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Sustainable Population Australia – Newsletter

Patrons: The Hon Bob Carr • Professor Ian Lowe • Professor Tim Flannery • Dr Mary White • Dr Paul Collins • Youth Ambassador: Bindi Irwin



Sandra Kanck

Latest news from SPA's national president

By Sandra Kanck

Life membership award

At our AGM, held in Melbourne over the Anzac weekend, we were able to surprise **Jenny Goldie** with an award of life membership. She joins a very select few who have been given this distinction, the others being Mark O'Connor and John Coulter. Jenny was a founding member of Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, the forerunner of SPA, almost 30 years ago. Over the years Jenny has held numerous official positions within these organisations, including national president and secretary, as well as representing us at various national and international conferences. Jenny is a valuable and highly esteemed member and well-deserving of this award.

Annual General Meeting

At the AGM the constitutional changes as put to the AGM were carried. As a result, our patrons now exist within the constitution with the method of appointing or removing them formalised, and we have clarity on the role of SPA executive members who stand as candidates in federal, state or local government elections or who are elected to parliament.

We had fewer nominations than positions available for the SPA executive so all nominees were declared elected.

However, I am very pleased to advise that Vic-Tas branch member **Martin Ryan** has agreed to be co-opted to the executive. **John Weaver** announced his retirement from the executive, and we paid tribute to the huge contribution he has made to the organisation, with key roles including treasurer and newsletter editor.

Following the AGM many of us enjoyed a seminar open to members and the public. Four stimulating speakers – **Mark Allan, Katharine Betts, Kelvin Thomson** and **Rod Quantock** – gave presentations on the topic 'Attitudes and Communication in Population and the Environment'. Rod Quantock, in his inimitable way, alerted us to the plight of the endangered TimTam. All of the talks were videoed and they will be made available in due course. Thanks go to the Vic-Tas branch for the efficient organisation of the AGM and seminar.

SPA executive actions and decisions

Our new-look website is up and running at www.population.org.au. With a federal election campaign in full swing, we will be asking parties to clarify their policies relevant to population and the environment. We will publish their responses on the website and let you know when.

The executive held face-to-face meetings over the two days following the AGM. One of the tasks we have set ourselves is to actively seek non-member supporters, with a target of gaining about 400 new members or supporters by the time of next year's AGM.

Sandra Kanck is SPA's national president

Victoria, once the garden state, is now headed for population overload

By Kelvin Thomson

An ecologist and an economist are swept off a tall building by a sudden gust of wind. The ecologist is horrified, but notices that the economist seems unperturbed as they plummet towards the ground. Why are you so calm, he asks? The economist replies, "because demand will create a parachute".

Economists, rather than ecologists, have been in the driver's seat concerning public policy for many years now, and I think there are plenty of signs that we are at risk of being swept off our tall building.

According to the 2013 Victorian State of Environment Report, the historic clearing of native vegetation in much of Victoria has resulted in the widespread loss of habitat and the decline of many species. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia with nearly two-thirds of Victoria's landscape now modified for agriculture and urban purposes.

This, combined with ongoing pressures from further clearing, habitat fragmentation, altered hydrology, inappropriate land use and fire regimes, and invasive species, puts enormous stress on land and biodiversity across Victoria.

Healthy land and biodiversity are essential for all Victorians. They provide vital services such as clean air and water, control of pests and fertile soil, and help to regulate our climate. These are necessary to support the production of water resources, food, fibre and timber. Healthy ecosystems are also important for our own health and wellbeing, providing places for cultural, spiritual and recreational activities.



Kelvin Thomson

Degradation of land and biodiversity resources impact on the services they provide. Biodiversity loss or decline can have significant consequences for natural processes such as pollination and nutrient cycling, decrease the availability of habitat, and impact on predator-prey relationships.

In severe cases, biodiversity loss can lead to significant alterations in ecosystem type and the functions ecosystems provide. It is important to maintain and, where necessary, improve the biodiversity and health of Victoria's ecosystems to ensure the continued provision of the services on which all Victorians depend.

The degradation of terrestrial ecosystems has far-reaching consequences for many Victorian environments. Terrestrial ecosystems are intimately connected to aquatic ecosystems, including the marine environment.

Poor terrestrial health has implications for the condition of rivers, lakes, wetlands, estuaries and coastal waters.

Historic broad-scale clearing of native vegetation has also changed Victorian landscape functions in ways that are

now presenting major challenges to land managers. Accelerated erosion, acidification and salinity, as well as the loss of soil nutrients and organic content, are problems facing land managers.

Climate change is predicted to compound existing pressures on Victoria's biodiversity and ecosystem. Projections of significant shifts in local climates and increases in drought, bushfires and storms, will impact on Victoria's natural ecosystems and primary production industries alike.

Climate change is likely to threaten species with limited capacity to migrate, such as those restricted to particular habitats and fragmented landscapes, or those that tolerate only narrow ranges of temperature and rainfall. Ecosystems such as rainforest, wetlands, alpine areas and coastal and marine habitats have been identified as being at greatest risk in Victoria. Climate change will exacerbate current environmental pressures, and therefore the capacity of natural ecosystems to adapt to climate change will be improved if existing threats are addressed.

In addition to impacts on natural ecosystems, climate change also threatens agriculture and forestry through impacts on land health, water availability, agricultural yields, and increased damage from bushfires and storms.

A key driver of this environmental decline is rapid population growth. Victoria's population growth rate of 1.7 per cent last year was the fastest in the country, and Melbourne has continued its relentless 200 extra people every day, 1,500 per week, 75,000 each year growth for all of a decade now.

This rapid growth creates a pincer movement on the quality of life in our city.

At the moment the most difficult issue in my electorate of Wills is the widening of the Bell Street ramp over City Link. Why is the widening happening? To accommodate increased traffic, which is of course a consequence of rapid population growth. What is the problem with the widening? The problem is that it brings the overpass to within five metres of the portable classrooms of Strathmore Secondary College, virtually overhanging the school, to the horror of parents and teachers alike. Why can't the portable classrooms be relocated? Because there is nowhere to move them to – all the available space has been taken up to cope with rising enrolments which are of course another consequence of rapid population growth. Is there a solution? Yes, but it would involve a complete redesign and rebuild of the school, and the problem with that is that Strathmore has to compete for education capital works dollars with every other community in Melbourne agitating for a new school to cope with, you guessed it, rapid population growth.

It is noteworthy that the Property Council, Housing Industry Association, Real Estate Institute and other industry bodies who profit from rapid population growth have not been sighted putting their hands in their pockets to pay for the Bell Street widening, or a new Strathmore Secondary College, or any of the other things we need to cope with rapid population growth. There are more Elvis Presley sightings than there are of the property industry paying for the social costs of its activities.

The Queensland academic Jane O'Sullivan points out that maintaining infrastructure in a population growing at 2% doubles, repeat doubles, the infrastructure cost for governments, who have only 2% extra taxpayers to pay for it. No wonder we are seeing one-term state governments and councillors getting chucked out every time there is an election. The task of keeping up with the infrastructure requirements of a rapidly growing population is basically impossible.

Another controversial issue in my electorate is planning. At the moment

Moreland Council is proposing Amendment C159 to the Moreland Planning Scheme which would put in place 12 neighbourhood centres throughout the city. Developers would be permitted to go up to four storeys in these areas. Last week I went to a public consultation about this at the Pascoe Vale swimming pool. The 50 residents who were there were horrified at what was being proposed for the area around Pascoe Vale Railway Station, where they live. The artist's impression of it looked to them, and me, like some third-world slum.

This amendment isn't coming forward because any residents have asked for it. I don't even think any local businesses have asked for it. It is the work of the Council planners themselves. They give the game away in an information sheet that states "Our population is forecast to grow by 41,504 to 214,320 people by 2036. New types of residential and commercial developments are needed to accommodate this growth". So as a result we will get high-rise, and our backyards and vegetation will be quietly but relentlessly destroyed, at the very time when climate change means we need them most.

I do not accept that we should just assume and accept this extra 41,000 people for Moreland. If we build it they will come alright, and we will get the 41,000. But I think local residents are entitled to a real say in what happens in their street, and in their neighbourhood. We are not under any obligation to build it. These high-rise buildings are making, and will make, the quality of life poorer in Brunswick, Pascoe Vale and Oak Park and beyond. We can and should say no to them.

Who are the advocates of rapid population growth? Well they are hiding in plain sight. Just last Monday the Australian Industry Group called on the federal government to increase immigration. It said this would boost the economy.

What a lame idea. If more people come to live in your street, yes the total wealth of your street will be greater, but you personally won't be

any better off at all. Indeed in terms of your amenity the chances are that you will be worse off. This shows the big end of town has pretty much run out of ideas and is bereft. They were the people who urged on us the free-market experiment. Its hallmarks have been globalisation, privatisation, deregulation, free movement of goods and free movement of people.

Far from making our economy more diverse and resilient, however, we have become narrow and vulnerable. We have much higher levels of unemployment than we did 30 years ago. We have much higher levels of youth unemployment, much worse long-term unemployment, and serious problems of underemployment. The distribution of wealth between rich and poor is becoming less equal.

That is why I am so concerned that we are failing future generations. I believe we have an obligation to pass on to our children and our grandchildren a world in as good a condition as the one our parents and grandparents gave to us, and I fear that we are failing in that task.

This is an edited extract of a speech given by Kelvin Thomson MP to the Protectors of Public Land on 27 February 2016.

The Long Shadow of Thomas Malthus

By Jane O'Sullivan



Jane O'Sullivan

February 13, 2016, marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Malthus. He is probably the most controversial figure in the history of economics. His conviction that population growth would inevitably lead to more misery has seen him labelled variously as a pessimistic misanthrope, or the prophet of an unassailable, if inconvenient, truth. With famine re-emerging on our TV news, it might be a good time to review this debate.

At a time when optimism for egalitarian social progress was burgeoning, Malthus was indeed a bit of a wet blanket. He surmised that poverty could not be eliminated, because relieving it simply led to greater population increase, until the miseries of deprivation re-emerged to check the population. It was less a prophesy than an observation on the cause of poverty, past and present, but its implication was that the prevailing remedies for poverty would ultimately be futile, since they did not eliminate the underlying cause.

The American economist Kenneth Boulding – a founder of ecological economics – perhaps most succinctly restated the Malthusian argument in his “dismal theorems”:

1. The dismal theorem: If the only ultimate check on the growth of populations is misery, then

population will grow until it is miserable enough to stop its growth.

- 2. The utterly dismal theorem:** Any technical improvement can only relieve misery for a while, for so long as misery is the only check on population, the [technical] improvement will enable the population to grow, and will soon enable more people to live in misery than before. The final result of [technical] improvements, therefore, is to increase the equilibrium population, which is to increase the total sum of human misery.
- 3. The moderately cheerful form of the dismal theorem:** If something else, other than misery and starvation, can be found which will keep a prosperous population in check, the population does not have to grow until it is miserable and starves, and it can be stably prosperous.

When Malthus wrote, option three seemed unlikely. Neo-Malthusians are more hopeful, thanks to modern contraception. Through voluntary family planning, enabled by universal reproductive rights and availability of modern contraception technologies, humanity finally has the means to avoid the Malthusian trap. Many countries have followed this path, succeeding despite

poverty and illiteracy, because their people understood the benefit for themselves and their children. Each has gained an enormous boost in human development by lessening the burden of rapid population growth. From South Korea and Thailand to Tunisia and Chile, development took off after births were reduced – not before. The sooner and faster that fertility is reduced in all remaining high-fertility countries, the better for their development and security, and for the preservation of biodiversity and our planetary life-support systems.

What is most disturbing is the extent of resistance to this view. It seems that almost any excuse will do, to justify opposing action to reduce population growth. “Development must come first,” goes the claim – despite the many examples disproving this. “Girls’ education is the key” – although most family planning countries succeeded without it, and were able to improve education much faster after fertility fell. “Every extra mouth comes with an extra pair of hands” – but they are not much use with insufficient natural resources to employ them. “Family planning must be about women’s health and rights only – if

it's about population, it is coercive" – this bizarre logic has done more to undermine family planning programs, and thereby women's health and rights, than any other.

There were regrettable instances of coercive practices, but they were always rare, ineffective and unnecessary, and are unlikely to recur. To shun all family planning promotion on their account is like banning schools because there were instances of child sexual abuse. Simply to have smaller families as an explicit goal of voluntary programs doesn't make them coercive. If I have the right to smoke, is it coercive to tell me that it's bad for my health? If population growth is the most important factor generating poverty and food insecurity, isn't it a greater moral hazard not to encourage smaller families? Wouldn't recognition of the economic benefit of population stabilisation give governments a greater incentive to deliver reproductive rights and education for girls, and to tackle the tough job of changing male attitudes?

That was indeed the experience of the family planning adopting countries in the 1970s and '80s, all of which have seen women's roles and freedoms blossom after relieving them from unwanted pregnancies and encumbering siblings. The 'sexual and reproductive health and rights' agenda that took over from the mid-1990s failed to sustain this success. In its wake, global population growth rebounded, seeing UN projections of peak population increased by 2 billion so far, and food production per person not keeping up. The self-righteous who believe they are saving underdeveloped nations from 'Malthusianism' may instead be locking them into Malthus' nightmare.

Before judging Malthus, we should remember that, in his time, contraception was a new and rudimentary practice, not socially accepted, so the third option seemed improbable. Hence, Malthus' objections to helping the poor were explicitly to avoid increasing the total sum of human misery. It takes a degree of moral fortitude to choose the greater needs of an unrevealed future over the pressing needs of the present destitute people, and not all will agree with his position, but it was by no means misanthropic. He did promote delayed marriage as a means of reducing births – with some hope that technological progress might then at least keep pace with population growth. Indeed, constraints on marriage were the main means by which the medieval populations of northern Europe remained fairly stable. But the onset of industrialisation during Malthus' life relaxed these constraints by making wage labour, and hence the means to support a family, readily available to landless, tradeless people. Technological advance was having precisely the effect he predicted.

He could not have predicted the rate at which the newly harnessed fossil fuels and newly recruited land in the colonies would enrich Europe, outpacing even the unprecedented population explosion that occurred in the subsequent two centuries. While this explosion continued to ride on a wave of seemingly limitless technological and social progress, it was seen by many as proving Malthus wrong. Yet, as we approach the planetary limits to provide the resources we need and the planet's ability to absorb the pollutants we generate, it seems more likely that only his timing was out.

"An Essay on the Principle of

Population" was first published in 1798, but a much expanded edition in 1803 explored global evidence and moral philosophy in much more detail. Sadly, it was usually printed in abridged form, omitting chapters that reveal the breadth of his inquiry and the depth of his engagement with the moral dilemmas of society. Among them are chapters on the indigenous people of Australia and North America. He treats them not as primitives but as evolved societies, with keen anthropological interest in their means of subsistence and of population control, and he deplores their dispossession by colonists, anticipating that this process would continue until they had nowhere to go. Even then, Malthus saw the whole planet as an island. Even if it were all to be cultivated, he reflected, where then would we find new land?

Such views may surprise anti-Malthusians, who like to lump Malthusianism together with racism and eugenics.

Dr Jane O'Sullivan is president of SPA's Queensland branch.

Limits to growth

By Samuel Alexander

If the rich nations in the world keep growing their economies by 2% each year and by 2050 the poorest nations catch up, the global economy of more than 9 billion people will be around **15 times larger** than it is now, in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). If the global economy then grows by 3% to the end of the century, it will be 60 times larger than now.

The existing economy is already **environmentally unsustainable**. It is utterly implausible to think we can “decouple” economic growth from environmental impact so significantly, especially since recent decades of extraordinary technological advancement have only increased our impacts on the planet, **not reduced them**.

Moreover, if you asked politicians whether they'd rather have 4% growth than 3%, they'd all say yes. This makes the growth trajectory outlined above all the more absurd.

Others have shown why limitless growth is a recipe for **disaster**. I've argued that living in a **degrowth economy** would actually increase well-being, both socially and environmentally. But what would it take to get there?

In a **new paper** published by the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, I look at government policies that could facilitate a planned transition beyond growth –

and I reflect on the huge obstacles lying in the way.

Measuring progress

First, we need to know what we're aiming for.

It is now widely recognised that GDP – the monetary value of all goods and services produced in an economy – is a **deeply flawed** measure of progress.

GDP can be growing while our environment is being degraded, inequality is **worsening**, and social well-being is **stagnant or falling**. Better indicators of progress include the **Genuine Progress Indicator** (GPI), which accounts for a wide range of social, economic and environmental factors.

Cap resources and energy

Environmental impact is driven by demand for resources and energy. It is now clear that the planet cannot possibly support current or bigger populations if developing nations used the same amount of resources and energy as developed nations.

Demand can be reduced through efficiency gains (doing more with less), but these gains tend to be reinvested in **more growth and consumption**, rather than reducing impacts.

A post-growth economy would therefore need diminishing “resource caps” to achieve sustainability.

These would aim to limit a nation's consumption to a “fair share” of available resources. This in turn would stimulate efficiency, technological innovation and recycling, thereby minimising waste.

This means that a post-growth economy will need to produce and consume in far less resource-intensive ways, which will almost certainly mean reduced GDP. There will of course be scope to progress in **other ways**, such as increased leisure time and community engagement.

Work less, live more

Growth in GDP is often defended on the grounds that it is required to keep unemployment at **manageable levels**. So jobs will have to be maintained in other ways.

Even though GDP has been growing quite consistently in recent decades, many Westerners, including **Australians**, still seem to be locked into a **culture of overwork**.

By **reducing the average working week** to 28 hours, a post-growth economy would share the available work among the working population. This would minimise or eliminate unemployment even in a non-growing or contracting economy.

Lower income would mean we would have less stuff, reducing environmental impact, but we would receive more freedom in exchange. **Planned degrowth** is therefore very different to unplanned recession.

Redirect public spending

Governments are the most significant player in any economy and have the most spending power. Taking limits to growth seriously will require a fundamental rethink of how public funds are invested and spent.

Among other things, this would include a swift **divestment** from the

fossil fuel economy and reinvestment in renewable energy systems. But just as important is investing in efficiency and reducing energy demand through behaviour change. Obviously, it will be much easier to transition to 100% renewable energy if energy demand is a fraction of what it is today.

We could fund this transition by redirecting funds from military spending (climate change is, after all, a **security threat**), cutting **fossil fuel subsidies** and putting an adequate price on carbon.

Reform banking and finance

Banking and finance systems essentially have a **“growth imperative”** built into their structures. Money is loaned into existence by private banks as interest-bearing debt. Paying back the debt plus the interest requires an expansion of the monetary supply.

There is so much **public** and **private** debt today that the only way it could be paid back is via decades of continued growth.

So we need **deep reform** of banking and finance systems. We'd also need to **cancel debt** in some circumstances, especially in developing nations that are being **suffocated by interest payments** to rich world lenders.

The population question

Then there's population. Many people assume that population growth will slow when the **developing world gets rich**, but to globalise affluence would be environmentally catastrophic. It is absolutely imperative therefore that nations around the world unite to confront the population challenge directly.

Population policies will inevitably be controversial but the world needs

bold and equitable leadership on this issue, because current trends suggest we are heading for **11 billion** by the end of this century.

Anyone who casually dismisses the idea that there is a limit to how many people Earth can support should be given a **Petri dish** with a swab of bacteria. Watch as the colony grows until it consumes all of the available nutrients or is poisoned by its own waste.

The first thing needed is a global fund that focuses on providing the education, empowerment and contraception required to minimise the estimated **87 million** unintended pregnancies worldwide every year.

Eliminating poverty

The conventional path to poverty alleviation is the strategy of GDP growth, on the assumption that “a rising tide will lift all boats”. But, as I've argued, a rising tide will sink all boats.

Poverty alleviation must be achieved more directly, via redistribution of wealth and power, both nationally and internationally. In other words (and to change the metaphor), a post-growth economy would eliminate poverty not by baking an ever-larger pie (which **isn't working**) but by sharing it differently.

The richest 62 people on the planet own more than the poorest **half of humanity**. Dwell on that for a moment, and then dare to tell me that redistribution is not an imperative of justice.

So what's stopping us?

Despite these post-growth policy proposals seeming coherent, they face at least four huge obstacles – which may be insurmountable.

First, the paradigm of growth is deeply embedded in national governments,

especially in the developed world. At the cultural level, the expectation of ever-increasing affluence is as strong as ever. I am not so deluded as to think otherwise.

Second, these policies would directly undermine the economic interests of the most powerful corporations and institutions in society, so fierce resistance should be expected.

Third, and perhaps most challenging, is that in a globalised world these policies would likely trigger either capital flight or economic collapse, or both. For example, how would the stock markets react to this policy agenda?

Finally, there is also a geopolitical risk in being first to adopt these policies. Reduced military spending, for instance, would reduce a nation's relative power.

So if these “top-down” policies are unlikely to work, it would seem to follow that if a post-growth economy is to emerge, it may have to be driven into existence **from below**, with communities coming together to build the new economy at the grassroots level.

And if we face a future where the growth economy grows itself to death, which seems to be the most **likely scenario**, then building up local resilience and self-sufficiency now will prove to be time and energy well spent.

In the end, it is likely that only when a deep crisis arrives will an ethics of **sufficiency** come to inform our economic thinking and practice more broadly.

Samuel Alexander is a research fellow, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne. The article was published on The Conversation on 21 April 2016.

The Lucky Country? Reinventing Australia

By Ian Lowe

University of Queensland Press,
2016, 240pp, \$29.95

Review by Jenny Goldie

"Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people's ideas, and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise."

Donald Horne, 1964

In 1964, Donald Horne published *The Lucky Country*. At the time, I was attending the University of Sydney where it generated considerable excitement. In my home, however, where my parents loved Bob Menzies as much as God and the Queen, my father felt insulted.

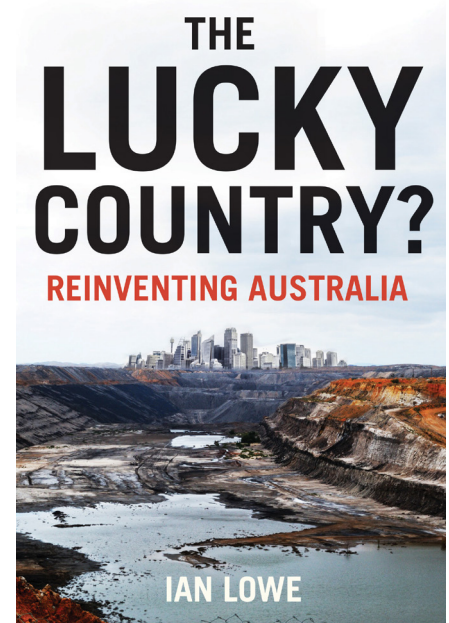
Despite, or because of, the book being a scathing indictment on Australia in the 1960s, it became a best-seller. It was, of course, not praise but a warning. On geography, Horne argued that we had to recognise that we were part of the Asia-Pacific, not Europe, despite our colonial history. On society, he called for public discussion about societal values, population growth, and what we would like to become, ideally with visionary leaders (unlike the ones we had) who would participate in, even guide such discussion. On the economy, he called for a revolution in economic priorities and the need to invest in education and science. More than 30 years after the book was published, Horne said these warnings should be repeated 'with the knob turned up'.

Now, 52 years since publication of *The Lucky Country*, Ian Lowe – academic, scientist and not least a patron of Sustainable Population Australia – revisits these warnings and says they are still relevant. He adds his own: that the environmental challenges we face should not be ignored. The extreme weather events that come with climate change, loss of biodiversity, breakdown of the Earth's ecosystems, and unsustainable use of resources all affect our future. Those of us who grew up in Australia in a time of peace and plenty, now have a duty to put in place the structures and policies that will allow our descendants to have secure, comfortable and rewarding lives.

To do this, we must be aware of our national history over the past half-century, and who better to do this than Lowe who has contributed to so many inquiries, committees and organisations, not least chairing that which produced Australia's first State of the Environment (SoE) report. He divides the book into four sections – environment, geography, society and economy – and looks at the current situation and prospects for change in these key areas.

What is striking in the section on environment is the number of times Lowe refers to human numbers. Global environmental problems, he argues, are worsening as a consequence of continually growing population and increasing consumption per person. In Australia, the 1996 SoE report noted population growth (along with consumption patterns, lifestyle choices and technologies we use) was causing biodiversity loss, poor state of inland rivers, degradation of productive farmland, pressures on the coastal zone and rapidly increasing greenhouse gases causing climate change. The report noted that if we were to achieve ecological sustainability, then economic and social decisions must be made in the context of their environmental aspects.

This reiterated what the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development had made clear: that economic development must be built on sound environmental foundations.



Lowe writes, as he does when speaking publicly, in a wry, understated style. It is almost a relief when some genuine anger bursts through, for instance when he says it is "outrageous" for the Coalition government to be claiming credit for Australia having met our Kyoto obligation. As he says, Australia's stance at the Kyoto meeting on climate change was a "national embarrassment". Our delegation had demanded a uniquely generous target where greenhouse gas production could be increased, while other developed countries undertook to reduce emissions.

We were lucky to have Lowe provide the summing up at the 2013 Fenner Conference on "Population, Resources and Climate Change," which SPA organised, and the final chapter in the book *Sustainable Futures* that arose from it. He mentions both, saying that the conclusions reached were essentially those of CSIRO's Dr Graham Turner's 40-year assessment of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*: that is, the world is right on target for the grim future of collapse. Clearly, we need to take a different approach.

Although this book has an extensive 'sources' section, it lacks an index. This is the only flaw in an otherwise exceptional book. Highly commended.

Jenny Goldie is a life member of SPA.

Econobabble: how to decode political spin and economic nonsense

By Richard Denniss, Black Inc,
2016, 176pp, \$19.99

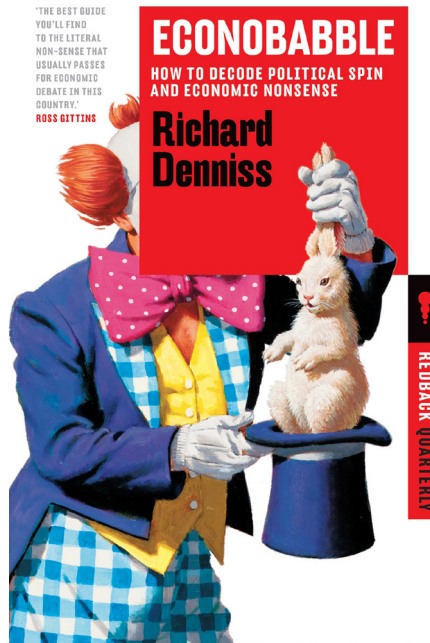
Review by John Coulter

This book delves into an important matter: how pervasively we are deliberately and misguidedly misled by most of the economic debate and policy which daily surrounds us. However, I believe it is too kind to economists and economics more generally and is pervaded with a left slant that may unfortunately stop some readers from hearing its message.

In the earlier chapters I found too many of the examples were drawn from contemporary Coalition speeches and reports. Though the quotes do show a flaw in the use of economics (flaws often exploited for self-interest) the same flaws can be found more widely and over a much longer time scale. Every evening on ABC TV news we find examples of the same gobbledegook. Quoting these would have been more neutral. Thus it would have been better to dissociate the flaws from who currently benefits until further into the book. For this reason I would recommend that the very good last chapter be read first.

I thought Richard excuses economists and economics too much for their part in this mess and lays the blame most heavily on politicians and economic commentators, ignoring the very long history of deliberate distortion among academic economists.

Economics began as a description of how economics was practised in the early days of the emergence of capitalism, morphed into a belief that



that was the natural order of things and thence to a defence of that order, for that served the interests of the most powerful – ‘the invisible hand’.

Look closely at the rise of Georgian (Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, 1879) thinking which sought to place the primary tax on land (in today's terms natural resources, especially non-renewable resources). Classical economics took land, capital and labour as the three primary inputs to the economic engine. For a time George was more widely recognised than Marx but his beliefs and policy proposals were strongly resisted by the US land and industrial barons of the time who went about creating university faculties of economics around persons who espoused that capital and labour were the primary inputs, capital and land being interchangeable. Thus Nature and biophysical reality were written out of the economics that still dominates economic discourse today.

Yes, econobabble infects almost all economic discussion but it can be found as much in the mouths of Labor and Coalition polities, with journalists and economic commentators. Its eradication requires a radical shift in mainstream academic economics. Keynes had no formal training in economics yet came closest to changing its direction. It's a pity he had no formal training in thermodynamics or the

shift may have been more radical. His remark that formal education was ‘the inculcation of the incomprehensible into the indifferent by the incompetent’ is most relevant in this situation. Economics needs to be reinvented by those with thermodynamic, biophysical and anthropological understanding.

Dr John Coulter is a life member of SPA.

Sabbath and the Common Good: prospects for a new humanity

by George Victor Browning
Echo Books, \$24.95, 373 pp.

Review by Jenny Goldie

Anglican dogma may be hard to digest at times but the strength of Anglicanism lies in its bishops, at least some of them. Retired bishop George Browning is a modern-day environmental hero, dragging a sometimes reluctant church, not quite screaming, to face the existential threats that confront us all. It was he, as much as anyone, who persuaded the organisers of the decadal 2008 Lambeth conference to focus on the environment.

Not that the church had exactly ignored the environment. One resolution from the previous conference in 1998 began with these words:

This conference recognises that unless human beings take responsibility for caring for the earth, the consequences will be catastrophic because of

- overpopulation
- unsustainable levels of

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Book Review

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consumption by the rich

- poor quality and shortage of water ...

Note that overpopulation was cited first. I'll bet Browning was at least partly responsible.

This is the book that was born out of his PhD thesis, undertaken after he retired, and perhaps inspired by the 2008 Lambeth conference. It is relatively easy to read (unless you're totally averse to theology), given its academic origins. It is solidly backed up by hundreds of notes and references: so many, I can only conclude they were the accumulated readings of a lifetime.

Browning's book is not exactly subversive, but it is radical, particularly in the context of the current federal election's implicit assumption that growth is good. As he says himself, he wrote this book:

... to argue that the environmental crisis is essentially a crisis of the human vocation, that cooperation is a more essential mode of being human than competition; that rampant individualism is at the heart of the environmental crisis and that this individualism drives an economic culture which worships individual profit rather than the wellbeing of human and nonhuman life.

What has Sabbath got to do with it? As it says in Exodus 34:21: "Six days thou shalt labour, but on the seventh day thou shalt rest." Browning argues that Sabbath is a celebration of creation. And for creation, read environment. Sabbath is linked to wellbeing, peace and wholeness, a time for us to consider the needs of future generations, and the need to live within economic and ecological limits.

Living within limits requires an end to population growth and Browning devotes a whole section to the issue. As he says, it is implicit in the recognition that all resources are finite. He reminds

SABBATH AND THE COMMON GOOD

PROSPECTS FOR A NEW HUMANITY

GEORGE VICTOR BROWNING



us of what climate scientist James Hansen wrote in his book *Storms of my Grandchildren* (2009):

The stress that humans place on the planet and other species on the planet is closely related to human population growth. Stabilization of atmospheric composition and climate surely requires a stabilization of human population.

According to Browning, the need to constrain population expansion has not received due recognition in the public debate because of the assumption that human ingenuity will solve all environmental problems. But as another eminent climate scientist, Professor Will Steffen, said to him, technology can only be part of the solution. We also need "changes in human aspirations, value systems, behaviours and institutions".

The other reason the problem of growing populations is unaddressed, Browning argues, is because economic growth is assumed to be for the common good and population growth is a necessary requirement of economic growth. Thus a stable population is a threat to living standards, the argument goes. But doesn't the biblical injunction to 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28)' support the dominant paradigm of growth in both

the economy and population?

Browning argues that scripture must be read and interpreted in light of other scripture. In this case, the overriding scriptural principle is that each generation has a responsibility for the wellbeing and security of the generation that follows.

If humanity does not address the problems associated with the size of its population then it imposes upon future generations severe deprivation at best and at worst a threat to survival.

While this book is mainly directed at the Anglican community, as Professor James Haire of Charles Sturt University says, it is:

essential reading both for those concerned with the future of Christian existence and for those concerned with the future existence of the planet.

Branch reports

ACT

The branch is disconcerted with the results of a population survey which showed that 20 respondents out of a random 24 ACT voters thought that Australia needs more people. It may be because all 17 members of the ACT Legislative Assembly constantly justify their policies by assuming that population growth is inevitable.

On 5 March Colin Lyons gave a talk titled 'Reflections on a recent trip to Zimbabwe and Europe: political, refugee and social impressions'. It is interesting to reflect that, by taking a million refugees a year, Germany grows its population by 1.2%, less than the growth in Australia.

Nick Ware, branch president

Victoria-Tasmania

The committee has just welcomed a new general committee member, Martin Ryan, who will be co-opted until elections at the next branch election. The committee would also like to advise that our postal address has changed and is now PO Box 556, Hawthorn, Vic, 3122.

The branch hosted the 2016 national AGM on 23 April and the committee are celebrating the success of the day and are currently enjoying a short recuperation. It was a fantastic opportunity to reconnect with the national executive committee and branch members and supporters alike. After constructive debate relating to membership issues at the AGM, we reflect that it was incredibly timely and appropriate that the afternoon's topic happened to be on 'attitudes and communication in population the environment'. With a diverse range of speakers including Rod Quantock, Kelvin Thomson, Katharine Betts and Mark Allen, who spoke to a full house, attendees were provided many different insights and perspectives in communicating for population sustainability to the wider community. The feedback from attendees was incredibly positive, and I would like to thank the committee for their ongoing hard work in making the day a huge success.

The main focus between now and the branch AGM in August/September is to organise social events for the current members and supporters, to re-engage and touch base with members. We note the enthusiastic response and assistance from the branch at the AGM, the Sustainable Living Festival, and with many members getting letters to the editor published on a regular basis. Given that *The Age* is writing more and more on issues of population recently, this is a crucial time for SPA members to get their voices heard!

I will be busy over the next couple of months writing an abstract for the Safe Cities conference and have also been invited to present to the Medical

Student Conference in late June on the issues of population health. I have also been invited by the Animal Justice Party to speak at a movie night on 19 June which will focus on human population.

Michael Bayliss,
branch president

NSW

Due to the fact that SPA is a non-political organisation, I will be standing aside for the duration of the federal election to focus my efforts on campaigning for political party Sustainable Australia. Graham Wood will be acting president during this period, up until the election on 2 July.

The branch has been given a number of Over books and we are currently seeking places or people to take them. Ideally they should go to places where they are likely to be viewed by large numbers of people. Please contact the branch if you have any ideas about where they may be put to good use.

At the end of the year I will be moving to the USA for family reasons. Anyone who is interested in taking on this challenging and rewarding position (supported by a dedicated committee) is invited to make contact in the coming months by emailing me at nsw@population.org.au.

Kristofer Spike, branch president

Committee report a real worry

The House of Representatives Environment Committee recently released its report for the 'Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations'. If the coming election returns a Coalition government, the report's recommendations could have major consequences for SPA and other environmental groups whose work is education, lobbying and advocacy and not on-ground work.

Of major concern is Recommendation 5:

The Committee recommends that legislative and administrative changes be pursued by the Australian Taxation Office to require that the value of each environmental deductible gift recipient's annual expenditure on environmental remediation work be no less than 25 per cent of the organisation's annual expenditure from its public fund.

This is a stunning recommendation! For decades, government has paid lip-service to concerns raised by the environment movement. Having largely ignored these concerns, the Committee now says environmentalists will have to pay for the remedial action!

The Committee's view is that remediation work would be defined as including "revegetation, wildlife rehabilitation, plant and animal pest control, land management and covenanting". Handing out condoms, which would be in line with SPA's environmental objectives, is not even a thought-bubble for the members of the Committee. They do envisage that groups like ours could pay 25% of our expenditure to another environment organisation to do remediation on our behalf.

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Having complained that a significant number of environmental organisations are not spending time, or not enough of it, on on-ground environmental works, the Committee goes on to recommend (at 6.81) over-the-top reporting requirements, including compulsory annual reporting to the ATO of “any arrests, charges or convictions for illegal activity in relation to any employees or responsible members of the organisation”. The time spent on gathering such information for an organisation like ours with a national executive and branch committees is unjustified and appears to be a method for making the workload of environmental organisations still heavier. This provision seems to include a ‘guilty until proven innocent’ component: if a person was charged but found not guilty it would have to be reported; if arrested but not even charged it would still have to be reported!

ALP members of the Committee have dissented from Recommendation 5 with the comment that “governments should be very slow to seek to define the bounds of legitimate non-government activity. This goes to the heart of a functioning civil society, and a healthy democracy”.

Recommendation 6 is incredibly high-handed and although there is only a small chance it would affect SPA, it is worth a look:

The Committee recommends that administrative sanctions be introduced for environmental deductible gift recipients that encourage, support, promote, or endorse illegal or unlawful activity undertaken by employees, members, or volunteers of the organisation or by others without formal connections to the organisation.

The ALP members have expressed concern about this recommendation. Jason Wood, the Liberal MP for La Trobe, to his credit has made his own additional comments, noting that a provision of this nature would have stopped the 1980s campaign to save the Tasmanian wilderness.

As we move towards election day, **SPA members might consider contacting their local Coalition candidates in both the House of Reps and the Senate to let them know what you think of these recommendations.** You can find the report here: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Environment/REO/Report_-_Register_of_Environmental_Organisations

Sandra Kanck, national president

Website: www.population.org.au

The SPA newsletter is published quarterly: in March, June, September and December. Members are welcome to submit material to the editor, to be published at the editor's discretion.

Membership applications and renewals should be done via the SPA website or sent to the national office. General inquiries should also go to the national office.

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