

THE FUTURIST

Population in an Asian century

Phil Ruthven reflects on the growing population of Australia and what this means for the country in the future.

In this 21st century, our nation has the potential to be more populous in its new economic homeland of the Asia Pacific, where the vast majority of our trade, inbound tourism and immigration takes place. While we may not expend much time thinking about the long term and population numbers, our neighbours in this region almost certainly will as the century continues to unfold.

For more than 50 millennia, Australia has been a thinly populated nation and continent. It was populated by fewer than a million Indigenous Australians up to the end of the 18th century. However, it was not populated by our Southeast Asian or Oceanic neighbours because it was not attractive to them to conquer or settle, and also because of the gradual separation from the continent by the emerging Timor and Arafura Seas as part of continental drift.

Our population share was a negligible 0.1 per cent of the world's inhabitants in 1788, and is still a negligible 0.3 per cent almost 230 years later. However, our land mass and natural resources were never negligible; it was simply a case that developed and advanced nations did not know our land mass existed or was worth looking for until the 17th and 18th centuries. Now the advanced nations and our economically-advancing neighbours know a lot more about Australia. The secret is out.

Population growth

We are expected to have a population of 70 million people by the year 2100,

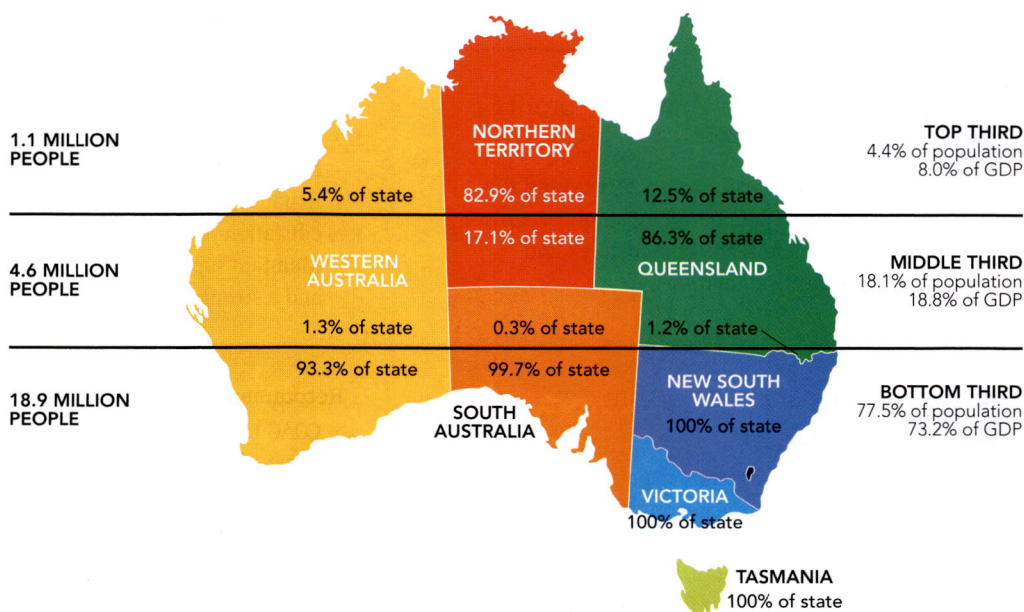
according to the highest estimate of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This will account for less than 0.5 per cent of the world's estimated population, spread across 5 per cent of the world's land mass. It will also account for a few per cent, at most, of the entire Asia Pacific population.

There are now seven Asian metropolitan areas in our region that are of a similar, or greater, population size than our entire nation, despite our extraordinary land mass. They include Tokyo (38 million); Shanghai (34 million); Chongqing (32 million); Jakarta (31 million); Karachi (25 million);

Delhi (25 million) and Beijing (25 million). Indeed by 2100 it is possible that there will be Asian cities with a population of 70 million or more, exceeding the population of Australia.

None of this should ever lead to xenophobia of the sort we have exhibited at various times in our history, the most alarmist being the "yellow peril" fear-mongering in the post-WWII decades. We are already on our way to being a Eurasian society by the end of this century, having been British in the 19th century and progressively European in the 20th century. By the 22nd century we will be on our way to a rich and westernised

AUSTRALIA'S THREE GEOGRAPHIC ZONES 2017 (POPULATION IN EQUAL LAND MASSES)





Asian society. Spread over six or seven generations, this is a very slow, osmotic and manageable evolution.

Constant evolution

Given our land mass and resources, re-evaluating our place in the Asia Pacific and greater Asia regions, including the Indian subcontinent, will be an ongoing, neighbourly and moral responsibility for many generations to come. In such a big and powerful part of the world, we will need big minds to think about population levels through the latter part of this century and into the next.

In this regard, it is worth developing some regional perspective within Asia at large. Australia comprises nearly eight million square kilometres of land, has a population of 24.5 million and a population density of 3 people per square kilometre. By comparison:

- Only China is bigger at 9.6 million square kilometres, but with 1.4 billion people it has a density of 143 people per square kilometre.
- India has only 3.3 million square kilometres of land, a population of 1.3 billion people and a density of 400 people per square kilometre.
- Our nearest neighbour, Indonesia, has just one quarter of our land mass but 260 million people and a density of 137 people per square kilometre.
- The density of other neighbours is nearly as high – if not higher – than any of the above: Philippines (337 people per square kilometre); South Korea (507 people per square kilometre) and Japan (870 people per square kilometre).

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The exhibit opposite shows the degree of our scarcity of population. The top third of Australia, a land mass of 2.6 million square kilometres, has a population of just over one million people. Our nearest neighbour, Indonesia, has less than three quarters of that land mass and a population nearly 250 times greater. And, in case we think of the top third of our continent as dry and largely uninhabitable, that part of our land mass has 60 per cent of our annual water supply.

However, in modern economies, natural resources are not as enriching as they once were to an economy. In Australia's case, agriculture and mining don't contribute directly to even 10 per cent of our GDP these days. Indeed, inbound tourism already earns far more export income than agriculture, and may earn more than mining exports by the end of the next decade. Developed resources (infrastructure, intellectual property and the digital era utility) and service industries are in ascendancy.

Nevertheless, land mass is of great interest and value. Over 60 per cent of the nation's assets – likely to be valued at more than \$15 trillion in 2017 by the ABS – is in land, infrastructure and the buildings on them. Interest by Chinese and other Asian investors in homes and agricultural land testifies to the value placed on them.

What does it mean?

Clearly the carrying capacity of our 7.7 million square kilometres of land is much greater than the narrow

and unimaginative figures bandied around for decades by isolationists and well-meaning ecologists. For well over a century, Australia has proven that it is not the number of people that threaten our fragile ecosystem – certainly not at our negligible level of population on the world scene – but what a small number of people do as ignorant or non-caring inhabitants. Soil erosion, salinity, pollution and other problems were created by a small number of people, rather than by excessive population.

Our reluctance to act on a different energy mix within any serious timescale to reduce the carbon footprint and counter any global warming outcome is yet again proof-positive of procrastination, dithering and filibustering in today's world.

This vast and space-rich continent deserves better, and our neighbours may well see that before current inhabitants do. Which is not to paint our neighbours as paragons of virtue in ecology – clearly they are not, and to some extent are limited by their still-low standard of living (GDP/capita) compared with ours. They must also deal with issues of greed and corruption.

But at the end of the day, we are all together on this finite planet Earth, with a need to be fair and respect the many, rather than the few. It cannot be business as usual or like the ways of the past, as much as many would like it to be. ■