granted permanent visas. It does not include New Zealanders, or temporary migrants, and it does not take account of departures. Sometimes one of the series of numbers is larger, sometimes the other. But in recent years high levels of temporary migration have pushed NOM way out in front; it is now much higher than the official permanent immigration program (which itself is nonetheless very large).

The ballooning numbers in the NOM series are partly due to the explosion in the numbers of international students entering Australia on long-term temporary visas, partly to the free movement of New Zealand citizens, and partly to the influx of temporary workers on 457 visas. For example, in June 2009 there were 548,256 New Zealand citizens in Australia, 386,523 international

students and 146,370 holders of 457 visas.<sup>8</sup> This gives a total of over one million temporary residents, without counting any other foreigners present on long-term visas such as working holiday-makers or people on bridging visas.

Though these temporary numbers are, in principle, under government control, the permanent migration program is the aspect of immigration policy most immediately affected by government decisions. Table 2 shows how this program has changed since the mid 1990s. When the Howard Coalition Government was elected in March 1996 it moved to reduce the numbers. However, by 2001, these were increased until, by the time the Coalition lost office in November 2007, they were very high. Today, however, they are higher still.

#### THE NOVEMBER 2007 ELECTION

Immigration was not an election issue in 2007 and the economy was strong; it did not begin to falter until the global financial crisis developed in September 2008. The new Labor Government was led by Kevin Rudd. One of its first acts was to increase the permanent migration program for 2008–09 to a record 203,800, a number later reduced, in March 2009, to 185,230 as the economy weakened.<sup>9</sup> But this new fig-

**Table 2: Permanent immigration program, Australia, selected years**

Category	1996–97	1998–99	2001–02	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10 <sup>1</sup>
Family reunion	44,580	32,040	38,090	50,080	49,870	56,370	60,300
Skilled	27,550	35,000	53,520	97,920	108,500	115,000	108,100
Special eligibility	1,730	890	1,480	200	220	180	300
Humanitarian	11,900	11,356	12,349	13,017	13,000	13,500	13,750
Total	85,760	79,290	105,440	161,217	171,000	<sup>2</sup> 185,230	182,450

Sources: *Population Flows*, Immigration Department, various issues.

Note: <sup>1</sup> The figures for 2009–10 are planning figures and come from Ministerial media releases.

<sup>2</sup> Originally 203,800, but reduced to 185,230 in March 2009; see text.

ure was still the highest ever for the official program.<sup>10</sup> The Rudd Government also, as Table 1 shows, presided over the increasing numbers of net overseas migrants, an increase which was historically unusual in a time of economic downturn.

During the election, Rudd's enthusiasm for immigration-fuelled growth was a well-kept secret; voters were told nothing. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) campaigned under the overarching slogan of 'The future versus the past', a phrase chosen for its soft message of non-threatening generational change.<sup>11</sup> While Rudd said he wanted to ease pressure on working families suffering from high petrol and grocery prices,<sup>12</sup> his six main election themes were: an education revolution; a national plan to fix hospitals; decisive action on climate change; balance and fairness in the workplace; maintaining national security; and a strong economy that delivers for working families.<sup>13</sup>

Immigration was not one of the big six and the website hosting the 24 documents outlining the 'complete official ALP policy documents for the 2007 federal election' did not refer to it.<sup>14</sup> Up until October 2008 the link to immigration policy on this site simply took the reader to a speech delivered at the ALP National Conference in April 2007 by the then shadow minister for immigration, Tony Burke. This document emphasised human rights, drew attention to employer abuses of the 457 visa system, and criticised the culture of the Immigration Department regarding refugee policy, but said nothing about overall numbers.<sup>15</sup>

The omission was intentional. In September 2007, during the campaign, Alan Wood reported that Rudd was deliberately keeping a low profile on immigration and that he was telling Tony Burke, to do the same.<sup>16</sup> There was, for example, no mention of it in Rudd's speech launching the campaign on 14 November 2007 (despite the fact that he had been very critical of

Howard's failure to mention Work Choices during the 2004 campaign).<sup>17</sup>

John Howard did not press Rudd on his immigration policy, an oversight which is understandable, given his own rediscovered support for growth. This is in keeping with the long history of bipartisanship on high migration which has helped keep the question off the political agenda.<sup>18</sup> And the media were content to let Rudd maintain his low profile. Consequently, Labor voters went to the polls in 2007 unaware that they would be voting for a higher rate of population growth.

While migration is not the only demographic variable it is now both the most significant and the one most directly under government control. Current data on all the variables affect projections, including the recent ones produced by Treasury. Even though these assumed that NOM would 'fall relatively sharply to 180,000 per year by 2012', Treasury still projected a population growing from 22 million in 2009 to 35.9 million in 2050,<sup>19</sup> 7.4 million more than the 28.5 million that it had projected for 2049 only two years before. The major difference between the two sets of projections is that the former assumed a net overseas migration rate of 180,000 per year and the latter one of 110,000 per year.<sup>20</sup> (The first Intergenerational Report, published in 2002, had assumed net migration of 90,000 per year and a population of 25.3 million in 2042.)<sup>21</sup>

### **THE THIRD INTERGENERATIONAL REPORT AND THE NEW POPULATION DEBATE**

Up until the new figures were announced<sup>22</sup> few media commentators had paid much attention to Australia's accelerating growth. The announcement shocked some commentators out of their compliant quietude and encouraged the media to open their pages to others who had long been con-

cerned about population growth. For the first time in many years the nation began to experience a vigorous population debate, a debate which began in October 2009 and continues at the time of writing. Thus it overlaps with the three months that the AuSSA survey was in the field.

One of the first voices to be heard was that of Ken Henry, Secretary to the Treasury. On 22 October 2009 he spoke of his doubts about Australia's capacity to handle 13 million extra people:

With a population of 22 million, we haven't managed to find accommodation with the environment. ...Our record has been poor, and in my view, we are not well placed to deal effectively with the environmental challenges posed by a population of 35 million.<sup>23</sup>

On the same day, Rudd was asked on ABC television about his reaction to the Treasury's projections. He replied: 'I actually believe in a big Australia. I make no apology for that. I actually think it's good news that our population is growing'.<sup>24</sup>

On 11 November, Kelvin Thomson, a government backbencher and member for the inner-city Melbourne seat of Wills, launched his own population policy, a 14-point plan, calling for migration to be cut to net 70,000 a year. He said that a population of 35 million would see the nation 'sleep walking into environmental disaster'.<sup>25</sup> His colleague, Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner, may not have helped the case for growth by claiming that it was 'nonsense' to say that Australia had exceeded its capacity; Bangladesh was 'roughly twice the size of Tasmania, and home to about seven times the population of Australia'.<sup>26</sup> While this was true, few participants found the idea of a population policy modeled on Bangladesh attractive. Thomson said: 'I don't accept the idea that because Australia is not overcrowded compared to other countries, that we should be copying these other countries'.<sup>27</sup>

Thomson also pointed to the role of vested interests in promoting growth: 'Some business entities, and property developers in particular, are in the ears of politicians, day in, day out, seeking high population ... They regard population growth as the yellow brick road to easy profit'.<sup>28</sup> Here, of course, he was alluding to one of the main drivers of high immigration in Australia, the steady pressure from property developers and other businesses benefiting from a growing domestic market.<sup>29</sup> And these interests had their own champions in the new debate: for example, the property developer Harry Triguboff, Arthur Sinodinos, Saul Eslake and Chris Berg.<sup>30</sup> In the four years to June 2009 Triguboff's company, Meriton, had donated \$182,000 to the Liberal Party and \$227,750 to the Labor Party.<sup>31</sup> In Triguboff's own words: 'If I give it to them they can't tell me I am their enemy'.<sup>32</sup> Thus some growth advocates use cash as well as words and, as the debate intensified, a number may have thought words a little risky. For example, in January 2010 Bernard Salt not only spoke up for growth, he urged property developers to put their case more forcefully:

What disappointed me about this debate was the lack of supporting comment emanating from the property industry. No-one that I could see was out there putting the case for growth.

And I suspect the reason is that 'big (property) business' doesn't want to draw attention to itself on a contentious public issue. ...

If the property industry continues to remain silent on big policy issues then public opinion will ultimately swing against development. Think about it. ...<sup>33</sup>

At about the same time, the forces for stability were gaining some important new recruits. For example Kevin Andrews, former Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, expressed reservations about current levels of growth, asking: 'Why is

the Rudd Government hell-bent on bringing more and more people to Australia?’ He pointed to problems with urban infrastructure, called for a population debate, and argued that we should consider reducing the intake to 35,000 a year.<sup>34</sup>

By November 2009 Dierdre Macken reported in *The Financial Review* that many people were focusing on the disadvantages of growth:

... the passion behind the immigration debate is being fuelled by feelings that it’s costing people their lifestyle—and possibly endangering the Australian way of life. ... You can’t park anywhere. You’re stuck in traffic every day and most of Saturday morning. You can’t get on the bus any more. You can’t afford a home loan in a capital city and you’ve got more competition for a decent job.

With population growth running at 440,000 a year and net migration accounting for 278,000 of that (three times the rate in previous decades), it’s getting harder to convince people that it’s good for them. ... It may be good for the economy but it’s rotten for lifestyles. ... it’s not going to impress average Australians to be told that it could be worse, they could be in Bangladesh.<sup>35</sup>

In January 2010 Dick Smith, prominent entrepreneur and business man, said Australia did not have the carrying capacity to support 35 million and that bringing in more people in order to offset the ageing of the population was nothing but a Ponzi scheme.<sup>36</sup> In February he launched the new edition of Mark O’Connor and Bill Lines’ book, *Overloading Australia*.<sup>37</sup> He was joined at the launch by former New South Wales premier, Bob Carr, the singer John Williamson, and the founder of Clean Up Australia, Ian Kiernan. A new political party was also launched at the same occasion, the Stable Population Party of Australia (SPPA), convened by William Bourke.<sup>38</sup> And, in late January, ABC television

broadcast a week-long series of programs on the population question.<sup>39</sup> During these broadcasts Rudd stepped back from his active endorsement of ‘a big Australia’. His new position was: ‘I don’t have a view on that to be honest, this is simply the reality we are now dealing with’.<sup>40</sup>

The result is that, since October 2009, population growth ceased to be a topic that few people in public life discussed; it moved much closer to the centre of political attention. Indeed, the Australian Greens, long silent on population, announced in March 2010 that they would call for a Senate inquiry and Scott Morrison, shadow minister for immigration, said that the Coalition parties would support them.<sup>41</sup> Given the numbers in the Senate the inquiry should go ahead. The Australian Conservation Foundation has also nominated population growth to be listed under federal conservation legislation as a process threatening biodiversity in Australia.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the respondents to the AuSSA survey would have completed their questionnaires by late January but these later developments point to the possibility that population growth may become an election issue in 2010. If this happens, how would voters respond?

A number of critics have claimed that public opinion is hostile to further growth but, to date, the evidence has been patchy. Over the years there have been many surveys of attitudes to immigration,<sup>43</sup> but few on attitudes to population growth. Responses to questions on immigration can be coloured by people’s attitudes to cultural diversity and race, as well by their feelings about refugee policy and internationalism. It is also hard to know the degree to which supporters of immigration, or its critics, understand the links between immigration and population growth. If we want to know what voters think about population growth we should ask them directly.

## RECENT POLLS ON POPULATION GROWTH

While surveys of attitudes to population growth have been rare, the current debate has led to three firms conducting recent polls: Nielsen, Galaxy and EMC.

In November 2009, *The Age* published results of an Age/Neilsen poll on attitudes to an Australia of 35 million: 40 per cent thought the number too high, 30 per cent said it was about right, two per cent said it was too few, and 26 per cent had no opinion.<sup>44</sup> The exact question was not published, but previous research has shown that questions about immigration that ask people to comment on a specific number of migrants can founder on respondents' limited understanding of demography. Many people have only a foggy idea of the numerical trends and thus have little idea of what constitutes a large or a small number of migrants. The same probably applies to questions about population that focus on a particular number and this may explain the high proportion, 26 per cent, reporting no opinion.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast a Galaxy poll in December 2009 of people in Queensland found that 60 per cent wanted their government to take steps to limit population growth. The poll also asked about growth in particular regions such as Moreton Bay and South East Queensland, finding in both instances that 59 per cent wanted limits to their region's growth while 35 and 33 per cent respectively did not.<sup>46</sup> Although the exact questions and detailed results were not published, the questions do not appear to have been focussed on a particular number and the proportions reported suggest that very few said 'don't know' or gave no response.

In February 2010, Essential Research, run by the online polling company EMC, asked a question on attitudes to population: 'It has been estimated that Australia will have a population of 36 million by 2050.

Do you think this will be good or bad for Australia?' Here 24 per cent said it would be good, while 48 per cent said it would be bad. But 23 per cent chose the neutral option of neither good nor bad, while five per cent said 'don't know'.<sup>47</sup> Again the mention of a specific number is associated with a large proportion of uncommitted responses. In March 2010, Essential Research asked more questions about population growth, this time without mentioning numbers. There was no neutral option offered, but there were also very few don't knows. They found that 75 per cent thought Australia did not have the infrastructure and services to manage more population growth, 61 per cent thought the environment too fragile to cope with a much larger population, and 52 per cent disagreed with the proposition that a larger population would help the economy.

But in contrast to the 75 per cent who doubted that Australia's infrastructure and services could manage more growth, only 64 per cent wanted immigration slowed. The full question here was: 'Immigration should be slowed as it causes too much change to our society'. The lack of congruence between the two responses suggests that questions about immigration often tap attitudes not directly connected to population growth; indeed in this case the immigration question could be read as inviting respondents to report on attitudes to cultural diversity rather than to growth itself.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the results described above vary with the type of question asked, they do suggest widespread dissatisfaction with population growth. Nevertheless, they are patchy. Some questions assume too much knowledge, one is limited to only one state, and the two run by EMC rely on the new method of online polling.<sup>49</sup> What would we discover with a large national survey based on a random sample and using a well-tested question?

## THE 2009–2010 AUSTRALIAN SURVEY OF SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND POPULATION GROWTH

In 2009, the Monash Centre for Population and Urban Research (CPUR) put a series of questions about attitudes to population growth on the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA). This is administered by the Australian Social Science Data Archives at the Australian National University, under the directorship of Ann Evans.<sup>50</sup> The survey was posted to a random sample of voters in December 2009 and, as noted above, was in the field until February 2010. As of March 2010, 3,142 responses had been received.<sup>51</sup> Evans has kindly made pre-release data available to the CPUR so that we can provide a preliminary report on these attitudes. The CPUR holds the pre-release data for our own population questions together with respondents' age, sex, and state or territory of residence.

The first two questions are the key to the series. They are based on wording first used by Irving Saulwick and Associates in 1977 and again in a modified fashion in 2001 (see below). The first read as follows:

The next few questions are about population growth.

In 2008–09 immigration to Australia was higher than in any other year.

Do you think Australia needs more people? Yes [or] No?

Respondents who answered 'yes' were then asked:

How would you like the population to grow?

Please choose only one option.

Encourage people to have more children

Encourage more migrants to come

Encourage both migrants and larger families

Table 3 sets out the answers. It shows that nearly seven out of ten did not think that Australia needed more people, and that only 23 per cent (six plus 17) favoured growth via an active immigration policy.

Women were much more likely to support stability than were men but, while both younger and older people were more in favour of stability than were the middle-aged, differences by age were not as striking. See Table 4.

**Table 3: Attitudes to population growth, all voters, December 2009 to February 2010**  
*Do you think Australia needs more people?*

	Number	Per cent
No	2115	69
Yes	937	31
<i>If yes, how would you like the population to grow?</i>		
<i>Encourage people to have more children</i>	215	7
<i>Encourage more migrants to come</i>	181	6
<i>Encourage both migrants and larger families</i>	526	17
Total	3052	100

Source: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes [Computer file], Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2010, pre-release data

Notes: The full sample was 3,142. This table, and subsequent reports of the 2009–2010 AuSSA data, exclude the 90 respondents who did not answer the initial question on whether Australia needs more people. The subtotals of how those who did think Australia needed more people wanted growth to occur add to 922 not 937 as 15 of this group did not answer this second question.

Table 5 shows that voters in Queensland were the most likely to want stability, and those in the ACT the least likely. While there were only 58 respondents from the ACT the difference between their responses and those of the sample as a whole was strong (significant at the .05 level). Most of these respondents would have lived in Canberra, whereas those from the states would include many people in rural and regional areas as well as cities. When the full 2009–2010 AuSSA file is released it will be possible to compare responses from the cities that are experiencing the strongest growth with those of voters in Canberra and

in other areas. Nevertheless, Table 5 shows that voters in the ACT are more pro-growth than are the rest of the electorate.

The questions then went on to ask respondents about their reasons, either for wanting growth or for wanting stability. Each group was offered a list of nine possible reasons and asked to nominate their first reason and their second reason. The reasons were chosen from themes in population debates in Australia, some of them current for more than thirty years.<sup>52</sup>

Table 6 shows the two reasons offered by respondents who preferred growth, by sex and for the group as a whole. The two

**Table 4: Attitudes to population growth by sex and age, December 2009 to February 2010, per cent**  
*Do you think Australia needs more people?*

	Female	Male	18 to 39	40 to 64	65 plus	Total
No	**75	**62	71	67	72	69
Yes	**25	**38	29	33	28	31
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	1678	1351	727	1567	703	3052

Source: See Table 3

Notes: Twenty-three respondent did not state their sex and 55 did not give their age.

\*\*Difference between the subtotal and the total is significant at the .01 level.

**Table 5: Attitudes to population growth by state and territory, December 2009 to February 2010, per cent**  
*Do you think Australia needs more people?*

	QLD	SA	VIC	NSW	TAS	WA	ACT	Total
No	73	72	70	69	65	64	*50	69
Yes	27	28	30	31	35	36	*50	31
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	577	279	781	909	89	331	58	3052

Source: See Table 3

Notes: Data for the Northern Territory (n=19) are not shown and subtotals exclude nine respondents missing on state/territory. QLD means Queensland, SA South Australia, Vic Victoria, NSW New South Wales, TAS Tasmania, WA Western Australia, and ACT Australian Capital Territory.

\* Difference between the subtotal and the total is significant at the .05 level.

reasons have been added; consequently the unit of analysis in Table 6 is one reason, not one respondent. (Most people provided reasons; 98 per cent of the pro-growth group gave at least one reason, and 96 per cent gave two reasons.) The combined reasons have been sorted from the most often mentioned by the group as a whole to the least often mentioned.

Table 6 shows that economic reasons predominated among people who favoured growth, though women were a little more likely to mention cultural diversity and refugees. The old argument about increasing the population for defence has few supporters, and only 26 respondents gave boosting the housing industry and supporting property prices as one of their reasons (three people mentioned it as a first reason and 23 as a second reason). Overall, pro-

moting economic growth, trying to offset the ageing of the population, and importing skills were the three top reasons; together they accounted for 73 per cent of all the reasons given.

Table 7 adopts the same approach to summarise the reasons offered by those who supported stability; 97 per cent of this group offered at least one reason and 96 per cent offered two.

Responses are spread over a broader range of reasons among the pro-stability group, but three of the top four focus on the environment: the natural environment, the urban environment, and water. It is a little surprising to find the need to train our own people as the reason most frequently put forward.

Why might it have attracted so many respondents? One explanation could be

**Table 6: Reasons for saying Australia needs more people by gender, December 2009 to February 2010, per cent**

	Men	Women	All
We need more people for economic growth	38	33	36
Having more babies and/or migrants could counteract the ageing of the population	21	22	22
We need skilled migrants for the work force	16	13	15
Having more people means more cultural diversity	7	10	8
A larger population could give Australia more say in world affairs	4	5	5
A larger population could make it easier to defend Australia	5	3	4
We may need to increase total migration so that we can take in more refugees	2	6	4
We could ease overpopulation overseas by taking in more migrants	2	4	3
More people could boost the housing industry and help support property prices	1	2	1
Missing	3	3	3
Total	100	100	100
Total reasons N	1030	832	1874

Source: See Table 3.

Note: All but 17 of the 937 who wanted growth gave at least one reason and 907 gave two reasons. The two reasons have been added together in Table 6 so the unit of analysis is one reason, not one respondent. Six of the respondents who were pro-growth did not state their gender.

the fact that post-school education for Australian residents has been seriously neglected.<sup>53</sup> But unlike school-based education and health care, this has not been a prime political issue. The result may also be a reaction to the continuing theme that we need to keep the intake high in order to import more skilled people. This dates back at least to 1977,<sup>54</sup> though contemporary accounts suggest that it was then often merely a device to justify bringing in more people irrespective of the need for their skills.<sup>55</sup> Today the theme is constant<sup>56</sup> and, when it comes to the professions, has more justification than it did in the late 1970s (due to the neglect of higher education for local students). Thus voters who want to improve local training may find the theme particularly grating.

The government has responded to skill

shortages by drawing on international students, many of whom have gone on to gain permanent residence visas on the strength of the local qualifications that they have paid to acquire. The outcomes of this policy have indeed generated media coverage in recent months. There are stories of racist violence against foreign students, stories about the inadequacies and financial collapse of many private colleges, and research documenting the failure of many former students to find work in the field for which they have been trained, often because of poor English.<sup>57</sup>

These three factors—the neglect of tertiary education for locals, the ever present theme of the need to import skills put forward by growth advocates, and scandals surrounding the overseas student industry—may help explain the prominence of

**Table 7: Reasons for saying Australia does not need more people by gender, December 2009 to February 2010, per cent**

	Men	Women	All
We should train our own skilled people, not take them from other countries	21	26	24
The natural environment is stressed by the numbers we already have.	18	17	18
Australia might not have enough water for more people	13	12	13
Our cities are too crowded and there is too much traffic	14	10	12
We have too much cultural diversity already	11	9	10
Having more people could make unemployment worse	7	10	8
We could still take refugees without high total migration	5	6	5
Population growth makes it harder for Australia to cut total greenhouse gas emissions	3	4	4
The cost of housing is too high	4	3	3
Missing	3	3	3
Total	100	100	100
Total responses N	1672	2524	4230

Source: See Table 3.

Note: All but 58 of the 2115 who wanted stability gave at least one reason and 2035 gave two reasons. The two reasons have been added together in Table 7 so the unit of analysis is one reason, not one respondent. Seventeen of the respondents who were pro-stability did not state their gender.

the need to train our own among the pro-stability majority. Nevertheless, if the three most mentioned environmental reasons are added together they account for 43 per cent of all reasons in this group and, if the four per cent of mentions of greenhouse gas emissions are added, the total runs to 47 per cent, or nearly half.

Overall, the need to train our own people and to care of the environment accounts for 71 per cent of all the responses from the pro-stability group. While growth advocates have in the past tended to claim that stabilists are motivated by cultural insularity or racism,<sup>58</sup> concern about cultural diversity accounts for only 10 per cent of the responses.

## CHANGES IN ATTITUDES TO POPULATION GROWTH OVER TIME

Apart from the recent flurry of polls, there have been few surveys in the past that ask respondents specifically about population growth. But there are at least two which provide data which can be compared with the CPUR's questions from the 2009–2010 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes.

In 1977 Irving Saulwick and associates asked:

*Do you think that over the next few years we should—*

- Not be concerned if growth slows down
- Encourage couples to have larger families

**Table 8: Attitudes to population growth, Australia, 1977, 2001, and December 2009 to February 2010, per cent**

1977 <i>Do you think that over the next few years we should—</i>			<i>Preferred means of achieving growth</i>		
Not be concerned if growth slows down	[Responses mentioning growth]	Total	Encourage couples to have larger families	Encourage more migrants to come	Encourage both migrants and larger families
50	49	100	22	10	17
2001 <i>Should Australia increase, maintain or reduce its population?</i>					
Maintain or reduce	Increase	Total			
65 (58% 'maintain', 7% 'reduce')	36	100			
2009–2010 <i>Do you think Australia needs more people?</i>			<i>[For those who said yes] how would you like the population to grow?</i>		
No	Yes	Total	Encourage people to have more children	Encourage more migrants to come	Encourage both migrants and larger families
69	31	100	7	6	17

Sources: 2009–2010 data, see Table 3; 2001 data, Saulwick Age Poll, published as a supplement to *The Age*, 8 October 2001, sample size 1000 voters; 1977 data, Saulwick Age Poll, published in *The Age*, 9 November 1977, sample size 2000 voters. The 2001 poll did go on to ask respondents about their preferred means, but this question was put both to those who said 'increase' and to those who said 'maintain', so the data are not comparable with those of 1977 and 2009. (In fact in 2001, 13 per cent said by immigration, 23 per cent said by tax breaks to have children, and 61 per cent said by a combination of immigration and tax breaks.) The data for both these polls can also be obtained from the Australian Social Science Data Archives.

Note: Totals may not add to 100, or to the subtotals given, because of rounding or missing data.

- Encourage more migrants to come
- Encourage both migrants and larger families.

And in 2001 the same organisation asked:

*Should Australia increase, maintain or reduce its population?*

The wording in the three questions set out in Table 8 is sufficiently similar to allow comparisons over time. The data show that, in 1977, up to 50 per cent of voters were content with stability and that, by 2001, 65 per cent actively preferred it. In 2009–2010, this total had risen to 69 per cent.

The broad trend shows increasing majority support for stability. But despite this for several years after 1998 concern about immigration dropped. In 2001, voters' attitudes to the migrant intake were more favourable than they had been for some time. Based on the question 'Do you think the number of immigrants allowed into Australia nowadays should be reduced or increased?' 25 per cent supported a larger intake, 37 per cent were content for it to remain as it was and only 36 per cent wanted the intake reduced.<sup>59</sup> Possible reasons for the more relaxed attitude to immigration then include: the fact that multiculturalism as ethnic separatism was no longer actively promoted, ignorance about the size of the intake and its impact on population growth, the Howard Government's tough attitude to border control, and low levels of unemployment.<sup>60</sup>

It is interesting to note once again the lack of congruence between responses on immigration and population growth: in 2001 62 per cent were content for immigration to stay as it was or to increase, at the same time as 65 per cent were telling the Saulwick poll that they did not want the population to grow. This underlines the relatively poor validity of questions on attitudes to immigration as surrogates for attitudes to population growth. But in the Australian Election Study held just

after the 2007 election, voters' attitudes to immigration were no longer so favourable. Despite a booming economy and few worries about jobs, the proportion wanting more migrants had dropped to 15 per cent and those wanting a reduction had risen to 46 per cent.<sup>61</sup> Here it is possible that some voters were seeing a connection between high migration, population growth and declining liveability in the major cities. If voters were to be asked the immigration question again today, one might expect a higher proportion favouring a reduction, especially as today's more open debate is making the link between immigration and growth clearer for some than it might have been before.

## CONCLUSION

Aspects of demography have been discussed in recent years, such as low fertility, demographic ageing, and immigration, especially immigration's effects on cultural diversity. But population growth itself has not been a front-of-mind political issue in the media until the last few months of 2009. Nevertheless, the data suggest that, over the last 32 years, more and more Australians have become dissatisfied with the growth trajectory supported by their governments.

A pro-growth minority are swayed by claims that population growth has beneficial economic effects, including the advantages of importing skilled workers, but very few find the old populate-or-perish argument compelling. Most Australians, however, want stability. They dislike the argument that we should take our skilled workers from other countries and nearly half of them point to the damage that population growth is doing to the environment. For a long time Labor parliamentarians have been far more likely to support high immigration than have Labor voters.<sup>62</sup> The CPUR does not yet have data on attitudes to population growth by party preference but, on the ques-

tion of population growth, the current Labor leaders seem to be even more distant from the people who vote for them than they have been on immigration in the past.

At the time of writing the Rudd Government appears to be arguing that it can do nothing, that it 'doesn't have a view on [population growth] ... this is simply the reality we are now dealing with'. However, as shown by this survey, the government's

tacit commitment to rapid population growth is far apart from the electorate it purports to represent.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bob Birrell for help in framing the questions, and the many people who helped by testing them and providing feedback. Thanks are due particularly to Kylie Weaver and Nataliya Dimaksyan.

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- <sup>3</sup> AuSSA is managed by the Australian Social Science Data Archives at the Australian National University. It is based on a large random sample drawn from the electoral role. Respondents are sent a printed questionnaire together with a return envelope. Further details are proved below.
- <sup>4</sup> Recent research suggests that the TFR may involve an undercount, as some parents delay registering a birth, or in some cases do not register it at all. See *Births Australia 2005*, Catalogue No. 3301.0, ABS, Canberra, 2006, Chapter 5
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