

SA's population policy

In the wake of nearly 1000 workers losing their jobs at Mitsubishi it might be questioned whether SA should have such a focus on enhancing its population growth. Moreover the drought has underlined the unquestionable constraints that water resources place on population growth in this state and the fact that these constraints are being tightened by climate change as run-off decreases over south-eastern Australia. Moreover the oft-quoted idea that population increase necessarily causes an increase in prosperity is a fallacious one as the experience of rapidly growing African country populations attests.

The reality is that in the short to medium term SA does need to grow its population. The demography is important. Between the last two censuses the South Australian population increased by 40,859. However, the population aged under 30 decreased by 5498. All our population increase is in the older age groups. If we do not have migration as well as other strategies like increasing workforce participation our workforce will begin to decline as the bulge of baby boomers, who make up 28 percent of the population, start moving into the retirement ages. On top of this are the pressures from the mining and defence industries on the workforce. Hence as the baby boom bulge moves out of the workforce there is a real need to grow our working age population as well as initiate a number of other strategies. However in the longer term once the baby boom bulge has passed through the state's age pyramid we should seek a stable population – one which is not growing but in which there is a balance between working age and non-working age populations.

South Australia was the first government in Australia to introduce a formal population policy – Prosperity Through People – in 2004. Since then the Victorian government produced its own population policy, but successive federal governments have eschewed this even though they had several specific policies which sought to influence population processes.

Successive SA governments over the last decade have been concerned that slow population growth has been

How many people should South Australia have, asks Graeme Hugo

a constraint on economic and social development of the state. After over three years of operation it is timely to make an assessment of SA's population policy.

SA has a distinctive demography which has been shaped over the postwar period. The state experienced very rapid population growth in the first three decades after World War II, when it was one of the fastest-growing parts of Australia, but in the subsequent three decades it has had the lowest rate of growth on the mainland.

At the turn of the century SA had only 1.4 percent of the nation's population growth although it had over seven percent of the population. It also had the oldest population with 14.5 percent aged 65 years and over in 2001 compared with the national average of 12.6 per cent.

Ageing and low population growth were seen as barriers to the progress of the state and the government introduced the population policy with the aims, to quote the Premier, of:

- Maintaining its current share of the Australian population (7.7 per cent).
- Effectively doubling its population growth rate (from 0.6 per cent per annum in 2003-04).
- Achieving a population of two million by mid-century.

Populations change through three demographic processes – fertility (births), mortality (deaths) and migration – and the State policy sought to influence two of these – migration and fertility. Since fertility is difficult to influence most focus has been on migration. The State Strategic Plan set the following targets:

- To match the State's share of international migrants to Australia with the State's share of the overall population over the next decade.
- To reduce the net loss by migration to other Australian States and Territories to zero by 2008.

International migration has been a dramatic success. Within the state government, agencies were set up to

promote migration – Immigration SA (and Education SA to attract overseas students) as well as a population unit, initially within the Premier's Department, then in the Department of Trade and Economic Development. These agencies initiated a number of strategies to attract migrants but also to lobby the federal government to expand the State Specific and Regional Migration (SSRM) element of the nation's migration program. This program comprises a number of visa categories which mostly gave potential skilled immigrants a bonus in the Points Assessment Test if they settled in areas which were regional or lagging economically. South Australia gained a great advantage in this since Adelaide was the only mainland state capital which was eligible for all SSRM migrants. However the state also energetically sought skilled migrants in a number of potential origin countries.

Accordingly there was a dramatic increase in immigrants settling in SA – from 3,657 in 2002-03 to 10,061 in 2006-07. Moreover the net population gain from overseas migration increased from 2,798 in 2001-02 to 13,146 in 2006-07. Moreover there was a jump in the number of overseas students from 11,026 in 2002 to 20,580 in 2006. In the Adelaide City Council area it is said that a quarter of the dwellings are now occupied by those students. There has been a significant increase in the number of temporary business migrants (457s) in Adelaide and in regional areas. The numbers of these temporary migrants who applied for, and got, permanent residence increased.

In interstate migration however there was little change. SA occupies a peripheral position in the national economy and it is inevitable that many young South Australians move to the eastern State capitals as they seek career progression, experience and adventure. Research indicates that many of those who leave as young singles and couples, they seek to return to SA once they enter the family formation ages and the state

has policies to assist this process.

With respect to fertility, the state has looked at ways that fertility can be stabilised or even increased, especially through improving work/life balance, childcare and other family-friendly policies, particularly in the workplace. However little has been done as yet. Nevertheless like the rest of Australia, SA has seen an increase in its total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) from 1.686 in 2002-03 to 1.826 in 2006-07 – a faster increase than other states. Hence the state's natural increase (excess of births over deaths) level jumped from 5845 in 2005-06 to 6726 in 2006-07.

Some suggest that we should move to a zero population growth strategy immediately to reduce pressure on the environment. This would be misguided on a number of grounds. Firstly reducing population growth is not a silver bullet solution to the environmental and water issues facing the State. We need a water policy which maximises the storage, conservation and judicious use of our water resources. Population is part of this but is not a substitute for sound water, and broader, environmental policies. Secondly, the costs of the imbalance between older non-working populations and younger working populations would have a huge negative impact on the social and economic viability of our society.

What is needed then? In my view we need not to see population as a separate self-contained policy area. Population policy needs to be seen as an element which enhances and facilitates our economic, environmental and social policies. It is an adjunct to, not a replacement of, these policies. Moreover the policy is one which needs to be developed in full cognisance of the state's economic, social and environmental realities. We must not have a policy which is driven by a single interest group but one where the full economic, social and environmental impacts are weighed up and a judicious balance achieved which will move us toward sustainability. Not just environmental sustainability but economic and social sustainability at the same time. It is not a case of either/or, environmental

or economic considerations – both have to be weighed up. Most of all there must be a dialogue involving all elements of South Australian society to arrive at a shared vision for our future population.

The state's population policy was a significant innovation – the type of innovation this State has been renowned for. In many ways too it has had success. However it must be seen as a start, not an end point. The policy must evolve and change as it is fine tuned to reflect the economic, social and environmental needs of the state. It needs to be decentralised and local government must be more effectively involved in its formulation and operation. Nothing is more important to this state than its people.

■ Graeme Hugo (below) is University Professorial Research Fellow, Professor of Geography, and director of the National Centre for Social Applications of Geographic Information Systems at the University of Adelaide

