

Thank you Simon for the welcome to country. It's important we acknowledge the original inhabitants of the lands on which we meet. Recognising that the pain of occupation, subjugation and dispossession has occurred can open up new conversations and new ways of thinking which allow us to walk together to solve some of the massive problems besetting us.

Sustainable Population Australia (or our shorthand - SPA) was formed by a group of Canberran environmentalists, artists and scientists in 1988. Our name then was Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population. We later dropped the word 'ecologically' to give us an easier acronym. Had we known the word 'sustainable' would in time be bandied about and come to mean all things to all people we would have kept 'ecologically' in our title.

When SPA uses the word 'sustainable', we use it in terms of the capacity of our continent and our planet to keep us alive in such a way that future generations will be able to live with the same quality of life. This is remarkably different to the in-vogue oxymoron 'sustainable growth'.

Blow up a balloon and it grows larger, but have you ever seen a balloon sustainably grow? It bursts. Try sustainably accelerating the speed of a car. The motor will seize up entirely and not long after turning on the motor. Why do we irrationally think the laws of physics do not apply to humans when we increase population numbers at an exponential rate?

In the 1980s a South Australian environmentalist spoke to me about the need to address the issue of population growth and asked me to join SPA. I immediately said 'yes'. He replied, astonished: 'For most people there's a quantum leap from concern for the environment to concern about population growth. Why was it so simple for you?' 'Easy, I grew up in a family of 9. It was a no-brainer' was my reply.

And it's still a no-brainer. Compare two families on the same average income, the first consisting of 2 parents and 1 child, the second with 2 parents and 7 children. The latter will have only one-third the amount of money per person on which to live. Poverty is an immediate consequence. My own private micro-population problem allowed me to easily understand the issue writ large across the nation and the planet. But for many it is not as simply or quickly perceived.

I joined SPA, and my understanding flourished as did my concerns about an ever-growing population.

Population is a controversial issue. Otherwise we would not be discussing it today.

It's double-barrelled: it relates to both the question of fertility and procreation, and the movement of people around the world. Both are tied to basic human instincts – sex and territoriality. So of course there will be controversy.

I hope you saw the article on population which appeared in *The Australian* on 26th December, written by Tom Dusevic. He describes that controversy thus: *'On one side are some who see high immigration as ecologically unsustainable, a threat to our social cohesion or as a "Ponzi scheme" to perpetually pump up our market size.*

On the other is an established pro-growth coalition of big business, property developers and globalists, including the policy wizards at Treasury and the Reserve Bank, a majority of MPs and, since 1964, the custodians of this newspaper'.

In that small grouping of 'some' described by Dusevic is a substantial number of scientists who do understand the ecological unsustainability of population growth and a few but not many environmentalists. It's a David V Goliath situation.

There's an elephant (or two or even more) in the room. SPA argues Australia needs to reduce immigration because immigration is the main driver of Australia's population increase. But there are strong influences across the political spectrum insisting that we must not do so.

Therein we encounter our first elephant: a usually unspoken accusation that those who advocate for reduced immigration are racist. This is because there are groups such as One Nation calling for immigration to stop because they want to prevent African and Middle-Eastern people coming here. And we get tarred with the same brush.

SPA finds itself at odds with human rights activists who tell us we are judging people in developing nations for having large families. It's not about judgement we argue for a greatly increased overseas aid budget, with a particular focus on family planning and contraception so that those in developing nations have a choice.

Then the feminists attack us saying we have no right to tell women how many children they can have. We agree. We know if education is provided to inform women of the opportunity to be able to control their own fertility, they put their hands up and say 'yes please'. And even the men like the idea of having a little bit more money at their disposal by spacing births.

And then fingers are pointed at coercive family planning, such as the former one-child policy of China which resulted in forced sterilisations and severe punishment for those who broke the rules. But it's a non-sequitur to suggest that those who advocate for reducing population size are arguing we should go down that path.

Similarly the Indian experiment where men were offered free transistor radios as a reward for having a vasectomy is not one to be replicated.

SPA finds itself at odds with The Greens and those on the left of politics who wrongly argue the issue is not about population numbers but about overconsumption, when in fact it is both. Arguing that it's overconsumption is a cop-out because it lets population off the hook. We cannot have a sustainable future unless we address both.

SPA often finds itself at odds with demographers. This is not surprising given they are generally not trained in understanding broader ecological processes and do not see their study of population trends as operating within those constraints. That said, one of the patrons of SPA is a demographer, Dr Katherine Betts.

We find ourselves at odds with religious fundamentalists – from Christianity to Islam – who argue against family planning and work to prevent its access and distribution.

Tom Dusevic pointed out that 'some' of us hold the view that immigration is a Ponzi Scheme, and he's correct: SPA does hold that view, which means we're up against the developers who are cashed-up and ready to lobby for more and more immigration.

So, it's a gargantuan opposition we behold.

Economic indicators

Let's take a look at the economic side of this issue, to see where the established pro-growth coalition described by Dusevic is coming from.

In the movement for stabilising and reducing population growth there is an oft-quoted equation to help understand what population does in concert with other factors. It's not a formula per se, but more an explanation:

$$I = P \times A \times T$$

where I is the human impact, which is measured by taking P (population numbers) multiplying by A (affluence or levels of consumption) multiplied again by T (the technology used). It's not simple addition: it's cumulative.

This means that the impact is increased by the amount of resources being consumed – that's the affluence: wealthy nations like ours have enormous impact because of our levels of consumption. On the other hand, if we alter our technology eg switching from coal-fired electricity to solar, we can reduce some of the impact. And if there are fewer people consuming then all the better to reduce the impact.

One of the problems associated with affluent societies is the economic indicators we use. GDP, or gross domestic product, is one of the principal indicators to measure economic growth. But it effectively measures the throughput of resources and therefore produces some lazy and crazy results.

Take last year's massive bush fires. According to GDP measures we are better off as a consequence of the deaths and the damage. Preposterous, but sadly true.

When the fire trucks drove out to the fires, they used diesel to get there then to pump the water to put out the fires: that extra use of fuel was a benefit to the economy. When people were burnt or injured and were treated in hospital, the use of the bandages and medicines was a positive for the economy. It's gruesome, but that's what GDP measures.

Everything destroyed has had to be replaced, creating greater demand for new fencing around rural properties, the replacement of electricity poles and wires, concrete pours, building materials, new cars and tractors, new curtains, new carpets, new furniture, replacement clothes, replacement kitchen utensils and so on. The economy has greatly benefitted!

The economy is not predictably 'gifted' with such disasters. So how to create the demand for those same things in a non-crisis year? The solution politicians and developers turn to is the increasing of population numbers and it is like drug addiction – they can never get enough. Ask any of them at what point you turn the tap off and they cannot answer.

And **how** are population numbers to be increased? Firstly, governments can encourage the existing population to have more babies, which they did during the Howard Government years with the baby bonus. And recently our Treasurer Josh Frydenberg blushed when asked about it, suggesting coyly it might be under consideration.

The other way is to increase immigration, and for more than a decade that's where the emphasis has been with **at least 60%** of Australia's population growth coming from overseas. That's a ballpark figure of around 150,000 each year.

SPA has a very different view. Given the number of people permanently leaving the country and average fertility rates we can probably allow **50,000** people into Australia each year. Of those 50,000 SPA's view is around 20,000 would be allowed into the country for humanitarian reasons. From this you can work out that a significant minority of the 50,000 would come from war-torn regions, nations with large populations, poverty and poor human rights records, many of them refugees. Our suggestion would no doubt produce a very multi-cultural result.

Environment

Nevertheless SPA's figure of 50,000 p.a. is hugely different to the 250,000 p.a. Australia has been experiencing and which our current government wishes to revert to in a post-COVID economy.

You're possibly asking why it's a bad thing to have an extra 250,000 people arriving here each year. It's because human numbers in Australia are already beyond the land's capacity to sustain them at our level of affluence.

Australia's population mostly clings to the edges of our continent. 233 years after the arrival of British colonists and despite all the advances in science and technology we continue to do so. And there is good reason for it. The great bulk of Australia's land mass is inhospitable, with ancient soils lacking fertility, water almost completely unavailable, and growing hotter by the year because of climate change.

Australia's 2016 *State of the Environment Report* compared the condition of Australia's natural environment from 2011-2016. Two words from the report need to be distinguished: 'drivers' and 'pressures'.

The key drivers of environmental change are **population and economic activity** which in turn are creating the main **pressures**, listed as climate change, land-use change, habitat fragmentation-and-degradation, and invasive species – and all those pressures increased in those 5 years.

The SOE report noted, that 'the number of species listed as threatened under the EPBC Act continues to rise'.

This observation was verified two years later by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, in its *2018 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™*. It showed a worsening of the situation with 106 Australian species now listed as critically endangered.

The IUCN's scientific investigations reveal that many of Australia's reptiles are facing severe threat from climate change, invasive species and habitat loss-from-land-clearing-for-development. Their list now contains 975 Australian reptile species, accounting for almost **all** our continent's reptiles.

Australia's forests and woodlands are only half of what they were at the beginning of European settlement. Much of what's left is severely degraded and fragmented and thus increasingly suitable for fauna because animals need to be able to safely move from one patch to another.

The Australian Koala Foundation has no doubt the greatest threat to koalas in Queensland's south-east is loss of habitat due to land clearing and urban encroachment, both of which are human-induced. Between 2013 and 2016 more than 5000 koalas died as a consequence of clearing.

The rate of land clearing in northern NSW more than tripled after the Berejiklian government eased native vegetation protection in 2017, to the rate of about 14 football fields of koala habitat **per day**. Australia is losing two million hectares of land to urban sprawl annually.

Jeffrey McKee, an anthropologist at Ohio State University has stated 'population as it grows squeezes out other species because people need space to live, and the other species need space to live. At some point they come into juxtaposition, and something has to give. So far, it hasn't been us.' Six years on from that statement COVID-19 made its dramatic entry into our lives as a consequence of exactly that juxtaposition.

In 2010, the Australian Conservation Foundation nominated population as a key threatening process to Australian biodiversity. It's unfortunate that the ACF is one of many environment groups that will no longer touch the issue of human population impacts because, as they have explained to us in correspondence, 'it is a divisive issue'. They have even removed it from their website!

We must not back away from issues simply because they are divisive, particularly if the future of our planet is at stake.

Back then, the ACF suggested Australia could support more people, beginning with a somewhat plaintiff caveat. *"if only our planning systems, our patterns of consumption, our lifestyles, our environmental laws, our built infrastructure and our technology were all very different and much improved over the current state of affairs... to assume that they will all occur, on the scale and timeframe needed to avert irrevocable pressure on our biodiversity, would be rash indeed.*

They wrote this ten years ago and, as the science shows, things have only worsened. The writers of that nomination were correct to be pessimistic. As a nation we have continued on the predicted trajectory, failing to learn from the information available to us.

Ten years ago our population was 22.3m, now it's 25.7m. More than 60% of that increase has come from immigration. Those arguing for Australia's human population numbers to continue increasing at this rate are arguing for environmental mayhem.

As Tom Dusevic points out, our population growth rate has at times been the highest in the world, although I think he meant the developed world. In the last decade on a number of occasions we've had the dubious honour of being the highest amongst OECD nations.

Australia's growth rate was around 50% higher than North America's, five times that of Europe, larger than Indonesia. Larger than India. We're on a par with South Sudan.

In 1992, 1,700 of the world's leading scientists penned the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*. Their message was: human beings and the natural world are on a collision course such that the living world will be unable to sustain life in the manner we have come to know it, the damage being such that repair will be impossible.

25 years on, in December 2017 they published a *Second Warning to Humanity*, supported this time by over 20,000 scientists in 184 countries, telling us 'we have unleashed a mass extinction event ... wherein many current life forms could be **annihilated** or at least committed to extinction by the end of the century'.

Scientists use their words carefully and often are not good at promoting their concerns. Yet they speak of 'our **imperilled** biosphere', telling us 'soon it will be too late to shift course away from our **failing** trajectory'.

When that *Second Warning* was released, on behalf of SPA I wrote to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, asking for the government's response. Admittedly he had other things on his mind such as the destabilisation of his leadership.

And so in turn our letter was inherited by the incoming PM, Scott Morrison, who in turn sent it to the Assistant Minister to the PM, Steve Irons. He advised he was forwarding our letter to the new Minister for Population, Alan Tudge.

Finally, three and a half months after our initial letter, we had a reply – of sorts. But it abysmally failed to address **any** of the concerns raised by those 20,000+ scientists.

Mr Tudge responded 'thank you for your letter about sustainable population growth'. Does he live on another planet I wondered because my letter was definitely NOT about that myth. He said a growing population presents opportunities and challenges and the challenges were defined in terms of infrastructure to alleviate urban congestion, better transport links to connect cities and regions, to rapidly grow smaller regions, and a 'more robust population planning framework'.

Nothing was said about the environment, nothing about energy technology, nothing about marine life depletion. It was a nothing reply. To my knowledge, this was the only response at Australia's highest level of government, demonstrating either an unwillingness to engage with the issues, or an incapacity to understand them. I regarded it then, and still do, as being wilfully blind, ignorant and arrogant.

Last March Australia's 'Commission for the Human Future', led by Professor John Hewson (an economist and former leader of the Liberal Party), issued a report, titled 'Surviving and

Thriving in the 21st Century'. It identified ten **catastrophic** risks the world is facing, population being one of them.

The other nine are: climate change, environmental decline and extinction, nuclear weapons, resource scarcity, food insecurity, dangerous new technologies, chemical pollution, pandemic disease, and – the political dimension – denial, misinformation and failure to act preventively. The awful thing is that all ten are working simultaneously in a dangerous combination, one feeding off another.

Here's what the report says about population:

*A fourfold increase in human numbers since the mid-C20th is the underlying driver of **all** the catastrophic risks we now face, combined with our overconsumption of scarce resources. A key question, therefore, is "How can we slow both population growth and its impact in ways that can enable survival and prosperity for all?"*

Limiting the human birth rate voluntarily is surely better than the alternative of a catastrophic dieback or the slaughter of billions of people, and for this reason must now be considered globally, whether people or governments want to or not.

The time has come for the world, and individual countries, religions and cultures to consider in a mature and farsighted way a universal, a longer-term objective of reducing population growth as it presents a catastrophic risk to all humanity.

The 20,000 scientists who signed the *Second Warning to Humanity* referred to a mass extinction event, now simply known as the sixth extinction. It's different to earlier extinctions which were caused variously by climate cooling or the earth being hit by asteroids. It's different because this is the first time an extinction event on Planet Earth has been caused by biological beings – us.

We are threatening all other species whether it be the 90% overfishing of our oceans, the destruction of forests, bushfires of an intensity never before recorded, the whirls and whorls of giant masses of plastic in our oceans, or more simple things like the River Murray's flow stopping because of the silting up of the mouth, and only constant dredging keeping it open. Forty percent of the world's surface has now been cleared to grow food for us. Our impact is enormous.

The late Physicist and Nobel Laureate Dr. Henry W. Kendall said 'If we don't halt population growth with justice and compassion, it will be done for us by nature, brutally and without pity - and will leave a ravaged world'.

Dr Guy McPherson of the University of Arizona is known for his provocative statement 'Nature bats last'. He says this is so because mammals cannot evolve fast enough to survive

this extinction crisis – and, we are mammals by the way. We depend mostly on invertebrates for fertilising the plants which we in turn eat. But we have an insect apocalypse happening now and fertilisation is becoming problematic.

Simply put, if the biology on which we depend cannot survive then neither can we. The consequence for life on earth is becoming entirely unpredictable.

Just a week ago a group of 17 international scientists, including two Australians, published a paper in which they say human population growth and material overconsumption will worsen all of the environmental problems besetting us, yet as a species we seem unable to comprehend the magnitude of this.

I understand if you prefer to walk away from this massive challenge. These are unpleasant things to hear.

At the peak of my campaigning for the dismantling of nuclear weapons, when the Doomsday Clock was set at 90 seconds to midnight, ABC radio's Science Show gave out a phone number for those wanting to leave a message about how they felt about it.

By this stage I'd been campaigning on the issue for 25 years, I'd organised rallies, I'd carried banners, I'd written and issued press releases for People for Nuclear Disarmament and chaired their meetings. I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

I dialled the number, listened to the message to start talking after the beep. I opened my mouth, and instead of my considered message I burst into tears.

Yet in two days' time the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons comes into effect. Sadly the Australian Government has not signed on to it. But that's another story and another fight. But the message is: when the fight looked impossible, campaigners kept on campaigning.

I've been charged to answer the question whether Australia's population should 'go big' and if so, 'how big'. My answer will be obvious. We must **not** go big, neither here nor anywhere else. At the very least we must stabilise our population numbers. Going big takes us further down a pathway to destruction.

We face choices. Do we shrug our shoulders and say, I can't do anything about it? If so, as the scientists tell us, the results will be catastrophic. Or will we instead take the fight up to our leaders, our politicians and our opinion-makers, forcing them into action as has been happening on climate change?

I understand why politicians turn a deaf ear to those of us calling for limits to growth. What political party would be courageous enough to go to an election promising to reduce our levels of consumption? What political party will reject the money from its donors and instead stand up for all life forms and not just the well-advantaged humans?

That's the realpolitik I suppose. But for me, it's a bit like the Reformation Catholic priest, Martin Luther, when he said to his inquisitors 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. I hope some of you will feel the same.

I thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to speak with you on this challenging topic. I await your questions with eagerness and look forward to hearing the results of your deliberations later today.