

Submission to the Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) by Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) on Australia's 2022-23 Migration Program.

[Sustainable Population Australia](#) (SPA) is an independent not-for-profit organisation seeking to protect the environment and our quality of life by ending population growth in Australia and globally, while rejecting racism and involuntary population control. SPA is an environmental advocacy organisation, not a political party. SPA should not be confused with the unrelated political party the Sustainable Australia Party.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia's immigration policy is its de facto population policy. In setting Australia's immigration policy, the Minister for Home Affairs is setting Australia's population policy. Home Affairs should therefore advise the Minister that population growth has these costs:

1. Harming the environment.
2. Reducing Australians' quality of life.
3. Impoverishing Australians by
  - a. increasing the number of people among whom our fixed resources are divided.
  - b. billing citizens and states for infrastructure we could just not build in the first place.
4. Retarding our politics by
  - a. crowding out of important policy questions with 'urgent' infrastructure questions.
  - b. discrediting of our politicians by their pushing high population growth on a public opposed to it.
  - c. Requiring ever more coercion in order to meet our international climate obligations.
5. Increasing inequality by lowering wages and making housing expensive.

The government's purported population policy (comprising the Intergenerational report (IGR) and Population Statement (PS)) does not model any of the above costs. The IGR and PS do not offer a comparative analysis of the merits of different levels of population. The benefits of Australia's policy of deliberate population growth (so called 'Big Australia') are vastly offset by the above costs. The conceptual scope of Home Affairs' questions in this process are therefore a breath of fresh air and we applaud you for living up to the objects of the *Public Service Act*.

Population is upstream of many problems but remedies these problems through various mechanisms that always involve less commerce. This in turn means population will always be muted by the commercial media and think tanks funded by companies. We mention this because many people when first explained the actual cost-benefit dynamics of Big Australia simply cannot believe that it could be so bad for such plain reasons.

SPA's key recommendation is for the government to aim for annual net overseas migration of 60,000 a year, rather than the 200,000 planned in 2022-23 and the 235,000 a year

planned in 2024-2060. Given current rates of fertility, this would see Australia's population still grow, but more slowly, before peaking at about 30 million in 2040. While this would enrage the banks, supermarkets, universities, and property developers (the growth lobby) it would align the government with the 70% of people who want no more population growth.<sup>1</sup>

The growth lobby's vision of Australia is one of more customers and the manipulation of immigration policy in pursuit of that. SPA's vision is of a smaller population living better lives; a richer, safer and more pleasant country showcasing sustainability to the world. In the process we seek to maximise the understanding of population policy. Our detailed response to the questions are as follows.

*Should the Australian Government increase/reduce/maintain the size of the Migration Program in 2022-23 and why?*

*Mechanics of SPA's proposal*

Rather than the 200,000-235,000 a year net overseas migration the government plans to 2060, our migration intake should aim for net overseas migration of 60,000 a year. This would mean Australia's population would have 175,000 fewer people, year in, year out.

Contrary to the misinformation campaigns of the growth lobby, significantly reducing our migration program would still see Australia's population grow for the next few decades due to demographic momentum, just more slowly. It would then stop growing in about 2040 at 30 million. The precise numbers are less important than the general direction: a migration policy that only tops up the (below replacement) fertility rate and a formal, public objective of the population slowing as soon as possible.

SPA does not seek an immediate halt to population growth only because that would require negative migration. A modest migration program is a positive for the country, especially its humanitarian intake. Slowing our population growth gently rather than suddenly would also make the political reckoning with the growth lobby more manageable.

*Immigration policy is Australia's population policy*

As the Productivity Commission (PC) has noted, Australia's immigration policy is its *de facto* population policy.<sup>2</sup> SPA shares the PC's opinion that Australia would benefit from having a population policy. SPA respectfully submits that neither the Intergenerational Report (IGR), the government's Population Statement (PS) constitute a useful population policy as they make no comparative analysis of the merits of different population sizes. As Treasury does not engage with the cost-benefit dynamics of population, we applaud Home Affairs' efforts in this regard.

*Australia's environment*

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<sup>1</sup> N Biddle, ANU Poll 28 [Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia: Australia's views on population](#). Canberra: Australian Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2019. – figure 1, page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission 2016, [Migrant Intake into Australia](#), Inquiry Report No. 77, Canberra. Page 2.

Every extra person in Australia makes our cities grow upwards or outwards. When our cities grow outwards through the process of urban sprawl, they require the destruction of either bush or farm. Destroying bush involves the death (usually by starvation or car accident) of the animals therein or their migration to remaining dwindling bush and competing for food with the animals there. The destruction of trees emits enormous amounts of carbon, interferes with the water table and reduces biodiversity.

The construction of houses also produces enormous amounts of carbon and other waste. The climate impacts of construction are largely misunderstood. When assessed by carbon foot print rather than direct emissions, the construction industry accounts for approximately 18% of Australia's carbon emissions.<sup>3</sup>

With respect to environmental impact what matters most is the quantum of people only, rather than their visa class. The difference between the government's plan of 200-235k and SPA's proposal of 60k is 175,000 a year. That is a city the size of Canberra and Queanbeyan every three years that simply never need be built - a vast and ancient forest that need never be flattened. A vast amount of farmland that could remain productive. Consider the entire urban area of Canberra converted from bush to housing every two years – this is the price of Big Australia.

Australia's climate reductions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change are *aggregate* reductions. Every extra Australian means greater reduction per person. This then requires more coercion and/or education and the reduction of political capital available for every other public policy objective in order to meet these objectives and more generally makes it less likely these objectives will be met.

### *Australians' quality of life*

Australia's peerless lifestyle is due in part to an abundance of space and access to nature. While the growth lobby derides Australia's low population density, it is the envy of parents the entire world over. Australia's spaciousness is one of its best features, more people mean less of it.

Every extra person in a city makes it grow out (urban sprawl) or in (infill/densification), there are no exceptions. In either event, a growing human population means less nature per person, less space per person and more congestion. The growth lobby has successfully steered the population debate onto the relationship between population growth and aggregate GDP. This (deliberately) obscures much more useful metrics of public policy success like how many Australian windows look out onto sky, trees or water? How many people can walk in bush on a daily basis? As population growth drives the displacement of school ovals and trees by school buildings, are our schools becoming more or less pleasant places for our children to spend their formative years? How long are people spending in traffic? The modelling in the Intergenerational report zero weights all these factors and

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<sup>3</sup> Man Yu, Thomas Wiedmann, Robert Crawford, Catriona Tait, [The Carbon Footprint of Australia's Construction Sector](#), Procedia Engineering, Volume 180, 2017, Pages 211-220

centres aggregate GDP. SPA encourages Home Affairs to push back firmly on Treasury's incomplete modelling and to re-centre quality of life in Australia's population planning.

### *What matters?*

In 2020 and 2021 the so-called laptop elite were able to live wherever they wanted. They thronged to places like Byron Bay and the Sunshine Coast – we don't blame them. We make mention of this because it offers a powerful heuristic about what matters to people. It is useful to pause and reflect: if the people with the most choice choose to surround themselves with sky, trees and water maybe there is something profoundly good in humans having access to these. Maybe it is not bohemian or hippy.

In this regard it is highly informative that the same property developers who espouse the virtues of towering apartment blocks always have detached houses with large gardens, ocean views and distant neighbours. It seems like the richest and most powerful people in the country like access to nature – for them. With 175,000 fewer people a year more Australians would have more of the good life. How did you feel the last time you were surrounded by trees? How did you feel the last time you were surrounded by concrete? If Australia has been 'booming' for the last few decades why are our kids' schools having their trees and ovals displaced by buildings? Why do we get more traffic? Less pleasant lives is the price of Big Australia.

### *Preserving Australia's wealth*

A growing population makes Australia poorer. A significant part of Australia's wealth comes from the exploitation of fixed resources, such as mines, farms and natural tourist attractions like beaches. The benefits from a larger population, such as economies of scale and slowing ageing, are of trifling importance set against the dilution of our stake in our own natural resources. Adding a city bigger than Canberra and Queanbeyan every three years through urban sprawl means vast amounts of farmland destroyed. We should be retaining as much of our farmland as possible as it is one of our most critical renewable resources. Borrowing money overseas to build houses and then selling them to each other is an unlikely source of long-term economic prosperity.

Population growth impoverishes Australia by diverting money to infrastructure. Contrary to the growth lobby's misinformation campaign, there is a positive relationship between the size of a population and the demand for infrastructure from that population: more people = more people using infrastructure. Higher demand for infrastructure leads to more congestion of infrastructure and greater need for more spending thereon.

Infrastructure in the capital cities is particularly expensive as it requires the bridging over, tunnelling under or buying up of existing land (of increasing price the further into the city it is). These costs are borne principally by consumers and state governments and as such are zero-weighted in the modelling underlying the IGR. Home Affairs should push back on the incomplete modelling in the IGR and PS and factor in the cost of our infrastructure caused by population growth. SPA has analysed the real nature of the relationship between population growth and infrastructure in its discussion paper [Population growth and](#)

[infrastructure in Australia: the catch-up illusion](#). Vague, fantastic claims of ‘better planning’ ‘next time’ are not supported by history and miss the fact that it is in every property and construction firms interests for Australia’s infrastructure to be as broken as possible.

### *Enhancing Australia’s politics*

Australia faces myriad important and difficult policy challenges across every policy portfolio with interesting policy reforms offered from across the political and institutional spectrum. Yet governments have a finite amount of political capital to spend pushing difficult reforms. The vast amounts of political capital required to manage the growth of our population crowds out other less urgent but more important issues. How much better might our public schools and hospitals be if our premiers could spend more time driving reforms there, rather than adjudicating zero-sum inter-suburban stoushes about where the location and construction of the next school or hospital? The consequences of this are felt most acutely at the state and territory level but the causes include Canberra’s immigration and population settings.

There are, however, significant political costs for the Commonwealth too. The Commonwealth government’s defiance of the 70% of Australians who want no more population growth erodes the government’s credibility in general and in turn undermines every other reform the government attempts. How much grander might the policy platforms of the government and opposition be if they granted the public’s desire for an end to population growth, and population policy became a font not a drain of their political capital? Setting population policy in murky, secret meetings between politicians and business lobbyists and then burying the result in the back of the budget needlessly inflames the relationship between the citizens and the government.

### *Immigration lowers wages*

The relationship between immigration and wages is complex as immigrants make jobs as well as taking jobs, as they earn as well as spend. Australia’s most independent public economist, the Governor of the Reserve Bank and his predecessor are amongst the many who have raised concerns that high migration levels are harming wages growth.<sup>4</sup> In turn, other economists disagree.

While economists can reasonably disagree about the relationship between immigration and wages in general, the specific sector by sector analysis is less contentious. Migrants are prevented by various legal and cultural barriers from participation in the labour market for politicians, bureaucrats, humanities academics, think tank workers, consultants, journalists and many other professions. The result is an over-representation of migrants in industries such as hospitality, transport, agriculture, food preparation and cleaning. The result is that our young, poor and low skilled workers in these industries face almost all of the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/immigration-levels-a-factor-in-sluggish-wages-growth-rba-governor-20210708-p587z2.html>  
<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/former-rba-governor-says-immigration-putting-downward-pressure-on-wages-20210709-p588ft.html>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I\\_YHWKMo5Is&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_YHWKMo5Is&t=9s)

competition from more migrants. The idea that our uber drivers, farm workers, cleaners and kitchen hands should bear a disproportionate level of competition for work and wage rises is morally bankrupt.

### *Immigration makes houses more expensive*

Increasing the number of people in Australia will increase the demand for land and so the price of housing. The marginal benefit to existing homeowners from higher house prices must be offset against the immense hardship experienced by Australia's young and poor, and increasingly not even just them. If Australia is booming, why do we have more and more adults living with their parents? This is the price of Big Australia.

### *Immigration drives inequality in Australia*

What better for the soul of this country, for our young and our disadvantaged, than higher wages, cheaper houses and more time in nature?

### *Population only one factor*

The growth lobby routinely responds to claims that population is upstream of many problems with the observation that other factors are at play in all of these issues. That is of course true but does not mean that population has no effect. SPA acknowledges the myriad other factors involved in all of the above issues and encourages comprehensive analysis and the use of multiple policy responses in addition to population. SPA's focus on population is not a reflection that population is of any greater importance in the resolution of these policy challenges but a response to the deliberate efforts of the growth lobby to suggest that population has no role to play in these issues.

### *What is the ideal composition of the Skill and Family streams of the 2022-23 Migration Program?*

Australia's skill and family streams should be reduced to the minimum possible level. SPA recommends a skill intake of approximately 10,000, a family intake of approximately 10,000 and a humanitarian intake of 20,000. This should be coupled with a capping of our temporary migration intake on a one in one out basis so that temporary migration does not add to population growth. SPA's target of 60,000 NOM requires the permanent migration visa issues to be significantly lower than the NOM target. This is because a permanent reduction in Australia's migration intake would see permanent upward pressure on wages and downward pressure on house prices as well as the better preservation of non-economic aspects of quality of life. This would result in a sustained positive inflow of Australian citizens choosing to return home or not leave in the first place, attracted by the constantly improving standard of living.

The skills shortage is largely mythic. Immigration is being used to suppress wages and claims to the contrary from business lobbies do not withstand scrutiny. Whereas supply shortages of everything, from petrol to food to desirable property, lead to soaring prices, no such

wage growth is seen in Australia in response to claimed shortages. More information is available in SPA's December 2021 briefing note [Is there a shortage of skilled workers?](#)

*How can Australia remain attractive to prospective migrants to support our recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 in the short term and support a future Australia for 2030 and beyond?*

Reducing migration options will result in greater competition from migrants in the short term while the preservation of our wealth and quality of life will do the same in the longer term. From Delhi to Shanghai to Tokyo to Cairo, nobody is deterred from migrating to Australia because it is too stable, green and spacious.

Many migrants' choices about migration destinations are informed by the first-hand accounts of other migrants within their families and communities. The woeful gap between population growth and government services in Australia is leading to an increasingly and unnecessarily unpleasant [lived experience](#) for migrants. This is very likely encouraging some migrants to look elsewhere and so reducing the pool of applicants from which Australia chooses.

*How can the Skill stream of the Migration Program effectively address workforce shortages while boosting efforts to upskill and reskill Australians?*

There is a direct conflict between high migration and the incentives for employers to offer wages, training and/or productivity boosting investment. The skills and workforce shortages are largely mythic and, in any event, not resolved by migration. Employer groups invoked a skills shortage in 2002, migration was doubled by 2008, and yet the claims of skills shortages persist. This is explained in our briefing note [Is there a shortage of skilled workers?](#)

SPA's vision for the labour market is that any skills shortages are better remedied through higher wages and training, that the costs thereof will be bitterly resisted by employers and that any temporary shortages are the only way to bring business to the table. The skills shortages are wildly exaggerated by a business sector that has the decency to at least be ashamed of its actual campaign of using migration to suppress wages.

*How can the Migration Program help address the challenge of uneven population growth and economic development between urban and regional Australia?*

SPA's vision is for a smaller population and smaller migrant intake with that smaller migrant cohort given full rights. SPA is aware of the various policy proposals whereby migrants are given residence and citizenship in Australia contingent on living in regional areas – *this is indentured residency*. Having indentured residents is antithetical to the Australian community's values. Australia should have as equal a distribution of rights amongst its citizens as possible.

Migrants do not want to live in Australia's interior for the same reasons Australians do not. The uneven population growth in Australia reflects the uneven desirability of different parts of Australia. The government should not attempt to pick winners in something as complex as where people live. The government's political capital would be better applied to

ameliorating the consequences of the vagaries of residential choices rather than trying to coerce or persuade Australians to live where they do not want to. Life in rural areas would be more desirable if blue collar wages were doubled, instead the government is using migration as an alternative to higher farm wages.

*How can migration policy settings better support economic security of women in Australia overall, and migrant women in particular?*

Migrant women are over-represented in industries such as cleaning, hospitality and aged care. The idea that their interests are served by yet more migration and yet competition for work and so less prospect of wage increases is not logical.

By slowing our population growth, our population will age. As the working age population shrinks in relative terms, the bargaining power of the remaining people of working age will increase, wages and conditions will improve and participation will increase. This will disproportionately benefit women who often perform unpaid caring duties for their family and so who presently face higher barriers to participation.

An ageing population would see higher demand for and wages paid in sectors such as aged care, disability care and health. These caring professions are highly feminised and higher wages here would disproportionately benefit women. What a blessing to our national character if more of our workforce were earning more in caring professions.

Contrary to the misinformation campaigns of the growth lobby, an ageing population does not see a drop in hours worked. This myth and others are debunked in SPA's discussion paper [Silver tsunami or silver lining? Why we should not fear an ageing population](#).

*How can migration policy settings better support social cohesion outcomes in Australia?*

### *Inequality*

What better for the soul of this country than higher wages, cheaper houses, less commuting and more nature? Lowering our migration by 175,000 people a year will put sustained upwards pressure on wages and downward pressure on house prices and less stress on our environment and infrastructure. Social cohesion would be greatly aided by more people having better prospects for work and home.

### *Climate risks*

Australia's wealth underpins the social stability that underpins the freedom from violence that most of its citizens enjoy. However, Australia faces significant threats to its ability to generate the export revenues to maintain our current wealth. Australia's exports of beef, thermal coal and natural gas are carbon intensive and comprise around a quarter of Australia's exports. Moreover, Australia's main service exports of international tourism and international education are predicated on cheap aviation.

The world is moving towards a less carbon intensive economy. It is likely that this will involve reductions in demand for carbon intensive activities like beef and fossil fuels and increased taxation of aviation fuel. One of the features of climate change is reduced rain fall in the temperate regions of Australia from where our bulk cereal exports are grown. All of these will greatly reduce Australia's terms of trade and will likely be contemporaneous. Collapses in the demand for our exports will likely lead to a similar collapse in the world's demand for our debt.

It is entirely possible that in a single decade Australia may see a precipitous collapse in our key exports and our ability to service our immense debt levels. While reduced wealth would be unfortunate, a sudden reduction in wealth will likely lead to acute stress on Australia's society and politics. Scarcity leads to instability and instability leads to problems. Every extra Australian who has to be supported from what remains of our economic base will exacerbate the gradient of the collapse of prosperity and, in turn, law and order. The impoverishment of almost the entire middle class in Greece and Argentina in recent years should warn any Australian bureaucrat who thinks that their middle-class existence is unthreatened.

### *Diversity*

SPA rejects racism and applauds the ongoing policy of the Commonwealth government to not use race in immigration policy. However, SPA also rejects the idea that the success of Australian diversity is in any way contingent on migration of any particular level. Australia is already a very diverse country with a highly successful model and praxis of multiculturalism.

Industry and employer groups and their lobbyists argue against every wage increase ever, lobby against the tax rises that would fund the better social services needed by Australia's disadvantaged and helped kill carbon pricing in Australia. Yet when it comes to immigration, they are suddenly deeply concerned that Australia is as diverse as possible. This is one of the most confused areas of the immigration zeitgeist and that is by design of those who benefit from a lack of public clarity about this. Higher wages, cheaper houses, nicer schools, less traffic and greater daily interaction with nature would do profound good for Australia's most disadvantaged people. A disproportionate number of disadvantaged Australians are themselves recent migrants. Low migration is pro-migrant. The sole reason this is muted in the public discourse is because it does not align with the growth lobby's real vision of Australia: more customers, lower wages and ever more crowded cities.

Thank you kindly for accepting our submission after the due date.

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