INSTITUTIONAL IMPEDIMENTS TO POPULATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA*

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Despite being near the top of the OECD league in rate of population growth, Australia does not have any explicit population policy. The potential constituent parts of one, particularly on immigration, family and environment, are firmly enmeshed in separate political domains and responsive to separate clusters of interests. Vague, demographically ill-informed, and mutually inconsistent views of a desired population size or trajectory for Australia co-exist, with no arena for systematic engagement and considered debate among them. Australia is not alone in this respect: instructive parallels can be drawn from Canada and the United States. Indeed, population policy may well be one of the issues that modern liberal democracies find peculiarly difficult to deal with. However, there are also specific historical circumstances that led to this outcome, and that perpetuate it.

There is an obvious sense in which a country can not not have a population policy. The state as an organization with a territorial jurisdiction and a roll of members necessarily influences the processes of entry and exit — through birth, migration and death — and patterns of settlement. In the case of immigration, the state’s influence may amount to virtually complete determination; for internal migration and for death, the influence may be a byproduct of actions taken in quite different spheres and for quite other purposes. However minimalist the state, however devolved its functions, however respectful it is of the sovereignty of its citizens, there is an identifiable array of measures it has taken — or conditions it has tolerated — that impinge on these demographic processes. Together, those measures define, in this sense, a state’s population policy.

This externally construed ex post facto notion of policy is not the sense in which I shall use the term. By population policy I mean a coherent vision of the desired demographic future and a co-ordinated set of actions designed to move towards it. This does not imply a static target and innocent faith in social engineering; it does entail some explicit deliberation about alternative futures, and an appreciation of how near-term decisions may favour some of them and exclude others.

In any policy domain, an abstract treatment of goals and means understates the messiness of real-world political debate and action. One might think that population is conceptually such a straightforward topic that these complications could be avoided. Unfortunately, even if the goals of population policy are comparatively simple, the 'means' are often both intricate and inherently controversial. Moreover, policy domains overlap and compete for government attention. In this contest, simplicity or essentiality are of no consequence. To get to the foreground requires alliance and constituency. Population lacks both. Worse still, 'population' can readily be redefined as a series of separate components within distinct non-demographic policy arenas — in effect, made wholly to disappear as an object of attention in itself.

In this essay, I look at these issues as they arise in the ways that Australia sets its demographic course. It is no more than a sketch, though one that I believe could be elaborated at length without much affecting the argument. Australia’s problems with population policy — and at base, its reluctance to concede that there are any problems — are in large part generic, paralleled or echoed in other affluent liberal democracies. The effects of the idiosyncrasies of our history are seen in the relative weighting and particular manifestations of these problems, in how they are perceived, and in the institutional context within which responses are evoked or evaded.

**Population Processes and the Institution of Citizenship**

From Federation, Australia’s territorial boundaries have been unproblematic, aside from a wholly peaceable and constitutionally-signalled willingness to embrace New Zealand. The legacies of unreconciled competing colonialisms that have helped to shape the polities of North America are absent. Aboriginal nationhood, long acknowledged by treaty for many of the indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States, has similarly been missing in Australia, its possibility only recently bruited. As a nation-state, Australia lies in one of the least complex categories.

Unlike territory, however, demography has been a major issue in Australia’s development since first European settlement. Population growth was the objective, immigration and high fertility the means. The labour supply to develop agrarian economies in the Australian colonies came initially as a byproduct of Britain’s penal transportation but this was soon overtaken by free settlement. Much of it was subsidized, either with assisted passages or with land grants: decades before Federation the colonies had their own recruiting agents in the British Isles, seeking yeoman stock with the right combination of age, sex and industriousness.

As the base population expanded, the contribution to growth of natural increase — the excess of births over deaths — became significant. The ratio of men to women, still 2:1 in the 1840s, dropped rapidly to more normal levels through subsequent decades. Fertility was limited to some degree by late marriage and appreciable fractions never marrying — the pattern that held fertility rates in preindustrial Western Europe well below the levels they could have reached. But for those who did marry fertility was of course high: