

Cap population growth for future good

In 2008, Australia's population increased by 459,600 people.

Every year, Australia needs to build the equivalent of a city bigger than Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama combined to accommodate new people.

Wollongong's population is expected to grow by more than 47,000 in the next 20 years. We are growing too fast.

Claims that we are being "flooded by refugees" are ridiculous. Less than 4 per cent of the total increase is due to refugee intake.

About 33 per cent is due to a natural increase and the other 63 per cent is due to non-refugee net immigration.

Advocates of continued high population growth say that more taxpayers are needed to pay for aged care. But they ignore the huge budget demands placed on taxpayers, governments and councils to fund growth-related infrastructure.

The cost pressure is exemplified by the State Government's attempt to hock public assets to provide new dirty coal power for new houses.

NSW is struggling to keep up with growth-driven infrastructure demand despite being in the middle of a coal boom.

Some people say that we need to abandon the ideal of home ownership. But they are not talking about themselves.

What they are saying is that our grandchildren need to live with less personal space than us, more commuting time, more crowded beaches. They are advocating a quality of life degradation for the future - a pyramid land scheme perpetrated on our own descendants. I think we should aim to make life better for our descendants.

Some people ask the Government to "make more land available for housing". What they are really asking is for parks, natural bush or coastline to be destroyed (which is what is happening at Sandon Point) or for land to be removed from food production (which is what is happening on the South Coast and south-west of Sydney).

In a world which will have more than 9 billion people by 2050, destroying food production capability and increasing our own food demand is irresponsible.

It is also unwise for us to be putting our food production capability at risk through climate change. But the more our population grows, the more difficult it is to make cuts in total emissions.

But don't we need skilled workers to support our mines? Well, if our population didn't grow as fast, then the mining and associated employers might need to offer higher wages to attract workers. And they might need to run training schemes. How is this bad?

On the subject of mining, as our population grows, the per capita income achievable from our finite mineral resources drops.

We have a structural problem. Much of our economy and employment is geared towards population growth and dirty energy.

We also have a spin problem. Growth is spun as "good" because it "creates employment".

Renewable energy and aged care are spun as "bad" because they "cost".

But employment costs money whether it's in housing employment or in aged care. We should redirect our employment and funding away from housing and housing infrastructure (which create no wealth once built) towards stability, energy efficiency and the nurturing of our national food, water and manufacturing assets which underpin our future wellbeing.

We should cut natural population growth. We should abolish the baby bonus. We should work with other countries to stabilise world population. But we should be humane and increase our refugee intake.

- Rowan Huxtable is a Wollongong climate change activist.