Australia doesn’t have a population policy – why?

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Despite expert recommendations to adopt a population policy, Australian governments continue to resist. Scott Cresswell/Flickr, CC BY

Population growth has profound impacts on Australian life, and sorting myths from facts can be difficult. This is the first article in our series, Is Australia Full?, which aims to help inform a wide-ranging and often emotive debate.

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Australia lacks an overarching population policy or strategy. Over the years, multiple inquiries have recommended such a policy. Population policies the world over typically focus on births and migration.

As part of post-war reconstruction, Australia adopted a 2% population growth target. Mass immigration was a defining feature, and couples were called on to populate or perish. Immigration
was successful, but women were big losers in the push for births.

The 1975 National Population Inquiry proved a significant moment in Australian demography. The inquiry found that Australia should not seek to influence population, but should anticipate and respond.

Population policy was revisited in the 1990s with the National Population Council. Its 1994 report found no optimal population size for Australia, but again called for a responsive population policy of preparedness.

Interest in sustainable population policy was renewed in 2010 following Kevin Rudd’s infamous endorsement of a “big Australia”. We even had a minister for population, Tony Burke, for about six months until the portfolio was expanded. Population was subsequently dropped from any ministerial title.

After an exhaustive inquiry, A Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia was released in 2011. This stopped short of recommending a population policy but removed any option of population limits. Change felt possible in shifting the narrative to a proactive endeavour concerning population matters, particularly evident in the National Urban Policy.

Despite such inquiries and recommendations to adopt a population policy, governments have so far resisted. Unsuccessful attempts at population policy can be understood in terms of difficulties in gaining political support and concerns about coercion.

But national population policy need not be coercive – unlike, for example, in India or China. Instead, it can be a series of targets and connected policy domains with oversight.

Presently, the policy landscape is disjointed. Parenting leave, family and childcare payments, and immigration are each somewhat responsive to population changes, but not prepared. Family payments have been shown not to increase birth rates.

**Births, deaths, migration – and taxes**

The intergenerational reports have been our only glimpse of responsiveness and preparedness. But these have increasingly been criticised for their political tone. Who could forget the Challenge of Change campaign?

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**Challenge of Change – A Talk by Dr Karl**

https://theconversation.com/australia-doesnt-have-a-population-policy-why-78183
Dr Karl Kruszelnicki fronted the Challenge of Change campaign.

What we know is that Australia’s population continues to age, so among the nation’s pressing issues is fewer taxpayers. The total age-related dependency ratio, of people aged over and under working age relative to the working-aged population, was 52 per 100 people in 2016.

While the child-dependency rate (0-14 year olds) is higher than the aged-dependency rate (people 65 and over), the rate of people aged less than 15 has steadily declined as the population aged 65 and over has driven increases in the so-called dependency burden.

**Age-related dependency in Australia per 100 people, 1976 to 2016**

The relative increase in people older than working age is increasing pressure on the economy and government budgets. While government spending on young people is substantial, the highest per person spending is among people aged 65 and over.
A robust workforce contributing income tax and services is essential to ensure current lifestyles are afforded to the young while also sustaining the public spending necessary for people over 65 years who have over their lives contributed to the nation.

With birth rates low and deaths increasing, natural increase is no longer driving Australia’s population. Immigration is increasingly relied on to offset the ageing of the workforce. Over half (54%) of Australia’s population growth is from net overseas migration.

### Components of population change in Australia, 000s, 1976 to 2016

Source: ABS. Figures based on Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, Demographic Statistics, ABS.

**Preparing for an older population**

In a 2013 United Nations survey, the Australian government reported concerns about population ageing, a desire to increase the “too low” birth rate, but satisfaction with the level of net overseas migration. Interestingly, a preference for migration away from cities was also cited.

From current policy and discourse, you would not know these views were held. Most Australians also report a preference for the level of immigration to remain the same or be increased, contrary to sentiments we often hear.

Australia has time to prepare for, and make opportunities of, the challenges of an ageing population. Some countries are facing tough decisions now and it is interesting to watch the politics play out. What Japan, China and Germany show is that we need to take action now.
Insightful guides are in place already. **South Australia** has had a population strategy since 2004. **Tasmania** recently adopted one.

These state strategies focus on growth to curb economic downturn. What is important in these two cases is that both emphasise policy portfolio linkages, as well as evidence and reporting against targets without coercive measures.

**What is a sensible approach to population policy?**

A renewed, earnest and transparent population conversation is needed. With ever more reliance on immigration, we must go beyond the unhelpful pro-immigration versus pro-nationalism debate to consider our population prospects.

The key question is: how can Australia make opportunities of its demographic challenges?

Australia has the potential to be a global leader in innovative markets and research and development. An ageing population provides an interesting market opening; we just need to be smart about it. Without careful consideration, Australia will be merely a bystander in the increasingly competitive global market.

Policy connectedness should exist between portfolios. These include: health; housing; education, skills and training; employment; infrastructure; regional development; water and energy; environment; and migrant settlement.

We can invest more effectively in young people – our future workforce and economic lifeblood – if we consider a life-course approach to population dynamics. Family friendly, gender-equal workplaces will go a long way to ease the pressures of having children. Integral to this is affordable and accessible child care.

And establishing a ministerial portfolio overseeing population strategy would be a good start.

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*You can read other articles in the *Is Australia Full?* series [here](https://theconversation.com.au/).*

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