

Media release

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If they come, will we build it? Time for a new approach to population and infrastructure

Prime Minister Gillard's vision of a sustainable Australia must incorporate an infrastructure strategy for our major cities, not just regional Australia, according to The Australia Institute.

Speaking at the National Population Summit in Casula, Western Sydney, at which the Prime Minister also spoke, the Institute's Executive Director Dr Richard Denniss said successive federal and state governments had failed to invest in critical infrastructure before they allowed for the rapid development of new suburbs.

"Increasing traffic congestion, pressure on our hospitals and housing affordability can all be linked back to governments which have accepted rapid population growth but rejected their obligations to provide the services that new communities need," said Dr Denniss.

"Imagine if a manager expanded its call centre staff but not its number of telephones, or if a transport company employed a lot more truck drivers but didn't buy any new trucks. It is the role of governments to ensure that investment in infrastructure keeps pace with rises in population, especially in the neglected outer suburbs of our cities.

"While the Prime Minister may have rejected a 'big Australia', we will know the government is serious when it is as specific about a population target as it is about inflation, Budget and emission targets," said Dr Denniss.

Dr Denniss also disputed the Minister for Sustainable Population Tony Burke's assertion that a blow-out in official population projections can be attributed to the mining boom.

"There are 800,000 more people living in Australia now than was forecast five years ago. Our analysis shows that the mining industry accounts for only 80,000 jobs – or just 10 per cent of this extra population growth. So it's a furphy to use the mining boom as an excuse for the mismatch between official projections and the Australian population today.

"Governments on both sides of politics have been guilty of ignoring these issues for too long. Recognising that we need the population to be sustainable is a good first step, but if we are to make real progress we need a genuine debate about what sustainable means," concluded Dr Denniss.

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