

THE RIGHT MIX: TOWARD A POPULATION POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA

■ Martin Ferguson

This is an edited version of a speech by Martin Ferguson, Shadow Minister for Population, to the Business Council of Australia's Population Growth and Society Conference on 15 November 1999 in Melbourne.

LABOR'S APPROACH TO POPULATION POLICY

A Labor Government will set itself the broad goal of achieving moderate population growth.

We believe a larger population can culturally enrich us, assist us to achieve our economic objectives, build our regions, and help us to meet new challenges as our population base ages in coming years.

Labor believes that virtually every other issue is affected in some way by our population management in the long-term.

We will consider a variety of measures, including:

- finding the right mix between immigration and family policies;
- dealing with an ageing population on a number of fronts;
- focussing on regional development;
- caring for our built and natural environment; and
- investing in people and their ideas.

Contrary to what some people believe, a population policy is not, and should never be, merely about targets for immigration, birth rates or any other single demographic measure.

It is about a philosophy that encourages a 'whole of government' approach that will allow Australia to develop and grow — in a way that is sustainable.

Labor's approach will combine the right mix of immigration and family policies that can help boost our popula-

tion through natural increase as well as through immigration.

We will establish, as a matter of priority, a new Office of Population to advise on a range of population options and ways of getting there.

The Office of Population will work closely with other portfolios to broadly identify policy measures.

The first step will be to undertake a wide-ranging inquiry to ascertain the levels of population that can be sustained into the long-term in order to pursue more favorable economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

This will involve consideration of a range of issues including:

- long-term demographic trends concerning immigration and natural population increase;
- environmental sustainability;
- detailed analysis of internal migration and population flows; and
- regional development needs.

OUR AGEING SOCIETY

On current trends of births, deaths and immigration, our population level is predicted to stagnate within the next half century.

Labor recognises that while immigration can play a role in helping keep our nation young, it is not the only lever capable of influencing our 'dependency ratio', the ratio of working age to non-working age Australians.

There is currently one Australian of retirement age for five Australians of working age.

In 2021, there will be one Australian of retirement age for every 3½ of working age, and by 2051 the ratios will be one Australian of retirement age for every 2½ of working age.

In 1998, just 12 per cent of Australia's population were aged 65 or over. That figure is predicted to double in the next 40 years.

Therefore, a population policy must complement policies in health, aged care and retirement incomes, and be assisted by measures to achieve a better balance between work and leisure time for older Australians.

We must invest in people and their ideas — repeatedly over a lifetime — because this is critical to achieving the economic growth required to offset the extra costs we will face.

While we must meet the challenges of an ageing population on all of these fronts, we must also attend to our declining birth rates — which are at historically low levels and are predicted to fall further.

THE RIGHT MIX — IMMIGRATION AND NATURAL INCREASE

Throughout Australia's history, population policy has been concentrated on discussions about immigration.

Opinion has often been polarised about the number and ethnic composition of new settlers to this country.

One point is beyond dispute, and that is the magnificent contribution to our economic, social and cultural diversity that migrants have made, and continue to make.

While we hear a lot about the value of cultural diversity, immigration can be overwhelmingly positive for Australia's

economy too — because migrants bring with them new skills, ideas, practices, extra demand for goods and services, and a greater preparedness to engage with the rest of the world.

Fortunately, we are moving on from many of the old arguments about immigration, and to a large degree, we have achieved agreement on the core composition of our migrant intake.

There are still some differences, but in the main, the changes to the intake mix have been accepted by most people in the debate. So, in terms of immigration, we have come a long way, but we now have the opportunity to go a lot further.

One of our greatest challenges is to foster a change in attitudes that supports immigration. We must have the courage to back up our convictions on that, and we can not shy away from the need to convince those in our community who remain sceptical.

Building community support requires that there is integrity in the immigration system. It must be able to deal compassionately with emergencies such as the tragedy in East Timor, and it must be able to deal swiftly with the critical problem of illegal immigrants.

We must be able to respond rapidly to crises in order to assist people when the situation demands. To do that requires some foresight and planning, not knee-jerk reactions every time we are confronted with international upheaval.

As I mentioned before, it is time to stop relying on immigration as a short-term policy lever. We must now consider medium-term planning involving other population measures.

Labor sees fertility as a crucial factor affecting our population. Having children is, in fact, the oldest form of recruitment there is.

But we will not arrest the decline in

birth rates without taking positive steps to improve the quality of life of those seeking to combine family with work. Family friendly policies are about offering people real choices and flexibility—not just between work, study, caring and retirement — but increasingly about how to more effectively combine these elements at different stages in our lives.

It has been argued that industrialised countries (for example France and Sweden) that offer women the greatest support to move in and out of work while allowing them to maintain their careers also tend to have higher birth rates.

Countries with lower birth rates (Spain, Germany and Italy) are those which, through their social institutions and ‘male breadwinner’ model of the family, make life more difficult and less rewarding for women to combine raising children and work.

The consequences for these low birth rate nations are faster rates of ageing. Although Australia’s birth rate sits somewhere near the middle range of industrialised nations, the implications for us are clear.

Government policies can affect birth rates, and therefore the ageing of the population — just as negative policies can have a negative effect.

Population researchers have expressed concern at Howard Government policies that have increased child care costs, trivialised the effects of workplace insecurity, and championed a new tax system that provides distorted incentives to combine work and family.

Australians used to be able to plan for their families in the knowledge they had a full-time, permanent job. Now, many Australian workers feel insecure in the struggle for permanency and working hours that fit in with their family lives.

The obsession with flexibility in the

workplace has not been matched by measures to support families trying to cope with the extra pressures and uncertainties it has brought about. Planning for a family has taken on a whole new meaning; and people are having fewer or no children, or they are deciding to have children later, because of the insecurity that now rules their working lives.

To arrest the decline in birth rates, Labor is examining new and cost effective ways to:

- ensure the availability and affordability of child care and after-school care, particularly at or near the workplace;
- remove the financial disincentives in the tax and welfare systems that presently deter some people from taking up part-time work;
- introduce more flexibility into the receipt of family benefits giving one parent the choice to stay home longer during the early childhood years; and
- encourage businesses, workers and unions to negotiate more family-friendly work practices and to equip the Industrial Relations Commission to assist them in this respect.

Of course, these sort of measures cost money, and we must be rigorous in evaluating them against other options. But we also need to understand that these are the sort of things we would want to do anyway — for social as well as economic reasons.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

I recently took over portfolio responsibilities for regional development and regional services. I have done so at a time when Australia is experiencing a particularly uneven pattern of economic development.

While I appreciate that this is partly due to demographic and industrial his-

tory, I am convinced that the resulting inequality of opportunity is unacceptable. It denies too many of us, and too many of our children, the opportunities we should all be entitled to. It divides us socially as well as economically, and it has major implications for environmental sustainability and natural resource management.

It is my view, and one that I have expressed strongly for some time now, that location has been an understated element of public policy. The fact is that serious disparities have opened up — both within cities and between regions.

I would also note — because it is relevant to the population debate — that poorer people living in depressed regions have higher birth rates — in no small part due to education levels.

A corollary of this is that people are becoming trapped in regions where there are few job opportunities, or where the job opportunities are going to people from outside the region — people with higher skills.

This is reflected in the increasing proportion of children growing up in families struggling to provide basic needs such as education.

Education, training and employment policies are locking too many Australians out of the workforce, thus creating a fragmented, divided society — with location entrenching the division.

I am aware of the approaches that have been tried before to overcome locational disadvantage, and I am aware of the few successes and many failures in this area.

But new models of place management and new ideas on the role of government in partnering regions to develop their economic and social capacities are emerging.

Labor rejects the argument that governments have no role in local economic development. While all communities

need infrastructure and services, some communities need extra support for local economic and social development. We must assist these depressed areas — because we can already see the consequence of failing to do so.

One example of where we believe there is scope to do better relates to the regional aspects of skilled migration. Labor will examine ways to attract skilled migrants and businesses (and their families) to the regions.

This has the potential to not only contribute to local economic development, but hopefully to break down the misconceptions many people have about immigration. In seeking to attract migrants to the regions, we must also appreciate the need for settlement and ethnic-based family and community services.

While skilled migration is at times necessary to fill skills shortages, it cannot be a substitute for a coordinated approach to workforce planning. Specifically, it cannot be a substitute for retraining our existing workforce.

To make regional development work for us all, we need to be prepared to invest in the skills of those people who are being left behind by the Howard Government. There is a role for business in this, just as there is a role for business in developing and promoting better environmental practices.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

I appreciate that many people are concerned with the potential conflict between a higher population and the maintenance and protection of our environment. The 1994 Jones Report into Population Futures found that environmental impact was a function not just of population, but also of technology, lifestyle and organisation.

Labor believes an increase in population can be sustained without further damage to the environment, but only if we change the way we do things: by developing more ecologically sustainable practices in urban planning and design; infrastructure provision; and pollution control.

The carrying capacities of Sydney and Melbourne are reaching their upper limits, while many of our regions are facing serious land and water management problems. A more coordinated approach to urban planning, regional development and natural resource management is a critical aim of any population policy agenda.

A full understanding of sustainable development, the more efficient use of limited natural resources such as water, and ecologically sound land practices, is a necessary complement to an increase in population.

We accept that there is a lack of consensus about the size of an ecologically sustainable population in Australia. That is why we are committed to studying the resource needs and environmental impact of alternative population scenarios.

THE NEXT STEP

The task of meeting the challenges of an ageing population, limited choice to combine work with caring responsibilities, uneven economic development and environmental management is not an easy one.

Labor agrees with business leaders that the right mix of immigration brings with it benefits for the Australian economy by exposing us to new skills, ideas, business practices, higher demand for goods and services and a more outward-looking trade policy.

At the same time, a Labor Government will expect business to accept their

labour market responsibilities to train workers, and to progress their attitudes to older workers, whose skills and experience should be valued.

There is also an onus on business to honour the relationships between skilled migrants and the local labour market by linking with the local education and training system, instead of seeing immigration as the sole answer to skill shortages.

We want leadership from business on this issue – and from all sections of the community – because it appears that, once again, the Howard Government is offering little more than a few platitudes.

CHALLENGE FOR GOVERNMENT

Barely six weeks ago, the Immigration Minister rejected calls for a formal population policy, stating that ‘Australia’s current approach to immigration was the right one’.

While Labor is prepared to take risks and actually develop a comprehensive population policy, once again it is clear that John Howard and his Government cannot provide national leadership. They are incapable of developing a plan.

While much of the developing world struggles under the weight of trying to support swelling populations, Australia must face up to the possibility of a stagnating population as we head forward into the next millennium.

We are a nation built on immigration, and that is something we should take pride in. But immigration alone can not solve our population priorities. Labor’s agenda also involves empowering individuals, families and communities.

We believe we can develop the capacities of individuals — but only if we invest in their employability throughout life.

We believe that we can develop the capacities of families — but only if we

invest in policies that support them.

We believe we can develop the capacities of communities — but only if we take an active approach to regional development.

And we believe we can do these things without compromising the capacity constraints of our natural environment — but only if we see that as integral to the

debate.

At present, too many individuals, families and communities are missing out in John Howard's Australia. Labor is looking forward to working to develop a population policy that secures a prosperous and sustainable future for all Australians.

THE END

Following article begins here in print journal.