

Submission on Australia's Demographic Challenges

By: Marlee Bruinsma LLB (Hons)

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To: Australia's Demographic Challenges
Social Policy Division
The Treasury
Langton Crescent
PARKES ACT 2600

Introduction

Firstly, I congratulate the government on considering and planning for the issues our society will face in the future. I am presenting a slightly different paradigm to that structuring the *Intergenerational Report* released in 2002. When I consider the choices proffered by that report, my submission supports Choice 2 more than the other choices. However, I believe that a number of approaches are needed. And I do not believe that reducing funding in the areas of health, social security and welfare is the only option under Choice 2. There are many opportunities for reducing expenditure apart from this.

Underpinning my submission is the premise that people form an organised society to benefit from pooling their skills, resources, knowledge and share the burdens and joys of raising families. When our basic needs are met – food, water, shelter, clothing, heat – then we should be able to turn our attention to socialising, art, culture, music, spiritual growth. It is not healthy to accumulate more and more of our basic needs and neglect these other endeavours. We, as a society, need to consider what our values are and model policies to achieve these values. Economic growth, per se, does not make us happy or provide us with all our needs. It can, if regarded as the ultimate goal, contribute to the breakdown of family life and the exhaustion of our natural resources. The economic model we currently use does not count these costs when considering profit and loss. It does not serve future generations.

A reduction in the number of people participating in the workforce and contributing taxes is a solution, not a problem.

As a species on this planet, Homo sapiens is subject to the same natural laws as other forms of life. When resources become scarce, fertility decreases and fewer children are born. This is a mechanism to ensure survival of the species. In our present circumstances, the composition of our society is changing to reflect this. Our present methods of consuming resources and pursuing economic growth are not sustainable over the long term. We will run out of fossil fuels and minerals, for example. We will run out of mature timber if we keep consuming at the same or a greater rate. Having less able bodied people to work and fuel this consumption of resources by industry is a natural

response by our species to diminishing resources. The solution is not to try and sustain our present way of living. The challenge is to find new ways of living on this planet, new ways to provide for our basic needs and our higher needs (art, music, cultural pursuits etc) without maintaining our current level of consumption.

Pursuit of economic growth merely for the sake of economic growth is meaningless and valueless in creating a sustainable society.

Economic growth that does not incorporate our values and goals as a society is not a healthy or sustainable or desirable target. Pursuit of profit for profit's sake contributes to the current problem, which is over-consumption and the exhausting of natural resources.

Australian society does not have a charter or bill of rights that enshrines our values. I believe it is absolutely essential to develop a charter to use as a guide to current and future policy. What are the basic rights each member of society deserves and how can we best organise our society to provide these? What is the current state of our society and do the economic and social policies and systems serve to create a healthy society? We have more and more separated families, more and more depression, chronic pain, more crime and social dysfunction with each succeeding generation. Economic growth and encouraging people to work longer and harder does not address these issues. It does not address the issues of increasing water shortages, diminishing fossil fuels etc.

Do we really need 20 different kinds of toilet paper or could the resources used by several of the companies producing toilet paper be better directed into other needs?

Public education on alternatives to over-consumption is needed.

Public education on how to scale down consumption is necessary to help people to cope with the solution that is being presented to us by the changing composition of our society. There are many ways to do this through public media campaigns, school and work programs.

Incentives to industries to develop low-consumption products.

Corporations and industry groups who develop better ways to produce products and better products (in terms of the resources used to produce them) should be rewarded with tax breaks, incentive payments and public awards. Public awards will help to raise societal awareness of these businesses and encourage the public to patronise these businesses over those who are less efficient. Efficiency is not just about productivity of workers, it is about using less physical non-human resources and reducing pollution, waste and undesirable by-products.

Funding in education is insufficient to produce creative thinkers who can formulate creative solutions to ongoing challenges in our society.

Our education system is failing many in our society. We have a significant number of people who are not literate. The number of children in classes is high – too high for teachers to notice individual difficulties or encourage the brighter children. The present system encourages only the lowest denominator and provides an over homogenised product to individuals. One size definitely does not fit all when it comes to education. Funding should be provided to investigate alternative learning techniques, such as those of Montessori or Steiner, among others. Funding should be provided so that the number of students per class is reduced. We may need to sacrifice tax cuts now, for example, so that future generations are adequately equipped to deal with the issues the Intergenerational Report identifies and also issues we cannot foresee.

Health spending needs to be increased.

Although people may be living longer, their quality of life is not necessarily good. Many people live in chronic pain and are incapable of sustaining a working life. Health funds have reduced benefits for people participating in healthy activities (sport, gym etc) and focus only on treatments for ill health, not preventative measures. Health funds and the public system do provide information about healthy lifestyles. However, providing information is insufficient. We need tangible incentives for people to take control of their health - exercising, playing sport, participating in community networks etc. Community networks can contribute to mental health, an important issue and one that impacts on people's ability to contribute and participate in work. If not reimbursed through the public or private health systems, perhaps expenses for these things need to be rebated or allowed as an expense through the tax system. Just as education expenses may be a valid work expense, so too should be expenses for maintaining the body and mind of a worker. Again, we may need to sacrifice budget surpluses now to ensure the healthy functioning of society in the future.

Some funding should be allocated to finding alternatives to conventional medicine, which only focuses on disease and illness, not wellness.

The current economic model of work creates many health problems.

This is evidenced by the growth in numbers of disability pensioners, and by the amount of stress, anxiety and depression present in our society. We talk about balancing family and work but this is only talk. For the most part, workplaces are not family friendly.

We need to develop work and work practices which nurture and sustain people, rather than forcing them to work long hours in isolation from their families. For example, there is no reason why the majority of office work cannot be done from home with the workplace supplying computers for the office workers. This would reduce consumption of resources, for example, electricity for large buildings, overuse of roads etc. It would reduce the time parents are away from their children by reason of commuting.

More childcare is not the only answer – often this just means greater hours away from home and family, and diminished health for all, as insufficient time can be had for creating healthy meals, exercising etc. If parents are expected to participate in work, workplaces of, for example, 50 of more employees, should have childcare facilities on the premises. This would increase the amount of time parents can spend with their children. This should contribute to less anxiety and stress in families. Our society may also need to sacrifice some of the profits of our enterprises to address future problems, by providing more family friendly workplaces. At the same time, it allows people to build up a stable history of employment and perhaps increases their motivation to work for a longer time (if the experience of working is a more pleasant one and not such a stressful choice).

In addition, not all parents are happy with the current way childcare centres, especially those that are profit-based, are run. Studies have shown that children under 3 years of age should have a minimum of one child carer to every 3 children. This does not often happen in childcare centres, which have a detrimental effect on the social development of our future generations.

Research and development

Incentives should be provided to corporate Australia and universities to research and develop more efficient ways of producing what society needs with less money. This would then flow on to spending by the government (even in small ways, for example, stationery, information technology hardware etc). Instead of the increased efficiency being passed on to shareholders in the form of increased profits, this money could then be channeled back into society to provide for the future shortfall in taxes. We, as individuals, set up enterprises to provide for our needs, not to serve enterprises as separate from the welfare of society.

Thankyou for considering my submission and I look forward to following the development of the government's policy on the issues raised in the *Intergenerational Report*.

I welcome contact by your department if you would like to ask me questions about anything I have written, or about other aspects of your policies.