

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

TITLE: It's life, but certainly not as we want it

AUTHOR: Clive Hamilton

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Plans revealed this week to squeeze a further 1.1 million people into Sydney over the next 25 years will transform it into the nation's least liveable city. Twenty years ago Sydney was less congested, slower, more friendly and had more green space. Unregulated population growth and timid planning are choking the city, a situation exacerbated by the refusal of the Labor Government - still hostage to the economic rationalist fear of public debt - to invest in a modern public transport system.

Sydney must stop growing sooner or later. If the "endless growth" mentality is not reversed, in 20 years' time we will be reading in the *Herald* of the next plan to lever an extra million or so residents into a bursting metropolis.

The fact is that while the State Government can take measures to alleviate the pressures, in the end Sydney's expansion is decided in Canberra because overseas migration drives population growth.

Rarely in our history has a federal government pursued such a high level of immigration as the Howard Government. Each year about 130,000 new migrants arrive on our shores and a third of them decide to settle in Sydney. The Government plans to increase the numbers.

The pressures from the influx are tempered by the efflux of thousands of Sydneysiders leaving the city each year, mostly heading north, driven out by declining amenity and house price inflation. The fact that John Howard, who has gained re-election by exploiting Hansonite xenophobia, has presided over a record inflow of foreigners is an irony little remarked, not least because the Government tries to keep the figures quiet.

The immigration program is a response to pressure from big business, which demands a steady flow of labour and dreams of a market of 50 million people.

The belief that Australia can accommodate a much bigger population is based on ignorance. Ecologically, Australia is not a wide brown land but a narrow green strip down the east coast. People don't want to live in Wilcannia and, as the national water crisis should tell us, there are not resources to support them.

The most rapid growth in the immigration program is in the business long-stay category, under which businesses sponsor migrants. And under the business migration visa scheme, the wealthy can effectively buy Australian citizenship.

The business lobby and the Government will not admit it, but a high level of immigration is of no economic benefit. Gross domestic product grows but the higher income is merely spread over more people.

Under a policy of zero net migration we could allow in perhaps 40,000 people each year, because that is how many Australians leave the country. This gives us plenty of scope to meet our humanitarian obligations and we should use it to increase the number of asylum seekers and political refugees.

Immigration should be aimed at improving the moral capital of the nation rather than our financial stocks. Instead of fast-tracking money-obsessed, self-interested business migrants, or overseas students who slip in the back door through visa scams run by dodgy universities, we should welcome more people who have suffered from oppression and have learned the value of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Unlike natural population growth, the immigration tap can be eased back tomorrow. Doing so is the only way to protect the quality of life in Sydney.

Already congestion, with all its frustrations and rage, is approaching the intolerable. Sydneysiders spend more time stuck in traffic than any other Australians. The growing volume of cars on the roads is undoing decades of legislation designed to clean up the air. In the 1980s smog levels fell after laws were introduced to improve car engines and fuels.

Now the gains have been overtaken by the sheer number of cars, especially in Sydney. The recent *State of the Environment Report* notes that ozone concentrations have been falling in all capital cities except Sydney, where they are getting worse.

The lemma Government's plan to funnel more and more people into established suburbs will inevitably destroy what makes those suburbs pleasant places to live.

Fifteen years ago a study compared living standards in Sydney with those in four Japanese cities. While incomes were higher in Japan, the population density in the four cities was five to six times greater than in Sydney. Japanese dwellings are around half the size and they sit on allotments of land only a quarter the average size of Sydney ones.

The provision of public amenities - in the form of parks, school grounds, hospital grounds, roads and sporting facilities - is much higher in Sydney. Japanese city dwellers enjoy about 250 hectares of public open space per million people; Sydneysiders have more than 4000 hectares. And while Japanese have 32 playing fields per million people, Sydney residents have more than 500.

But the gap is narrowing between Sydney and Japanese cities and will continue to do so as long as immigration booms; the Howard Government's decisions are having a direct effect on quality of life in Sydney.

It's not just the loss of open space and road congestion but the psychological effects of overcrowding.

A famous experiment in the 1960s found that when too many rats are forced to live in a cage of a given size they soon display abnormal behaviour including hyper-aggression, failure to nurture young normally, increased mortality, abnormal sexual patterns and infant cannibalism.

In human populations, crowding causes physical diseases and psychological stress. When humans are forced to live in these "behavioural sinks", defined less by geographical proximity than by excessive social interaction, they respond with aggression, attempts to isolate themselves and, when all else fails, drugs and alcohol.

One thing is certain: as the population of the emerald city expands so will the industries that help us cope with the anxieties of living in a behavioural sink.

Dr Clive Hamilton is the executive director of the Australia Institute. Miranda Devine is on leave.