

Quality of life compromised when numbers increase

The case for a 'big Australia' raises the issue of whether we have the resources to support it, **JOHN SUTTON** writes

Across Australia there are increasing public concerns about population growth, as more people question just how we can provide the water, homes and infrastructure needed to resource our projected rapid population growth. Population is shaping up to be the sleeper issue of this year's federal election. The Rudd Government would be wise to pause, take a look around and rethink blindly marching along with the "big Australia" cheer squad.

A broad range of voices across ideological boundaries is growing concerned that our nation does not have the water, the ecology or the infrastructure to pack in tens of millions more people.

It's not just greenies who now comprehend that our fragile ecology and limited water supplies are incompatible with net migration numbers close to 300,000 every year.

Even the 180,000 net migration the Government is projecting from 2012 will take our population from 22 million now to 36 million by 2050, with migration responsible for 80 per cent of this growth.

Commuters and public transport advocates are realising the crumbling infrastructure in our cities must be rebuilt before yet more people try and pack onto that hopelessly choked peak hour train or freeway.

Blue-collar workers know their pay and conditions are at risk from the 457-visa program and temporary worker schemes. These have allowed business to avoid its responsibility to train our youth, in favour of importing captive and compliant workers with temporary status on lower pay. And everyone is aware of the crumbling infrastructure in our health system and schools, the expensive desalination plants being built around Australia as we struggle for water, regional towns with bone dry dams and the fact that we need

ever more costly new base load power generation capacity.

These views and concerns are not anti-immigrant or racist. They simply reflect that concerns about population growth are well-founded and that significant constituencies are now lining up against the power elites, who are slowly growing more isolated in their championing of a "big Australia."

Sure, there are loud voices from the business world. At its crudest, you have developers like Australia's biggest apartment builder Harry Triguboff from Meriton Apartments who wants to cram huge numbers into our major cities. Harry and his ilk dream of making bigger and bigger profits. They seem totally unconcerned about their impact on current Australians and the legacy they will leave for future generations.

Multiculturalism has been a spectacular success in Australia and our society is richer for the wide and diverse nature of the cultures that make up modern Australia. The trade union movement embraced migrant workers long ago, and a union like my own has a substantial part of its membership from a non-English speaking background and many officials with diverse ethnicities. This debate is not about whether we should continue to have an immigration program or the source countries for tomorrow's migrants. Rather it is about the size of our immigration program and whose interests the program should serve.

Increasingly our mass migration program is not serving the interests of Australian workers and their families. Their economic interests are in fact being undercut by the hundreds of thousands of temporary workers in Australia, often working for below market rates and forced to accept substandard conditions.

These temporary migrants and the business-sponsored skilled

permanent migration program, are eclipsing the permanent unsponsored migration program that historically has served us well.

Indeed, the orientation of both our temporary and permanent immigration programs has shifted to serve the interests of the business lobby, whom the Federal Government freely acknowledges now calls the shots on immigration.

So I hope for a serious debate about population and immigration policy. There has never been such a disconnect between the views of the power elites on this issue and the views of the rest of us.

The left must take a serious part in this debate and not react with a knee-jerk analysis that these increasing community concerns about population growth are automatically racist. It must also engage more critically in the debate on the dramatic re-orientation of immigration policy to the interests of employers. There is a sensitivity about race and immigration in this country that retards serious debate. Historically, there is good reason for this, the appalling treatment meted out to Aboriginal Australians being the compelling example.

Our environment, infrastructure and standard of living are dependent on us having a mature national dialogue about population and immigration that is unshackled from issues of race. Intelligent voices now coming into the debate like Bob Carr, Tim Flannery and Dick Smith cannot simply be typecast as the old redneck racist brigade.

This debate is not about race, it's about fixing our infrastructure, ensuring a lower carbon footprint and that our first world wages and conditions are not decimated.

■ **John Sutton is National Secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union.**