

## **Submission to Crikey**

**By Dick Smith**

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For the past three months I've been travelling all over the country talking to people about plans to rapidly increase our population, and nine out of ten people I talk to oppose the idea.

The ones in favour are property developers and the people who work for them, including most of our politicians. Little wonder. I've made more money out of Sydney real estate in the last twenty years than I ever did from electronics and publishing. Why grow a real business that employs people when you can sit back and let population growth make profits for you? We've become addicted to this simplistic formula, but I fear we are going to pay a terrible price.

The Government claims to be concerned about housing affordability, climate change, congestion and the preservation of our environment, yet it welcomes massive population growth knowing full well it makes all those other problems far worse. It seems to be able to put all the challenges into separate boxes without ever admitting that they are, in fact, all related.

Let's get real about the scale of what we are dealing with here. Last year we grew our population by almost 500,000, the equivalent of the entire State of Tasmania. Think of the infrastructure in Tassie: three major hospitals, a multi-campus university, 200 schools, 200,000 homes and thousands of police, medical staff and teachers. That's the scale of investment we need every twelve months just to prevent our standard of living falling backwards, yet we all know nothing of this scale of infrastructure building took place.

Our cities are clogged, our public transport is failing and our hospitals are stressed. Soil degradation is costing us billions each year and our long term agricultural security is threatened. None of the major issue we face is made any easier by vastly increasing our population, yet we are the international gold medallists of growth.

I ask a simple question: why? What good does it do us and why are we taking such risks? I fail to get a coherent answer from anyone promoting the idea. They argue we have an ageing population, yet in reality we have one of the youngest populations of any advanced nation. In any case, the advice from the Productivity Commission in 2005 was very clear: “Increased migration cannot do much to avoid population ageing”.

Those favouring massive immigration argue that we have mysterious ‘skills shortages’, yet more than 100,000 young Australians left the workforce last year, while we continue to throw our most experienced workers over 55 on the scrap heap. Meanwhile we have corrupted our higher education system, turning it into a crude factory for permanent visas, while we plunder poor nations of their best and brightest doctors, engineers and others they can sorely afford to lose. In terms of foreign aid, we give very little in return. And what do we think will be more welcomed by developing nations: an Australia that takes a tiny fraction of the world’s rapidly growing population, or one that continues to be a major contributor to global food supplies? It is clear we cannot be both.

It’s not people that we lack – it’s a people *policy*. When it comes to population, Kevin Rudd drifts from welcoming ‘Big Australia’ to having ‘no opinion on that’ - the biggest issue facing our country. This does not sound like leadership to me. It’s more akin to what ALP backbencher Kelvin Thomson calls “sleepwalking to disaster.”

In aviation we *plan* for worst case scenarios, insisting on rigorous safety analysis and design and building aircraft which are *planned* to last for decades. Yet when it comes to population, Australia has *no risk assessment and no plan*. Given the implications this has for all Australians, it beggars belief.

We need a national enquiry into Australia’s carrying capacity, a commitment to implement its recommendations and a Ministry for Population that will embrace not just immigration, but a realistic assessment of its true costs. And I and others might just have to get used to not making any more easy capital gains out of the property business.