Population Distribution Policy

Building a Better Life in Australia

Introduction

"Increased resettlement of migrants and refugees in regional Australia has been an ongoing focus of the policies of successive governments (Deloitte, 2015 p.g 3) for many years but with Australia's population now at 25 million, it is time we reconsidered the way we distribute people across the nation by developing a National Population Distribution Policy[1].

Our regional cities, and more importantly rural towns, are crying out for more people but as a country we need to have a mature debate about population that includes a range of elements: population size, migration rates, social and cultural issues and the way we deal with temporary and permanent visas.

Former Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd supported a 'Big Australia' and recognised that population growth would be good for the country's long-term prosperity. He alluded to the fact that many economists have indicated that our "strong population growth underpinned by immigration is part of the reason for our economic success" (Salt, 2018 p.g 21).

Australia's prosperity can be attributed to the fact that we are one of the most successful multicultural societies in the world with 26 per cent of Australia's population born overseas. However, the majority of these people live in our capital cities with most of the growth in Melbourne and Sydney (Le Grand, 2018 p.g 20). This is placing considerable strain on infrastructure and housing, leading to congestion issues such as housing affordability extended waiting lists for childcare and elective surgery in our hospitals.

At a time when rural and regional towns are experiencing population decline, we need a more realistic integrated approach to regional development. One that provides a better balance between urban and rural populations so that economic growth is shared and rural and regional areas have the chance to prosper.

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[1] Other terms used: National Settlement Strategy, National Urban Development Strategy, Secondary Migration Policy.

Summary of the Past

"It was not until 1966 that the first substantial modifications were made to the White Australia Policy[2] (Jones, 1997 p.g 6) and when Gough Whitlam came to power in 1972 the policy was totally abandoned and replaced with a Non Discriminatory Policy. Australia became a signatory to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1975 and this saw an influx of migrants from Vietnam who came to Australia to seek refuge and make better lives for themselves.

But the prospect of a better life is nothing new and is what attracted many immigrants to Australia during the gold rush days. In Victoria, regional cities such as Ballarat and Bendigo were settled off the back of a booming economy that promised good fortune and prosperity. But rather than capitalise on the growth of these regional cities, Melbourne became the capital city of Victoria and since 1851 has continued to grow and is projected to reach 8 million people by 2051. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2017, 262,500 people migrated to Australia and just like the 'Gold Rush' era, most of these new arrivals migrated to capital cities.

However, the debate on Australia's population growth should not be confined to the rate of immigration but the spatial distribution of incoming migrants and refugees. "A poll published in the *Weekend Australia* on 3-4 May 1997 showed overwhelming support for multiculturalism – 78 per cent said they thought it had been good for Australia, compared with only 16 per cent who thought it had been bad" (Jones, 1997 p.g 19). More recently, the findings from a three year study of settlement outcomes by the Australian Research Council of recently arrived refugees in NSW, Victoria and Queensland found "80% of respondents reported a warm welcome" (SBS, 2018) from people living in regional areas.

Establishing a more balanced decentralisation program would assist in alleviating the congestion currently experienced by residents living in Melbourne and Sydney[3]. Prime Minister Scott Morrison expressed his concerns in *The Sunday Age* on the 9th of September 2018 when he acknowledged that "more than half the nation's population growth occurred in these two cities which is why the government is working on ways to encourage migrants to go to the areas that need growth" (Crowe, 2018 p.g 6).

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[2] The White Australia Policy was the first racial law of the new nation imposed by Edmund Barton and lasted 70 years before it was dismantled in 1972 (White Australia: Rise and Fall. Youtube.com)
[3] Government data has recently showed eighty-seven per cent of skilled migrants who arrived in Australia settled in Sydney and Melbourne. SBS, N. 2018. Refugees are integrating just fine in regional Australia. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/refugees-are-integrating-just-fine-in-regional-australia Retrieved 22/09/2018.

Options

One of the ways suggested in an article in The Sunday Age, 'PM's migrant overhaul' is to "use a points system to fast-track temporary workers who go to smaller cities or regional areas" (Crowe, 2018 p.g 6). Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs David Coleman recently announced a program for the development of a "Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA) – a migration and settlement policy which would include visas conditional on settling in cities outside of Sydney and Melbourne" (Fernando, 2018). In the South West of Victoria, a group of local Councillors and CEOs are working with local businesses and the Federal Government to establish a DAMA to fill gaps in the labour market. Speaking at the launch of the program in Warrnambool, Member for Wannon Dan Tehan said, "The DAMA will mean that businesses in the region can remain productive and competitive" (Tehan, 2019).

An outcome that has been achieved in Nhill, a small township in the wheat-belt Wimmera region of Victoria, which has since 2010 attracted 160 Karen[4] refugees to take up residency. "Like a number of small regional towns, Nhill has faced a declining working-age population, which has had flow-on implications for the economic and social prosperity of the town" (Deloitte, 2015 p.g 4). However, unlike many small regional towns, Nhill has a large multi-million dollar commercial business that was in need of labour to support growth of the business. Management of the Luv-a-Duck company had exhausted available sources of employment in the town and needed to seek assistance from outside the community. Through a staged recruitment and resettlement process, Luv-a-Duck now employs fifty-four Karen refugees with a further fifteen employed in other businesses and service providers resulting in $41.5 million worth of Gross Regional Product added to the Hindmarsh Shire economy.

The Nhill resettlement program is an example of business, with the assistance of government and community, acting to address a specific problem. However, in isolation this is not a sustainable plan to address ongoing population decline in rural and regional Australia. The opportunity to learn from overseas policy development may provide valuable insights into achieving population distribution across Australia; one such country is Israel.

Israel started out by identifying trends in population growth and dispersal in core and peripheral areas of the country. Regions were identified for their developmental capacity based on prosperity. "One of the most important policy tools for attracting and retaining population in development towns is the creation of employment opportunities" (Lithwick, 1981 p.g 24). Developmental towns were identified based on a number of factors, such as location near a natural resource, major markets,

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[4] In 1989, the military government of Burma announced that they wanted foreigners to stop using the words Burma and Burmese. Instead they wanted the world to use Myanmar for the country and its national people, and Bamar for the majority ethnic and linguistic group. Thus, members of the ethnic minorities – the Karen, for example – would be Myanmar by nationality and Karen by ethnicity, … (Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences, Culture Profile No. 21, Published by the Centre for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Centre, Washington, DC, June 2007)

plentiful labour force and industry capacity. As a result of Israel's policy intervention "thirty years after statehood, over one-fifth of its population was residing in the 34 designated *developmental towns* (Lithwick, 1981 p.g 23).

The Israeli Experience is not the only example of successful population distribution. Norway has a policy approach of encouraging the development of medium-sized cities outside its capital city that incorporates innovation and design, while Denmark has a 'Regional Economic Equalisation Policy' that assists a community transition and diversify its economy when faced with disruption (Scott, 2014). One such example of a town responding to economic downturn, is Geelong. The Ford factory opened in 1925 and was responsible for assembling the late T Model Ford, at the high of its production the site was employing over 820 workers but when the car industry started to decline the future of manufacturing in Geelong looked bleak.

Deakin University stepped in to create a technology precinct[5] that paved the way for highly innovative small and medium enterprises (SME's) to develop in areas of research and design and advanced manufacturing. As a result, a company that supplies lightweight wheels to Ford Performance and Ferrari will triple its workforce and push its annual production capacity from 10,000 to more than 150,000 wheels. The expansion is worth $100 million, according to the Victorian Labor Government, and will include a 7000m² production plant next to the company's existing facility. "Carbon Revolution is the only company in the world supplying one-piece carbon-fibre wheels to Ford for the Shelby Mustang GT350R, and to the Ferrari for the 488 Pista. The wheels are lighter and more durable than their metal counterparts" (Collier, 2018).

These initiatives could easily be duplicated in other areas around Australia facing similar circumstances however according to Bernard Salt in the Weekend Australia Magazine 'Town Jewels' (Salt, 2018 p.g 14), "these towns need to be able to respond to challenges whilst having the characteristics of a successful town" like Israeli's development towns as previously mentioned. Being open to diversity, encouraging prosperity and having employment opportunities are ingredients essential to attract people to smaller towns but according to Gabriel Chan in her book 'Rusted Off' there is also one other ingredient that is crucial and that is, coffee!

Chan describes how the town of Jugiong, half way between Melbourne and Sydney transformed itself by adopting a 'can do' attitude. The townsfolk rallied together to attract new people with entrepreneurial skills to open cafes, art galleries and wine cellars to encourage people "to stop for the night, and suddenly there was the beginnings of critical mass and a destination food and retail experience developed" (Chan, 2018 p.g 158) in order to cater for the influx of tourists and new residents.

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[5] Manufutures is a purpose-built advanced manufacturing innovation hub located within the heart of Deakin's Future Economic Precinct at Waurn Ponds. www.deakin.edu.au/manufutures

Platform for change

But change does not happen overnight, it requires leadership, collaboration and a plan. If Australia is to develop an effective Population Distribution Policy, then an overarching framework or plan needs to be developed that takes into consideration a number of these factors. These include: current immigration rates and settlement patterns, including overseas tourists and students; internal migration[6]; economic potential of regions and labour shortages; analysis of service capacity of rural and regional areas to cater for population growth and a desire for these communities to welcome and integrate people.

"Formation and implementation of a population policy would need to involve many different arms of government – those dealing with immigration, family and social welfare, education, health, employment, regional development and urban planning" (Jones, 1997 p.g 4) just to name a few. However, this is not the first time the formation of a national policy on population distribution has occurred. In 1976, Victorian Liberal Senator Ivor Greenwood outlined "The basis for the development of growth centres in Australia" (Pryor, 1977 p.g 24) with a broad list of national economic and social development goals including basic employment opportunities, services in education, welfare and health that lead to a more balanced distribution of population across the country.

Opposing Views

Yet not everyone has the same opinion about population growth. Sandra Kanck, President of Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) believes "things are constantly getting worse and the only way of dealing with this is by having zero net migration, whereby when one person permanently leaves the country, another can be let in" (Lloyd, 2018 p.g 20). The SPA's major concern is the environment and pressure of urban sprawl that is articulated in their mission statement available on their website: "…to protect the environment and our quality of life by ending population growth in Australia and globally" (https://population.org.au).

However, putting a handbrake on immigration and population growth is not the answer (Reece, 2018) especially in rural and regional areas where there is clearly a desire to grow population and fill job vacancies. In fact, Jack Archer (formally) from the Regional Australia Institute argues that international migration should be the priority for communities looking to turn the population decline situation around. He pointed to the fact that lower international migration to regional areas is the fundamental driver of population growth differences between city and the bush and that "if more international migrants settled in regional Australia, our population would grow at the same pace or even faster than the capital cities" (Gray, 2016 p.g 6).

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[6] At any one time there are almost one million foreigners in Australia on some form of temporary visa. HUGO G, J. 2013. Population Distribution, Environment and Development in Australia. *Australian Population & Migration Research Centre,* Vol. 1. p.g 2.

Which is why community leaders from the Great South Coast Region of Victoria are working with the Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development to relocate families living in Sydney and Melbourne to relocate to their area. The Great South Coast Economic Skilled Migration project was established in 2016 as part of Leadership Great South Coast's Alumni program. Initially rolled out in the Southern Grampians Shire, a small number of families, originally from Africa have relocated to Hamilton, Casterton and now Portland to build a better life in Australia. An online interactive database is being established as a platform to match families with employment prior to arrival. Families are supported locally with links to housing, schools, training providers and service clubs to ensure a smooth community integration.

These are some of the key factors that have been identified as the basis for a successful integrated population distribution policy; some other **Recommendations** include:

- Undertake an analysis of migration rates and resettlement patterns across Victoria and or Australia.
- Review current applications for DAMA's across Victoria and or Australia and any roadblocks experienced by applicants.
- Undertake a desktop analysis of successful retention programs and draw on key findings to develop a best practices approach.
- Identify Developmental Towns (areas of growth and opportunity based on key criteria i.e. workforce shortage).
- Analyse service capacity i.e. schools and health care of Developmental Towns and willingness to integrate new people into the community including migrants.
- Investigate need for infrastructure investment in Development Towns or Regional Cities in close proximity.
- Identify a range of incentives to attract people to regional and rural areas i.e. first home buyer's grants and payroll tax exceptions[7].
- Support the implementation of Skilled Migration Programs.
- Consider the appointment of a dedicated person to oversee the successful distribution of people across Australia; a Population Minister.
- Develop an evaluation tool to monitor the success or failure of resettlement programs i.e. What does success look like? What are the social implications? and What are the economic benefits?

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[7] As part of the 2017/2018 Budget announcements, "Victorian Treasurer Tim Pallas announced government will cut the payroll tax by 25% for businesses that have a workforce made up of at least 85% regional employees" KEATING, E. 2017. Victorian budget gives SME's payroll tax relief. *In:* SMARTCOMPANY.COM.AU (ed.).

Conclusion

As previously suggested in this paper, Australia's prosperity has been linked to population growth and "with proper planning and investment in infrastructure, this growth can be a positive for our economy and for our communities" (Le Grand, 2018 p.g 20), which include rural and regional Australia. But with Australia's population now at 25 million it is time that we had a well-informed conversation about the current challenges and future opportunities for population growth. Whether it be a "region-by-region approach" (Crowe, 2018 p.g 6) as suggested by Prime Minister Scott Morrison or a national debate on population, either way we need a Population Distribution Policy that maps out future growth patterns of this country.

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