

# MERCURY

## Window on our world

**C**AUGHT up in our own lives, it is easy to lose sight of the broad picture. The national census every five years is a chance to stop and take a look at what is happening all around.

Results from last year's census are beginning to emerge and they reveal great changes. Most striking is how wealthy and diverse Australia is becoming and how fast it is growing.

Two million more people live in Australia now than at the time of the previous census in 2001. The population today is 21 million, 40 per cent of whom have been born overseas.

Tasmania is far less multicultural but the numbers are rising here too, up by 15,800 or 3.4 per cent in five years. That is worth thinking about when we get stuck in traffic or consider the climbing road toll. There are many more of us driving around.

This growth is remarkable in the light of Tasmania's recent past. In the mid 1990s the population fell so much that one state government set up a special taskforce to attract people. The Australian Bureau of Statistics predicted a long, steady decline, with a loss of 11,000 over 50 years. How wrong it was.

A decade of economic growth has transformed the state and the nation. Thanks to a combination of more births and migration from interstate and overseas, Tasmania is growing faster than at any time since the post-war baby boom. Last year it reached 476,481, with more than 200,000 in the greater Hobart area.

It is nothing like the expansion in Western Australia and Queensland, which now drive the economic boom, having taken over from traditional powerhouses Sydney and Melbourne.

Wealth is not evenly distributed and, along with South Australia, Tasmania remains the poorest state but it has become richer with the rest of the country. It also has the oldest population, a median age of 39, just ahead of South Australia and rising quickly. This has big implications.

The State Government has warned of school closures in some areas. A greater challenge is the effect on hospitals and other health and social services, with 55 per cent more patients expected to be admitted to public hospitals in the next 15 years. This is one of the main justifications for the Government's dramatic reform of the health care system.

Partly as a result of this ageing trend, more Tasmanians now live alone (26 per cent in Hobart) which, along with population growth, helps explain the continuing demand for new housing.

This may seem a bleak picture but if there is one thing Tasmanians should know from recent experience it is not to accept the future with a sense of doom or inevitability. Managing an older population brings problems but also opportunities.

Tasmania still has the best housing affordability, highest level of home ownership, least congestion, most reliable water supplies, a great environment and good access to social, recreational and cultural activities, which is why people move here.

It is important to make it a place of potential for young people too, with better school retention rates and continuing investment in technology and all sectors of the economy.

While Tasmania may be getting older, hopefully with it comes a little wisdom.