

Australia Dossier by Michael J. Sharp

No 'bio-physical limit' to population

A new report by the government's premier research organization refutes the malthusians.

In the run-up to the recently concluded U.N. Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, all sorts of dire prognostications about Australia's future flooded the national and even international news media. Cable News Network, for instance, aired a five-minute segment which purported to demonstrate that Australia, with only 17 million people, was teetering on the edge of its "carrying capacity," while the Australian Academy of Science's "Population 2040" conference hysterically informed the world at large that "Australia had already far exceeded its biological limits, and ought to aim for as few as 6-7 million people."

In a refreshing counterpoint to such quackademics and Chicken Littles who have generally dominated the "population debate," the Australian federal government's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) has just issued a 100-page study which says that "carrying capacity is not determined by immutable, bio-physical constraints," but is a subjective factor determined by the wisdom and voluntarism of human beings.

Originally submitted to the House of Representatives' "Inquiry into Australia's Population Carrying Capacity," the report opens by questioning the very terms of the debate itself, arguing that it is "neither possible nor useful to attempt to put a figure to either an optimal or maximum population for Australia."

Instead, the CSIRO scientists say,

"Questions about Australia's population size can be usefully rephrased to ask what needs to be done to 'carry' the current population or any future population. The critical point is that any rise in population will increase the necessity and urgency to do *what should already be done* to enhance Australia's capacity to support its population" (emphasis added).

The report then proceeds to debunk some shibboleths of the greenie faith, beginning with the notion that Australia is running out of water:

"Water is arguably the key determinant of Australia's population carrying capacity, with the main problem being more one of quality, rather than quantity. . . . By and large, growth in urban water demand can be met from known resources. Most states have medium to long-term plans indicating where they can obtain water supplies for the kind of growth suggested in current population projections."

The report argues, especially given the rather small requirements for high-quality potable (drinking) water, as opposed to lesser-quality water for other purposes, that there is plenty of water for the foreseeable future, particularly if technologies are developed to deal with waste water.

A growing population will require more food, the document notes, which in turn will mean increased water requirements for agriculture. However, that is not a big problem, it says, because "there is considerable under-utilization of water resources in northern Australia in each of the ma-

ior geographic zones."

Beyond that, the report notes, lies the technology of desalination. However, that option, in reality a near-term necessity for an Australia which were growing at the rates which prevailed in the 1950s, is not developed at any length.

The report also calls for "greater public and private investment in improving urban and rural infrastructure," an urgent necessity for Australia's run-down, dilapidated infrastructure.

Beyond cataloguing specific technologies, the report exemplifies a refreshing faith that the march of scientific progress will continually provide new answers to existing or foreseeable problems. "What futuristic water management technologies might leapfrog present quality/quantity problems by the year 2020 for Australia's most populous areas?" it asks. Such optimism used to be an axiomatic feature of the Australian cultural outlook, much like the legendary "Yankee ingenuity" of Americans, which Australians formerly so much admired.

Though of a generally optimistic bias, the report's weak spots are considerable. In particular, it lacks the sweeping vision of the sort of agricultural and industrial renaissance which is outlined in a new report by the Citizens Electoral Councils, American economist Lyndon LaRouche's co-thinkers. The CEC's pamphlet, "Sovereign Australia, Part II: The Legislative Program to Save Our Nation," now released in tens of thousands of copies, provides a map of the large-scale infrastructure projects, nuclear-powered desalination projects, related massive water projects, and so forth, which are necessary to lift Australia out of its present highest-ever unemployment rates, and to prepare it for the 21st century.