

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO PAID MATERNITY, PATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE

from

Sustainable Population Australia Inc.¹

Summary: Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) supports the introduction of paid maternity leave for six months but only for the first and second children.

Rationale: SPA believes women need to be supported by the community at large - specifically through paid maternity leave - for a full six months after the birth of a baby. Doctors now advocate six months of breastfeeding before other food is introduced and it is very difficult to do this in a calm and relaxed way if the mother also has to work. In addition, it is desirable on a number of levels if the mother has time to bond properly with the baby.

At the same time, however, SPA is opposed to population growth, be it from high levels of immigration or from natural increase. Thus, while we believe mothers need to be supported after childbirth and be free to re-enter the workforce six months after the birth of a baby, we are opposed to encouraging them to have more than two children as this will lead to continuing growth in the population as a whole.

SPA believes that Australia is already overpopulated and cannot sustain further growth in the long term. We would like to see population numbers stabilise as soon as possible and then go into slow decline until an ecologically sustainable level is reached. What that level is depends on a number of factors including levels of consumption, technology use and the two major crises that are already upon us: climate change and Peak Oil.

The evidence for our claim that Australia is already overpopulated is in the decline of most environmental indicators. As the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) noted 2002 publication, *Measuring Australia's Progress*²: biodiversity had declined during the previous decade; clearance of native vegetation (a contributor to reduced biodiversity and to land degradation) had increased 40 per cent between 1991 and 1999; about 5.7 million hectares of land were affected by, or at high risk of developing, dryland salinity; about a quarter of Australia's surface water management areas were classed as used or over-used; and greenhouse gas emissions increased by 17 per cent between 1990 and 1999. Only urban air quality had improved, though it was thought that improvements might soon be offset by increased numbers of vehicles on the roads.

¹ Sustainable Population Australia is a national environmental organisation of over 1000 members with eight branches. For 20 years it has been advocating an ecologically sustainable population for Australia and globally.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics *Measuring Australia's Progress* 2002. Publication 1370.0.

Since the publication of this report, the southern half of the continent has been further affected by persistent drought that some scientists believe is a function of long-term climate change. While the drought has broken along much of the eastern seaboard, it still affects much of the inland areas with dire effects on the Murray-Darling Basin, the traditional food bowl of the continent. So much water has been taken out of the river that the Coorong wetlands in South Australia at the river's mouth have dried, exposing acid sulfate soils, rendering that part of the river highly acidic. Unless environmental flows are restored, acid waters may flow back towards Morgan, the intake of Adelaide's water supply. Increased salinity also threatens Adelaide's water supply from the Murray River. The communiqué from the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council³ of 23 May 2008 noted:

Although salinity remained relatively low at Morgan for much of 2006-07, the peak salinity late in June 2007 was the start of a rising trend. This occurred because there has not been enough water for normal dilution flows. Ministers noted that higher river salinity was a continuing risk for the lower Murray River...

Meanwhile, all major Australian cities face water restrictions from the combined effect of too many people and the continuing drought. Whether Australia becomes overall wetter or drier through climate change remains to be seen but the southwest and parts of the east are likely to be a lot drier. Australia will certainly experience higher temperatures and more severe weather events such as droughts, storms and floods. Agriculture will be adversely affected.

To add to farmers' climate change woes, they will be affected by rising fossil fuel prices and the products thereof, notably fertilisers made from natural gas. Conventional oil supplies globally and nationally have already peaked and natural gas will not be far behind though Australia does have much healthier natural gas reserves than of oil. Nevertheless, because so much of Australia's agriculture is industrialised, its capacity to continue to feed three times its domestic population is likely to be severely diminished by the combination of rising fuel prices and climate change.

The Australian economy has been buoyed in recent years by the sale of its natural resources, largely to China, and some believe that, should our own agriculture fail, we can always buy food on the world market. In an energy-constrained world, however, were global food stocks to plummet (because of competition for land from biofuels crops and from urban development), there may not be enough food to import.

SPA thus believes the Australian Government should take a precautionary approach and adopt measures that will see an end to population growth as soon as possible. Existing measures that boost the birth rate, notably the baby bonus, should either be abandoned or restricted to the first and second child. SPA wishes to note that natural

³ http://www.mdbc.gov.au/_data/page/915/MC_communique-May_2008.pdf

increase remains very high even though fertility is below replacement at 1.8.
According to ABS⁴

Natural increase for the 12 months ended 30 September 2007 was 139,400 persons, an increase of 7.4% (or 9,600 persons) on the natural increase for the year ended 30 September 2006 (129,800 persons).

This was in the context of Australia's population growth reaching unacceptably high levels. As ABS reported:

The annual population growth rate for the year ended 30 September 2007, at 1.53% was the fastest annual growth rate for a year ended 30 September since 1989 (at 1.56%).

This growth rate is higher than most OECD countries and is twice the average of 0.7 per cent.⁵ It puts Australia in the same league as many developing countries. It is a rate at which it is difficult to provide adequate infrastructure - hospitals, schools, transport etc - for all the extra people.

Conclusion: While SPA supports the concept of paid maternity leave in the interests of mothers and children, it does not support it for the third and subsequent children. Nor does SPA support any other measures that encourage population growth. We believe the national and global situation is deteriorating and there is no guarantee that Australia will be able to feed its current population, let alone export food to other countries, in a world experiencing climate change and energy constraints.

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<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3101.0Main%20Features2Sep%202007?open=document&tabname=Summary&prodno=3101.0&issue=Sep%202007&num=&view=>

⁵ <http://titania.sourceoecd.org/vl=591229/cl=14/nw=1/rpsv/factbook/010101-g2.htm>