
Chapter 4 - Flaws in the Decision-Making Process

View 1

The We Will Decide proposal was not prompted just by a disagreement with the current migration intake and its rationale. It was prompted also by the realisation that the errors in migration policy were the result of a flawed process. We Will Decide is designed to remedy two of the major flaws.

Dysfunction Results from a Top Down Process

The first flaw is that the process is top down. Migration numbers are set nationally, then a higher population is imposed at a regional and local level, regardless of the wishes of those who live there. There is no connection or link between the migration intake and the demand for people and development at a local level. This creates a planning mess, where development is imposed from above and resisted from below.

In part the problem emanates from our defective Commonwealth Constitution. The Commonwealth has power over immigration, so it decides the migration intake. This power extends to granting visas on condition that the new migrant lives in a particular area or works in a particular job or industry, but does not extend to planning and development in those areas. So the Commonwealth dumps people on the States, who have no power to refuse them entry. Every new migrant has to live somewhere, which means in a local area somewhere people will have to live with higher population density. In practice, State Governments tell Local Councils they must increase the population density of particular areas, whether they like it or not. Local interests are routinely overridden by State Governments.

This is a recipe for conflict. Most of us can think of examples of disputes about planning and development. Now consider whether the disputed development proposal sought to intensify the use of a site. A proposal to replace a house with a house may provoke some argument, but not much. A proposal to replace a house with villas or a block of flats causes more of a problem. Home units of 3 to 5 stories are one thing, but the New South Wales Government now has the brilliant idea of imposing 30 storey blocks of flats in many areas of Sydney. It should expect plenty of opposition.

When developers propose merely modernising or upgrading older buildings, or re-aligning them without creating more residences or shops, the impact on the surrounding area is much less, and the level of conflict over planning is much less. It is proposals to intensify use which generate most of the disputes, and population growth requires more intense use.

Those who dislike more intense development have every right to object. Opponents of a disputed development are usually accused of NIMBYism. NIMBY stands for 'not in my back yard'. But for everyone who objects to something in their back yard, there is a decision-maker who has decided something should be placed in the back yard. Where the decision concerns a facility the community needs, the decision may well be justified. But does the community need more people? Has the community affected by the decision requested more people? If not, then the decision is being taken to satisfy the needs of a decision-maker, not the people. Those adversely affected have a legitimate objection to such

decisions.

The situation would be quite different if the impetus for growth, the drive for more intense development of sites, came from the areas which would be affected by the growth. People will accept development if most of their neighbours support it. They generally don't accept development which is imposed from outside. And yet our top down approach is designed to produce decisions which are imposed by outsiders. The decision-making process itself manufactures resistance to its own decisions.

Migration is part of the growth treadmill

The second flaw in the process is that migration has become a self-perpetuating program; part of the cult of endless growth.

? The Commonwealth has a large department administering immigration, and both the Commonwealth and the States have departments busy planning the expansion of our services to cope with population growth. Public servants in these departments will have opportunities for promotion if migration is maintained and expanded.

? Developers are in the business of supplying the homes the extra people will need. The homes have to be furnished, decorated and furnished, directly generating sales for hundreds of other businesses.

? All businesses find it easier to sell the same goods and services to more people than to devise new goods and services to sell to the existing population. For all businesses, population growth offers an easier path to riches than innovation.

? Universities have been encouraged by Governments to increase their foreign student intake, as foreigners can be charged fees to which locals would object (and vote against). Universities and some private colleges now depend on this revenue stream.

? Migration law has become sufficiently complex that in the early 1990s a special training and registration system was introduced for migration agents. These agents depend for their livelihoods on continued migration.

The cumulative result is a substantial group of people whose employment and / or wealth is predicated on keeping up the supply of people. These people embrace and perpetuate the idea that migration helps economic growth, because their own prosperity is tied to continuing population growth.

Their economic interest complements the political interests of the major political parties. Politicians always find it easier to go with business, rather than against it. Population growth produces higher economic aggregates than a static population, so by focusing on the aggregate GDP figure, rather than the more important GDPPC, the major parties can claim they are delivering a richer Australia. An increased population allows the politicians to focus on delivering to more people - more schools, more hospital beds, more roads - than delivering better quality to a static population. And Australia remains trapped by its historical mindset, still regarding itself as a young country with huge potential for growth, as if there are never any limits.

Some excuse their role in this growth treadmill by arguing that Governments only provides the means for development to occur, if the public wants development; that really it is a matter of choice made through market forces.

This is simplistic and wrong. The public has very little choice, because Governments from both the major parties have followed the same policy of massively increasing the size of the market by importing people.

Our Governments have deliberately expanded the market to which they say they are responding.

With such powerful interests acting as if a big Australia is obviously the correct policy, few pause to question whether this culture of endless growth makes sense. But it doesn't.

Here are some reasons why the culture of endless growth, whether economic growth or population increase, is illogical.

Firstly, more is not always better. Only sometimes is it better. What is missing from the cult of endless growth is *a concept of enough*.

Secondly, money is not everything. More people in your area may raise the value of your home, or bring a few more customers to your business, but is it worth the extra delay in traffic, the loss of tranquillity and the disruption of building a bigger and better everything to cope with more people?

Thirdly, on a global level, economic growth as practised by developed Western countries, including Australia, is destroying the planet. Earth does not have sufficient resources for everyone to live at our standard of living. Yet we continue to demand more, even though by any measure, this country is not poor.

We need to replace the cult of growth - that bigger or more is always better - with the idea of quality of life. Instead of asking 'Does this mean we have more?', we should ask 'Does this make our lives better?' Sometimes we will need more to make our lives better, but not always.

Quality of life recognises the concept of enough. It allows for the importance of those factors which economics cannot measure accurately and so ignores. And when applied to economic matters, quality of life recognises that quality can be more important than quantity. To be able to afford to do something more often may not be worth it if the quality of the experience declines.

Let us apply the notion of quality of life to the population issue. At the personal level, what use is a bit of extra money from population growth if traffic jams increase and the hospital waiting lists are longer? Nationally, what use is the economic growth from a higher population if it causes so many growth-related disputes? Internationally, does it make sense to lure the talent away from developing countries if it delays the stabilising effect which development has brought to every prosperous country?

We can start to get off the growth treadmill if people are confronted with the choice of whether or not to limit growth through We Will Decide.

The next chapter examines the benefits of We Will Decide.

[Go to Chapter 5](#)

View 2

View 3

View 4