

# **SUSTAINABLE POPULATION AUSTRALIA**

## *Canberra Region*

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3 September 2002

Mr Richard Selth  
Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
Department of the House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
**CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Dear Sir

### **Inquiry into skilled migration**

Sustainable Population Australia (Canberra Region) welcomes the opportunity to make a contribution to the Committee's inquiry into Australia's migration and temporary entry program for skilled labour.

Our organisation's vision is of:

*"A relationship between humans and the natural environment which ensures the integrity and sustainability of the Earth's life support systems, the ongoing evolution of natural living systems and the well-being of every person in a sustainable population".*

In pursuit of our aim to increase public awareness of the limits to Australia's population growth from ecological and social viewpoints, we take a strong interest in the contribution of immigration to that growth.

We appreciate that the Committee's inquiry is not directed to the size of the overall migration program, but to one component of it. That component is, however, a major element of the total and has been increased significantly from the 2002-03 Program. It is therefore highly important that the Committee should keep firmly in mind that whatever it may have to say about skilled migration has the potential to influence significantly trends in the size, as well as the composition, of future programs.

This leads to the key point. Birthrate trends notwithstanding, Australia's population is projected to grow substantially in the first half of this century, even with comparatively modest levels of net migration. As Committee members will be aware, this is an outcome of past rapid growth through the so-called baby boom. In his media release of 7 May 2002 announcing this year's Program the Minister, Mr Ruddock, noted that annual programs of around 105,000 - the 2002-03 level - would

see the mid-century population reach up to 27 million (see Attachment 3 to the Minister's release)<sup>1</sup>.

Does Australia have the resources to sustain a population of this size? There is a large and growing body of scientific evidence to support a view that Australia is already suffering severely from the impact of its human population and its activities.

We live in a land of poor soils, already badly degraded through ignorance and over-exploitation. One of these problems alone - increasing salinity, particularly in Western Australia and the Murray Darling basin - provides a major threat to the productivity of much of the country's agricultural lands and to regional social assets such as roads and buildings.

The continent's water resources are under great pressure, both in terms of quantity and quality. For example, on present trends, within a quarter of a century Adelaide's water will not meet WHO standards on two days in five.

For the great majority of their residents, our major cities are becoming increasingly clogged and polluted. The provision and maintenance of adequate infrastructure is becoming ever more burdensome and problematic - note, for example, the huge amounts spent on a few road tunnels to alleviate traffic pressures. The human population of our coastal areas has been expanding rapidly, bringing a range of environmental problems with it.

Biodiversity - a most remarkable and precious national and international asset - is being seriously diminished by the pressures of development, in which population growth is a substantial factor.

Adding to this is the emerging prospect of substantial climate change as a consequence of global warming. This also, on the basis of scientific studies, is likely to have adverse impacts on productivity in many of our best agricultural areas.

Other things being equal, the more people we add to our population, the more we add to the emerging and present problems in providing for them. And the more that our resources are taken up in meet the needs of our own people, the less we will be able to continue to help feeding and clothing the rest of the world.

Against this background, boosting the overall level of the migration program is short term expedience and long term insanity.

In any event, claims for the benefits of skilled migration need to be scrutinised with great care. There is certainly good reason to doubt that the benefits are anything like they are sometimes claimed to be.

We draw attention, for instance, to the fact that, as reported in the Government's own discussion paper circulated by it for the consultations for this year's Program, recent unemployment rates for Skilled Independent migrants six months after arrival in

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<sup>1</sup> It is not known to us how the projections have taken into account possible future migration levels from New Zealand, which is not included in annual Migration Program figures.

Australia have been around 10 per cent. This hardly suggests a labour market hungry for imported workers. Further support for this comes from media reports that the demand for IT personnel (said to be in great shortage by industry interests, and therefore an important element of skilled migration) is in fact nowhere near as strong as claimed.

Australia's broader policy interests would be better served if, instead of seeking to import large volumes of skilled labour - much of it from countries who can ill afford the loss of scarce skills - it concentrated more on developing the skills base of those already here. Such a switch in emphasis could also open the way for the humanitarian component of the migration program to assume a more prominent role in it.

We ask the Committee to keep such broad policy considerations in mind when looking into the particular matters raised in the terms of reference for its inquiry.

Yours sincerely

(Mr) G Jones  
President, Canberra Region