

***Interviewee: Jonathan Sobels (J)**

***Interviewer: Linda Mottram (I)**

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I: It may seem far off in the distance but see if you can imagine the Australia of 2046, the Australia that by then has added another 12 million people to its population. Okay, it's 28 years away but there's a new warning to drop the politics and start a serious conversation about the benefits and the costs of population growth. A report today from Infrastructure Australia says Sydney and Melbourne will expand to roughly the current size of New York while Brisbane and Perth will reach the current size of Sydney during that time, and Infrastructure Australia's CEO Philip Davies says the federal government must wake up to the population boom.

Philip Davies: "There's a critical role here for the federal government to facilitate this kind of long-term planning and really focus on how we're going to grow rather than how much we're going to grow so that's why it's incumbent on our political leaders, industry and the business community to come together to talk to the public about these relative trade-offs."

I: Philip Davies from Infrastructure Australia. Jonathan Sobels has looked in great detail at the issues around population growth. He is a senior research fellow at the University of South Australia and in 2010 he authored a key report on these issues prepared for the Department of Immigration. We spoke earlier.

J: Where people live is going to be really important, how they actually live becomes important as we change our lifestyles, our – increasing our housing density. You end up with – in absolute terms – more pollution, you end up with more impacts on people's personal time spent in commuting for example, you end up with less choice in terms of even simple things like lining up for a ticket to a movie theatre or getting into a restaurant that you like, and we are coming up towards physical limitations within our physical natural and built environments that will lead to compromises in the quality of our life as we objectively see the world and experience the world.

I: I'm just thinking about the situation Cape Town finds itself in at the moment you know heading to day zero without water, Adelaide has had that experience, I'm originally from Perth and I know that rainfall there has become a lot more scarce. What are the numbers around the amount of water we're getting?

J: Well the Perth example, the southwest of Western Australia has experienced an average rainfall decline per annum of about 20 - 25% for the last 20 odd years, 30 years, which means that not only are the dams not filling, the groundwater supplies are not filling. The only option you have open to you is water efficiency use and whacking up desal plants. But as your population keeps increasing at the rates it has we've seen in recent times you won't be able to afford to keep putting up billion dollar desal plants which also have their environmental impacts in terms of brine, in terms of energy use and so on. This is the potential for Sydney, not so much Melbourne but certainly Perth and certainly southeast Queensland.

I: I mean there are a lot of benefits to an expanding population, an expanding labour market, more consumers and importantly it prevents the situation we see in a lot of European countries where they have an ageing population and that puts pressures on health and welfare services, but are we putting you know are the arguments as we hear them in Australia too much about that? Are we not taking into account sufficiently those other elements that you've mentioned?

J: I think we have a problem with this notion of growth being the panacea to all our policy problems. Ultimately growth in a finite environment becomes impossible, it's a lazy policy prescription that simply says oh let's have more people to drive the economy because essentially the growth in productivity over the last 30 years is a product of increasing population and essentially migration, immigration and not natural replacement. Our productivity per se hasn't necessarily gone anywhere in the last 20 years despite technological development. We need to consider how we can actually structure our economy so that growth is not the aim but in fact creating living spaces and economies that people can sustain over a longer period.

I: We heard Tony Abbott propose a reduction in net migration just this week and that became a political football really I suppose in Canberra but is that the discussion we should be having, what is the number for net migration?

J: I believe that that is the place we should begin. All our issues to do with infrastructure stem from the number of people we have. If we're going to have a discussion about infrastructure we first need to discuss how many people but also most importantly where they are located before we start planning what we want to do in terms of infrastructure.

I: When Kevin Rudd was Prime Minister he gave Tony Burke the Ministerial responsibility for looking at population. I don't think we got terribly far on that. Why do you think there is – it seems to be such a prohibition, almost a taboo around talking about population size?

J: I'm baffled in large part why we don't actually have politicians with either the information or the political capital to talk about how many people can live in certain places. Eighty per cent of the immigration into Australia post world war 2 has been to 20% of the local government areas, principally Sydney, Melbourne, Perth. Those are the places where perhaps the Commonwealth needs to be active in terms of, well can we sustain the continuation of that intake? Or is there a way that we can ameliorate the pressure on these major cities in terms of where we encourage people to live?

I: And how do you perceive the political will around these issues at the moment, or I guess the policy will, because the politics does get in the way, doesn't it?

J: I'm a little bit sceptical and sanguine about the political will of the government – of either side – to actually engage people in what are difficult and contentious discussions. And it's really quite a shame that we don't see the leadership in terms of establishing the vision for what Australia could be and then working back from that vision in terms of setting policy.

I: Jonathan Sobels, thank you very much for joining us.

J: Thank you.

I: Dr Jonathan Sobels is senior research fellow at the University of South Australia.

End of recording