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Meredith Hunter
Chair
Inquiry into Ecological Carrying Capacity of the ACT and Region
Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water
ACT Legislative Assembly

by email to: committees@parliament.act.gov.au
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Dear Ms Hunter

Thank-you for the opportunity for making a submission to this Inquiry. The following is my personal submission.

“I do not support the idea of a ‘big Australia’, with arbitrary targets of 40 million people. We need to stop and take a breath. (...) I don’t want us hurtling towards a big Australia. We should not sacrifice our wonderful environment or our unique quality of community life”.

— Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia 27 June 2010

1. Importance of IPAT formula

I submit that in considering all the terms of reference, the Standing Committee should be guided by the IPAT formula, developed in the 1970s by Professor Paul Ehrlich, of Stanford University, and John Holdren, currently Adviser to President Barak Obama on Science and Technology.

The formula has been chosen by many scholars in both the social and natural sciences as a starting point for establishing the ecological impact of interactions of population, economic growth and technological change.

The formula states that ecological impact (I) is the product of three terms: 1) population (P); 2) affluence (A); and 3) technology (T).

It is stated $I = P \times A \times T$ or $I = PAT$. At present $I = 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. To keep I constant in the face of a doubling of both P and A over the next 25 years would require T to reduce by 75%, i.e. $I = 2 \times 2 \times 0.25 = 1$.

Another way of putting this is to act as a counterweight to doubling of *both* affluence and population size by 2035, technology must become *four* times more efficient in the use of everything (fuel, soil, water, minerals, fertilizers, crops, forests, animal husbandry, fish stocks, biodiversity etc) than it is today. For example, a car that today uses 10 litres of fuel per 100km must use 2.5 litres per 100km or its equivalent, a hectare of land must produce four times as much food etc.

While some advances in technology will be made, it is not likely that technology will become four times as efficient in many of these areas. The inescapable logical conclusion is that there will need to be lower growth in affluence (more people catching buses or using bicycles, more people with a simple vegetarian diet), or lower growth in population, or a combination of these, if impact is to remain constant.

But note this is only to keep the ecological footprint of human settlement in any given area such as the ACT constant. The Commonwealth Government's State of the Environment reports document that most ecological indicators have been consistently going backwards measured at five-year intervals over the past two decades, which is unsustainable.

2. What will it take to halt and reverse ecological deterioration?

To achieve a state in which ecological indicators are either constant or actually going forwards, (i.e. sustainability), it will be necessary to achieve:

- (i) an even higher than quadrupling in the efficiency of technology, OR
- (ii) a less than doubling of affluence, OR
- (iii) a less than doubling of population growth, OR
- (iv) a combination of two or more of these.

What is clear is that the sensible approach to stopping the current downward spiral in ecological sustainability would be to make progress on all three fronts – an increase in the efficiency of technology, a decrease in personal resource consumption, and a decrease in the rate of population growth.

This is the “three legged stool” model – if just one of these factors is not present, the stool falls over.

There is undoubtedly some scope for improvements in technology (i) and it is even possible that governments might have some success in persuading people to accept a lower “standard of living” (ii), but what chance is there of slowing the rate of population growth, or even stabilising population size?

Unfortunately, there is little likelihood of this happening, given the current “growthocracy” model of governance in Australia and the ACT.

This is because Governments at federal, state and local levels have been captured and comprehensively dominated by the special interests of property development, real estate, and construction. These special pleaders stand to make windfall profits from population growth, and they make very substantial donations to political parties and engage in well-funded lobbying activities that are grossly disproportionate to the general interests of the community.

ONCE UPON A TIME, builders used to be people who provided building services to the community as and when the community demanded them.

TODAY, the building industry has become so wealthy and influential that it dictates to governments what the population growth rate of the community will be in order to maintain windfall profits for building.

TODAY, the tail wags the dog.

In today's "growthocracy" there is little or no chance that the "P" part of the IPAT formula will moderate, and therefore little or no chance that Australia, or the ACT, will achieve ecological sustainability.

3. What can the ACT Government do?

If the ACT Government is even vaguely serious about establishing ecological sustainability, it must abandon the growthocracy model, and eliminate or at least moderate the corrupt self-serving influence of the property industry.

A very good starting point would be a complete revision of governance in the ACT along the lines recommended by the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

In its report issued on 10 November 2010, ICAC called for the enactment of legislation to regulate lobbyists and increase transparency, on the grounds that a lack of transparency in political lobbying in NSW is a major corruption risk and contributes significantly to public distrust of government.

The ACT Government should adopt the ICAC's recommendations for:

- Establishing a new lobbyists' register and ensure meetings and communications between lobbyists and government representatives are made publicly available;
- Legislating that ministers, parliamentary secretaries, ministerial staff and senior government officers such as chiefs of staff be prevented from working as lobbyists for a prescribed period after they resign from office;
- Developing a new code of conduct for lobbyists, including mandatory standards of conduct and procedures to be observed when contacting government representatives;
- Outlawing success fees should be outlawed;

- Developing a model policy and procedure for adoption by all departments, agencies and ministerial offices concerning the conduct of meeting with lobbyists, the making of records of these meetings and the making of records of telephone conversations.
- Prohibiting lobbyists or their clients from giving or promising any gift or benefit to a government representative;
- Establishing an independent government entity to maintain and monitor the lobbyists register.

It should be noted that these recommendations by the ICAC have been supported by the NSW Greens.

The ACT Government should also stop hiding behind the apron strings of “population growth is a federal matter, there is nothing we can do about it except try to accommodate it”. This is of course nonsense. The ACT Government could show national leadership by abandoning the expensive and silly [“Live in Canberra”](#) campaign and spend the money saved on a national program promoting stable population growth, as advocated by Kelvin Thomson MP’s [14-point plan for population reform](#).

4. What is sustainability?

A question the Inquiry should address is what is meant by sustainability? (see TOR g – “sustainable population”). Over what period of time are we intending to sustain our environment? The next 20 years? The next 40 years? The lifetime of a child born today (100 years)? The lifetime of their grandchildren (170 years)? Or the next few centuries?

The unpalatable truth is that the world’s present population is not sustainable given present levels of resource consumption. If (as anyone concerned with issues of equity will wish) all of humanity is to enjoy a comfortable standard of living, we would need at least THREE EARTHS to provide that in perpetuity to 6.8 billion people. Four for 9.2 billion, the expected population in 2050.

The population of the ACT should not be considered in isolation from the population of the rest of Australia. And the population of Australia should not be considered in isolation from the population of the rest of the world.

It should be acknowledged that the world’s population has already overshot sustainability, and needs to stop growing as soon as possible. For that to occur, all nations, and all jurisdictions, including the Australian Capital Territory, should adopt as a matter of the utmost urgency and importance, a policy of population stabilisation. This will at least, as Prime Minister Gillard termed it, allow us to “stop and take a breath”.

Yours sincerely


Tom Gosling