

# Editorial complaint to the ABC regarding programs about a Big Australia

Submitted by Peter G. Cook, MA PhD

## Programs and publications that are the subject of this complaint:

*4 Corners*, 'Big Australia: Are We Ready', broadcast date 12 March 2018

*QandA*, broadcast date 12 March 2018

*Life Matters*, Radio National, population phone-in, broadcast date 13 March 2018

Online interactive content: "You decide Australia's population, we'll show you how it looks", published online 13 March 2018, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-13/big-australia-or-small-australia-you-decide-our-population/9470156?pfmredir=sm>

*Talkfest*, Radio National, 'Population,' broadcast date 17 March at 10:05pm EDT.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a complaint about a series of programs broadcast or published by the ABC on the topic of a Big Australia (henceforth called the Programs). The substance of the complaint is that this content, as a whole and in their individual constituent programs, did not meet Editorial Policy number 4,<sup>1</sup> 'impartiality and diversity of perspectives'.

Before going into the details of the complaint, I want to acknowledge and commend the effort that the ABC has made in this series of programs, which clearly represent a serious attempt to grapple with a major challenge facing Australian society, namely the determinants and impacts of a rapidly growing population fuelled largely by immigration, and with no end in sight. This complaint is not based on malice towards the ABC or on lack of appreciation of the high calibre of and the immense effort put in by ABC staff.

However, given the stakes involved with this particular issue, it is important that the ABC be held to account against the very highest standards as interpreted from its own Editorial Policies. This is all the more so because it is hoped we can all agree at the outset that the questions surrounding a Big Australia are 'contentious' as per the Editorial Policies – indeed they are a nested set of multiple contested issues – and therefore the bar must be set to a very high level. Anyone with more than a passing acquaintanceship with the population issue in Australian history would know that this has been a contentious issue for many decades, going back to the divergent contributions of Griffith Taylor and Edwin Brady in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically the population issue is contentious but in a sense it is *too* contentious to be spoken about. Hence scattered throughout the Programs there are statements by a number of interviewees

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<sup>1</sup> Also as reproduced in the 2016 revision of the *Code of Practice*.

<sup>2</sup> Griffith Taylor, "The frontiers of settlement in Australia," *Geographical Review*, 1926, XVI, 1-21.; Edwin James Brady, *Australia unlimited*, 1918.

about the urgent need for a national ‘conversation’ which they say has not been had so far. This is also indicated in the promotional material for *4 Corners*: “It’s time for the nation to have a conversation about how big Australia is going to grow.” The Programs may be viewed as a major effort by the ABC to stimulate this conversation and, as per the Editorial Policies (EP), “to equip audiences to make up their own minds” on this contentious issue.

The basis of this complaint is that the Programs:

- did not include all the “principal relevant perspectives” on the matter of contention;
- did not achieve “a balance that follows the weight of evidence”; and thus
- did not sufficiently succeed in helping Australians to “make up their own minds” (EP 4).

This complaint recognizes that when assessing balance of perspectives in programming, it is a more charitable and comprehensive approach to seek balance over multiple programs rather than necessarily just one program. Balance within a single program is not always possible or even desirable. This complaint refers, where relevant, to each program individually and also considers all of the programs together as a whole.

In addition, this complaint is that the Programs did not meet the following standards (EP 4):

4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

And further, the complaint raises the serious question of whether the Programs, taken together, express an implied editorial stance taken by the ABC, in contravention of standard 4.3:

4.3 Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC. The ABC takes no editorial stance other than its commitment to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity.

In order to lay the groundwork for this complaint, it is useful to unpack some of the sub-issues which the Big Australia question consists of. These sub-issues have a major role in determining what are the “relevant principal perspectives” and also the range of evidence that needs to be considered when assessing the “weight of evidence”. The following is a suggested shortlist – which hopefully is not too controversial:

1. What are the determinants (drivers) of population growth?
2. What are the impacts, costs and benefits of population growth?
3. What are some possible constraints to future population growth?
4. What are some possible or likely scenarios for future population growth?
5. What size of population ought Australia aim for in the future? (the ‘vision’ question)

With these sub-issues in mind, here are the particulars of the complaint.

**COMPLAINT 1.** The Programs convey a strong message that a Big Australia is a fait accompli and unstoppable by human intervention. The Programs encourage and reinforce the view that the only response possible is that of adaptation and planning to the inevitable rise in human numbers. As such, this message represents a conflation of ‘is’ and ‘ought’, and ignores a major relevant

perspective in the population debate, namely that Australia *ought not* proceed down this path. There is, furthermore, an equivocation in the meaning of the word 'conversation', where the Programs' dominant meaning is that the conversation ought to be about adaptation and planning for continuing high population growth, rather than planning to modulate or reduce population growth. This fait accompli message disempowers Australians from thinking that they have control over their destiny, and thus hardly fosters a democracy in which Australians can "make up their own minds" and thereby have input into the decisions of government.

The strength of this message begins with the promotional material for *4 Corners*:

"And our population *is* set to get even bigger. ***There'll*** be almost 40 million of us by the middle of the century.

It's time for the nation to have a conversation about how big Australia *is* going to grow."

(The bold italicised words above indicate attempts to state matters of fact or certainty, using the verb 'to be' or the auxiliary verb 'will', rather than alternative constructions, such as 'may' or 'could', which indicate some degree of uncertainty).

Then throughout the *4 Corners* program there are further statements that reinforce this message, as indicated by the following examples:

"***Sydney is on track*** to hit a population of around 8 million in the middle of this century." (Reporter)

"When you talk about the idea of a big Australia, that we're going to get bigger, even though people don't feel comfortable with that, ***people recognise that it's inevitable.***" (Rebecca Huntley)

"I don't have the sense that the government is substantially scaling back our immigration program, or has any serious intention of doing so." (Saul Eslake)

Which means ***we're still on track*** for Melbourne and Sydney to become megacities." (Reporter)

"***By 2050, Melbourne will need one and a half million new dwellings*** - half a million on land that's never been built on before." (Reporter)

"Tarneit sits on Melbourne's western fringe. In 10 years it grew more than anywhere else in Australia. Back in 2006 there were fewer than eight thousand people living here. It's now over 36 thousand, by 2036 it ***will be over 90 thousand.***" (Reporter)

"So we've got 56 new schools in the construction pipeline, 11 of which are opening for the 2018 school year. But we just need to keep that pace up, year after year, because the enrolment growth, the birth rate, interstate migration, ***this pressure is not going to stop.***"

Each of these statements builds a sense of continuing rapid population growth as a fait accompli into the long-term future. It may be responded that many of the above statements are based on current trends and future projections. And yes, the current and recent trends are very real and they are what are causing the ongoing problems of congestion of amenity, services and infrastructure. But

future projections are another matter: future projections of the Australian population are not destiny, particularly when the largest part of our annual population increase is from immigration, the quotas for which are determined by administrative/ministerial decision of the federal government.<sup>3</sup>

Future projections can always be adjusted to create multiple scenarios. There is not one single scenario for Australia's future population growth. This point was clearly accepted by the Productivity Commission in its Migrant Intake report.<sup>4</sup> *To avoid any doubt on this matter it is recommended that the ABC consult Box 10.1 and Figure 10.3 in the Productivity Commission report, where it can be seen that there are alternative scenarios for Australia's future population growth, dependent upon the level of immigration.*

There is virtually no mention in the Programs (and *4 Corners* in particular) of alternative scenarios of lower population growth. There is one statement, to introduce comments by Dick Smith:

“Some are now saying we should *pull down the shutters* and dramatically reduce the number of migrants arriving in Australia or risk our envied way of life. (Reporter)

‘I see disaster for the way of life that we loved in Australia.’ (Dick Smith)

Others point out that we're facing a tsunami of older Australians, who will not have people to care for them.” (Reporter)

That first sentence quoted above is one of the few recognitions in the whole *4 Corners* program that there might be alternative paths or scenarios for the future population size of Australia.

The emotive ‘pull down the shutters’ could be interpreted as a disparaging comment which implies those who hold such views are isolationist and possibly eccentric people. Moreover, the statement itself is not used to introduce further engagement with the possibility of alternative population scenarios, but as a segway to the issue of population ageing which is used in the Programs as a knockdown argument for the necessity of continuing high immigration-fuelled population growth (more on this further below).

The only other mention of an alternative scenario is the statement included by Tony Abbott to cut immigration by half. This is rebutted by statements from Scott Morrison and Bernard Salt:

TONY ABBOTT, 20 FEBRUARY 2018: My issue is not immigration; it's the rate of immigration at a time of stagnant wages, clogged infrastructure, soaring house prices and, in Melbourne at least, ethnic gangs that are testing the resolve of police.

SCOTT MORRISON, TREASURER, 21 FEBRUARY 2018: As you know I was the Immigration Minister for Tony Abbott and the permanent immigration intake that we have today is exactly the same as it was when he was Prime Minister and I don't recall at any time there was any discussion that that should be lowered at that time.

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<sup>3</sup> See, Peter Cook, “Submission in response to Department of Home Affairs issues paper on Managing Australia's Migrant Intake,” 2 February 2018. [http://www.peakdecisions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/migrant\\_intake\\_submission\\_2018\\_Peter\\_Cook.pdf](http://www.peakdecisions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/migrant_intake_submission_2018_Peter_Cook.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission, *Migrant Intake Into Australia*, Inquiry Report No. 77, (2016) Canberra, Australia, see p. 109 (for statement of overall approach to assessment of costs and benefits), and pp. 337-340.

Now, if you cut the level of permanent immigration to Australia by 80,000 that would cost the budget, that would hit the bottom line, the deficit, by four to five billion.

BERNARD SALT: it's a bit like changing direction on a super tanker. If you were to say, look we've been travelling along at 240 thou per year, we need to wind it back to 80 thousand people per year, it's like grabbing the wheel and yanking it a particular direction. The economy would tank.

This is a case of 'refutation' by extreme exaggeration. No mention is made, for example, of the possibility of a graduated reduction in immigration quotas which is more suited to the requirements of a supertanker. Although supertankers cannot be "yanked", they can be steered. (Bob Carr did raise the option of a graduated reduction in immigration in *QandA* – however that contribution in no way obviates the need for *4 Corners* to have provided much more balance, not to mention open-mindedness, in its presentation of future scenarios for population growth).

Nor was any challenge made to the assertions by Mr Salt and Mr Morrison, both of which are highly contestable. For instance, the fact that Australia's immigration levels were ramped UP as quickly as they were early this century, and that projections for Australia's population in 2050 increased dramatically between the first and third Intergenerational Reports, suggests that the 'supertanker' is more agile than implied here. The fact that this rapid surge has been associated with a massive increase in fiscal debt (primarily due to the infrastructure bill) should challenge Treasurer Morrison's assertion, which implies ludicrously that the extra taxes from immigrants come with no extra outlays.

It can be concluded that the Programs, and *4 Corners* in particular, present the inevitability of Big Australia as an unstoppable force which can only be adapted to. The Programs ignore a significant and long-standing strand of Australian public opinion which disagrees that we ought to become a Big Australia. As such the Programs are unbalanced, misleading and disempowering. The chosen title for the *4 Corners* program, and for promotion of the whole suite of programs commissioned for that week, was 'Big Australia – Are We Ready?' The question of 'Do We Want It' was systematically excluded. That this choice of title was made is not merely a matter of editorial prerogative. It effectively positions the ABC as deciding that Australians *ought not to have* a 'conversation' about whether they want a Big Australia. By what statute, by what warrant, can the ABC justify making that decision on behalf of the Australian people? Has the ABC in effect adopted an implied editorial stance in favour of a Big Australia, which largely excludes opportunities for questioning whether Big Australia is in fact the most appropriate vision for our country?

There is some irony in the fact that part of the Programs included an online interactive article by Inga Ting, entitled "You decide Australia's population, we'll show you how it looks". The idea behind this article is commendable, to help readers to engage with the data and see how different future population scenarios can unfold.<sup>5</sup> It seems that ABC is prepared to encourage citizens to participate in creating population scenarios on their home computer screens, but not to equip them with information about alternative visions, policy options and scenarios so they can be empowered to participate in the policy debate about what the size of Australia's future population ought to be.

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<sup>5</sup> The *idea* for this interactive article is commendable, but the *execution* left a lot to be desired, because the whole article was devoted to painting a doomsday scenario around the ageing population – so this article materially contributed to a major lack of balance in the Programs when it came to discussing the sub-issue of population ageing.

**COMPLAINT 2.** That several contentious sub-issues of a Big Australia were either omitted or presented in a one-sided fashion, and by such omission or one-sided presentation, these were used to bolster the dominant underlying perspective in the Programs, that a Big Australia is (and ought to be) unstoppable as per Complaint 1.

The particular contentious sub-issues in question, are as follows:

### **The Ageing Population**

The ageing population is a familiar theme in the population debate and it should absolutely be discussed. However, there is a range of expert opinion about the significance of the ageing population and how we should respond to it.<sup>6</sup> This includes differences of expert opinion about the role of immigration in counteracting an ageing population. None other than the Productivity Commission has recently stated that: “Importantly, immigration cannot readily prevent Australia transitioning to an older population or alleviate the underlying future fiscal pressures of an ageing population.” The Commission has further stated that: “Immigration, however, does not offer a long-term panacea for population ageing.”<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the *4 Corners* program and also particularly the online article, through statements from experts Bernard Salt, Peter McDonald and others, presented the ageing population as a knockdown argument for why we need high levels of immigration.

However, there are grounds for thinking that the ageing population issue is being used as a ‘fear appeal’ to persuade people of the need for continuing high levels of immigration.

In the *4 Corners* program, Liz Allen, who is a self-admitted proponent of a Big Australia, stated that:

**DR LIZ ALLEN, DEMOGRAPHER:** We tend to have a bit of a doomsday approach and we think of the worst case scenario particularly in light of our current constraints. But if we step back and consider, we will change. We will innovate, and be smart about how we adapt and change.

Dr Allen was referring to what she views as the “doomsday approach”, namely the advertisements of Dick Smith and suchlike warning of the dangers of continued population growth. However, her statement could just as easily be turned around to apply to the way the Programs presented the ageing population sub-issue. It seems that the Programs are prepared to dismiss concerns about real here-and-now congestion and house pricing issues (for example) as ‘doomsday’ exaggerations, but on the other hand the Programs unwaveringly present the ageing population issue as being a doomsday threat and a knockdown argument to justify continued high levels of immigration. Yet this putative threat is about a hypothetical future state which is subject to diverse expert opinions as to its exact consequences.

Clearly there are a range of views on the implications of the ageing population and how we should respond to it, and the Programs, by excluding other principal perspectives, did not present a balanced assessment of this contentious sub-issue.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Peter Gahan, Raymond Harbridge, Joshua Healy, and Ruth Williams. "The Ageing Workforce: Policy Dilemmas and Choices." *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 76, no. 4 (2017): 511-523.

<sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission, already cited, pp. 361, 337.

## The Need for Skilled Migrants, and the Drivers of Immigration and Population Growth

In the *4 Corners* program the ageing population was identified as a ‘driver’ for immigration, and the problematic nature of that claim has already been discussed. There was only minimal discussion in the *4 Corners* program of other drivers of the accelerated population growth which has taken off this century in Australia. One such statement follows:

DR LIZ ALLEN: Migrants are filling a need. The jobs that Australians don't want or are not skilled for. And more importantly, immigrants actually drive up demand.

This statement reflects one perspective on Australia’s need for skilled migration, but it is not the only perspective. Other experts believe the requirement for overseas skills is exaggerated and that skilled new immigrants are competing with Australian citizens for jobs. For example, a recent study concludes that: “The great majority of those visaed in the skill program are professionals, an increasing share of whom hold occupations that are oversupplied. On the other hand, it is delivering a negligible number of construction trade workers. This is despite housing industry claims that continued skilled migration is crucial to supplying the workers needed to provide the housing and infrastructure to accommodate Australia’s booming population.”<sup>8</sup>

Once again, this is not the place to enter into detailed discussion of this sub-issue, but merely to demonstrate that it is a contentious one. As such, the Programs failed to establish that there are multiple principal perspectives on this sub-issue.

The other relevant statement about drivers came from Bob Carr in the *4 Corners* program:

BOB CARR: Business sees this as the simplest way of increasing a domestic market. But, I think we've overshot the mark, and I think business has too big a say in this.

This brief remark is an important one as it hints at one of the key drivers for continued high levels of immigration: namely for the benefit for a few industries such as real estate, construction and development, and (recently) higher education – sometimes known as the growth lobby.

It has been observed that benefits of immigration are concentrated in a few while the costs are diffuse and shared by many.<sup>9</sup> A number of commentators and researchers have observed how the whole dynamic of population growth has become embedded as a “game of mates” within and between government and business. In this game, mutual back-scratching and revolving doors of employment between government and business, provide rewards to insiders in the form of ‘grey gifts’ following extraction of value from things like land re-zoning, mineral rights and associated activities. These rewards often fall short of legally definable corruption.<sup>10</sup> Economist Judith Sloan has labelled the interlocking arrangements between bureaucrats, politicians, business, universities and other rent seekers as a “conspiracy” to keep the pedal to the metal on immigration.<sup>11</sup> Others

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<sup>8</sup> Bob Birrell, *Australia’s Skilled Migration Program: Scarce Skills Not Required*, Australian Population Research Institute, Research Report, March 2018, p. i.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Betts, *The great divide: Immigration politics in Australia*, Duffy and Snellgrove, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron Murray and Paul Frijters, *Game of Mates*, 2017. Published by the authors. [www.gameofmates.com](http://www.gameofmates.com)

<sup>11</sup> Judith Sloan, “Scott Morrison part of Canberra conspiracy to keep immigration rates high,” *The Australian*, 24 February 2018.

have described it as a 'Ponzi' scheme to stoke seemingly endless growth which benefits a few, while the *per capita* GDP of Australians as a whole has remained stagnant for several years.<sup>12</sup>

In any other circumstance, this sort of alleged scenario would be bread and butter for an investigative program such as *4 Corners*, to track down the pattern of dodgy dealing and unfair skimming of rewards. It is disappointing that, so far, the ABC has not chosen to undertake such an investigation.

To conclude, Complaint 2 is that the Programs (and *4 Corners* in particular) did not present a balance of principal perspectives on either of the alleged, but contentious, 'drivers', namely the ageing population and the need for skilled migration. On the other hand, the Programs omit almost entirely any reference to the growth lobby as a real and important driver of immigration and population policy.

**COMPLAINT 3.** The virtual complete absence of discussion or analysis of environmental impacts and carrying capacity issues in any of the Programs.

The question of Australia's environment imposing a unique constraint (eg of water, energy, food) on human habitation on this continent stretches back at least to the pioneering work of geographer Griffith Taylor in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> It has continued as a theme in discussions of an 'optimal' or maximum level of population for Australia ever since.<sup>14</sup> The Productivity Commission took up this theme again in its concept of 'absorptive capacity.'<sup>15</sup> Scientists have undertaken major research projects on Australia's carrying capacity.<sup>16</sup> Many others have focused on the destruction of biodiversity and extinction of species.

Why, then, was this vital sub-issue excluded from any serious consideration during the Programs? Indeed, this omission was briefly commented upon by the host of Life Matters, Michael McKenzie, in the follow-up talkback show the next morning.

It is not as if the ABC producers did not have an easy way to make a token gesture in this direction. For *QandA*, a total of 10 video questions from members of the public were submitted to the *QandA* web site (see text of the questions in Appendix). Four of those questions were, in one way or another, about carrying capacity and limits to growth (the questions were from Mike O'Brien, James Ward, Michael Bayliss and John Coulter). The producers of *QandA* chose to not put any of the video questions to panellists. As an aside, it does make one wonder what is the point of offering this option to the public, if not even one video question is actually used. But more importantly for the purpose of this complaint, the producers therefore missed an opportunity to provide balance and as well wasted a chance to make better use of panellist Tim Flannery, who has actually published work on this exact topic – the carrying capacity of Australia's environment.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, this complaint is that the omission of questions of environmental impact and carrying capacity in the Programs means that a highly relevant principal perspective was ignored – even

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<sup>12</sup> Leith van Onselen, "MB population Ponzi primer presentation," *Macrobusiness*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.macrobusiness.com.au/2017/12/mb-population-ponzi-primer-presentation/>

<sup>13</sup> Griffith Taylor, "The frontiers of settlement in Australia," *Geographical Review*, 1926, XVI, 1-21.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, *Population 2040: Australia's Choice*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Productivity Commission, already cited, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Murray Lane, Les Dawes, and Peter Grace. "The essential parameters of a resource-based carrying capacity assessment model: An Australian case study." *Ecological Modelling* 272 (2014): 220-231.

<sup>17</sup> See, *Population 2040*, already cited, chapter 3.



when there was an easy way to at least make a gesture towards such. This indicates an egregious failure to provide balance on the contentious issue of a Big Australia.

**COMPLAINT 4.** The selection of the expert and other sources who were given ‘voice’ on the Programs, was heavily skewed towards Big Australia advocates.

Aside from the specific complaints about content already mentioned, there are also concerns about the sources which were granted a voice on the Programs.

In *4 Corners*, the expert and other sources were heavily skewed towards a pro-Big Australia point of view. Liz Allen, Bernard Salt, Innes Willox, Peter McDonald and Saul Eslake are known to all be proponents of Big Australia to one degree or another. Rebecca Huntley may be ‘neutral’ but her work is oriented toward social and psychological preparation for a Big Australia.

That left only two sources, Bob Carr and Dick Smith, to voice an anti-Big Australia position.

The ABC cannot genuinely claim that there are no other sources that could have been drawn upon to provide more balance. For example, researcher Dr Jane O’Sullivan has published an important paper about the infrastructure costs of population growth<sup>18</sup> – and it is remarkable that she was not cited or interviewed for the *4 Corners* program, given that the program had a big focus on the question of congested and inadequate infrastructure. There are many other sources who also could have been approached.

The balance of sources (panellists) in the *QandA* program fared slightly better, but it was still a majority of Big Australia advocates: Jane Fitzgerald, John Daley and Jay Song.

This imbalance of panellists was reflected in the number of words spoken by the panellists: 62 percent of words were from Big Australia advocates and 38 percent from the opponents.

**Number of words spoken by panellists** (based on transcript analysis)

<b>Panellist</b>	<b>Number of words</b>	<b>%</b>
Bob Carr	2141	25
Tim Flannery	1067	13
Jay Song	1308	15
Jane Fitzgerald	1530	18
John Daley	2427	29
TOTAL	8473	100

This imbalance was continued the next morning in the *Life Matters* talkback which featured (again) demographer Peter McDonald. While there may be little doubt Professor McDonald is a fine demographer, the larger question is how the ABC sought balance in its use of sources within the Programs. Surely an alternative expert perspective (or two) could have been sought to help provide

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<sup>18</sup> Jane N. O’Sullivan, "The burden of durable asset acquisition in growing populations." *Economic Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2012): 31-37.

balance for the Life Matters program? (the other guest was more of a ‘stakeholder’ and thus not a suitable balance to an expert opinion, given that this is a contentious issue).

Special mention must be made here of the episode of *Talkfest* entitled “Population” and broadcast on 17 March at 10:05pm EDT on Radio National. This program, presented by Michael Williams, was co-hosted by Dr Liz Allen who, as mentioned, is a self-admitted Big Australia advocate. The program included extracts from a number of panel discussions held at the Wheeler Centre. The presenter’s introduction to the program started out promisingly, with Michael Williams assuring listeners that they would “rise above the fray” and “we’re not gonna get nasty, we’re gonna get substantial.” In complete contrast to this promising start, Liz Allen then set the tone for the remainder of the program, by introducing the themes of the general public’s “fear” of numbers and data, and “fear of the other” – in other words framing concerns about population growth as irrational, emotive and quite possibly racist or xenophobic. This theme was then pursued virtually without let-up through the remainder of the program, including an extraordinary segment of no less than 18 minutes, where the entire six panellists<sup>19</sup> (from a previous Wheeler Centre event) were all self-professed Big Australia advocates. The tone of much of this segment was one of sanctimonious superiority vis-à-vis what was acknowledged to be majority concern by Australians toward high levels of immigration and population growth. It included a vitriolic spray from Shen Narayanasamy where she conflated and confused two very distinct issues: concern about the treatment of people who arrive by boat, and concern about mass immigration and rapid population growth. Ms Narayanasamy tried to argue that public concern about the latter has nothing to do with population numbers but is really just a way to victimize refugee claimants and immigrants. This sort of confused thinking is not at all helpful in progressing the sort of conversation about population that Australians really do need to have.

The only respite from this 53-minute almost continual onslaught against critics of a Big Australia, was a 6-minute segment from Professor Ian Lowe, who briefly presented a reasoned and non-emotive case for lower levels of immigration. This did not phase Dr Allen who, after this segment, came straight back in with her ‘fear’ theme, to portray concern about a Big Australia as an irrational fear of Australia being “swamped” by immigrants, and as wanting to “shut the door” on immigrants. Dr Allen made no attempt to actually engage with Ian Lowe’s non-emotive and well-reasoned comments, which made the case for a *lower level* of immigration, but certainly not for shutting the door. For all Dr Allen’s talk of the debate as being about what kind of “vision” various proponents have for the future of Australia, Dr Allen repeatedly disparaged other points of view which had a different vision to her own.

The significance of this episode of *Talkfest* needs to be put in context. It was broadcast at the end of a week where the ABC made much fanfare about a series of programs which would open up the ‘conversation’ about population. The *Talkfest* co-host was a self-admitted partisan for Big Australia, who had also been given voice on *4 Corners*. There was no counterbalancing effort by the presenter Michael Williams, who seemed in awe of Dr Allen’s expertise and appeared to be in furious agreement with virtually everything she said. The choice of Dr Allen as co-host raises the question of why, yet again, a Big Australia advocate was given the leading role in a discussion program – with no effort from the presenter to counterbalance, and no effort to include a second co-host who could have offered an alternative perspective.

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<sup>19</sup> Lauren Duca, Kenan Malik, George Megalogenis, Tim Wilson, Shen Narayanasamy, Rita Panahi. A minor qualification can be made in the case of Tim Wilson, who is a Big Australia supporter, but also stated that he supports a halving of immigration as a temporary measure to allow time for gradual social and economic transition to Big Australia.

In addition, of the approximately ten other panellists who were given voice during the program, a whole seven were, in one way or another, Big Australia advocates.<sup>20</sup> Two of the others<sup>21</sup> do not appear to have commented specifically on the topic within this program, so that leaves only one voice – Ian Lowe – putting a view not supporting a Big Australia. One out of ten.

How can the ABC plausibly claim that this episode of *Talkfest* comes within a country mile of being balanced in any way, shape or form? Such a claim would be simply laughable. The only possible response could be that this program is balanced by other programs which present other principal relevant perspectives. But overwhelmingly during the preceding week that was plainly not the case, as indicated in this complaint.

What is all the more disappointing is that this *Talkfest*, in recycling the usual trope that concern about population growth is ‘really’ all about fear, racism and xenophobia, missed an opportunity to progress the debate and establish some genuine dialogue between people with different perspectives. There was none of that on show here.

To conclude, the lack of balance in the range of principal perspectives mentioned in Complaints 1, 2 and 3, is replicated in the use of sources and the giving of voice. Therefore, Editorial Policy 4 is not met.

**COMPLAINT 5.** The conduct of the *QandA* program.

#### **The editing of Matt Bradley’s question**

Matt Bradley asked the first question to the *QandA* panel. Following the broadcast, Matt Bradley revealed that just prior to the program start, an ABC staff member handed him an edited version of the question he had previously submitted.<sup>22</sup> It was clear the intention was for Mr Bradley to read out the edited version. This edited version was significantly pared down and did not refer to a number of negative impacts of population growth (see below).

In the event Mr Bradley showed some initiative and chose to read out his original version of the question, of which he had a copy on his phone.

This episode does raise some concerns. Do ABC staff regularly make substantive edits to the questions asked from the audience, without consultation with the questioner? In this case, what were the reasons for the changes? Was it simply for brevity, or was it to remove reference to negative implications of population growth?

The following is Matt Bradley’s question as delivered, with proposed edits by ABC staff shown in strikethrough:

~~We’ve seen a sharp decline in our living standards in the past five to 10 years. Unaffordable housing, overdevelopment, low wage growth, increase in traffic congestion and pollution, and overcrowded schools, hospitals and public transport are now part of life in Sydney and Melbourne, and our other cities will soon be the same.~~  
Australians aren’t stupid. They realise that the root cause is our rapid population

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Mares, Lauren Duca, Kenan Malik, George Megalogenis, Tim Wilson, Shen Narayanasamy, Rita Panahi.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Searle and Lenore Manderson (?). Michael Buxton did not actually speak during the segment.

<sup>22</sup> Based on Mr Bradley’s statements on Facebook, accompanied by a photograph of the edited version of the question typed on a card which was handed by ABC staff to Mr Bradley.

growth driven by the highest immigration rate in the developed world, currently at over 200,000 per year, and that the main advocates of this unsustainable immigration are corporate and political elites who love being able to boost their profits and brag about GDP growth via an ever-increasing consumer base. Do you think our politicians understand how angry Australians are about our mass immigration program?

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the arguments and evidence presented in this complaint, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Programs do not meet Editorial Policy 4. Highly relevant principal perspectives were omitted or given very limited time. The Programs overwhelmingly favoured one perspective: that a Big Australia is inevitable and there is no room for debate about alternative scenarios. The Programs ignored opportunities to present alternative perspectives even when they were offered as low-hanging fruit (for example, the video questions on *QandA*). There was repeated reliance on the same narrow range of expert opinion, while other expert opinion was omitted, in defiance of the weight of evidence on these matters. Given that these same one-sided viewpoints and imbalances were repeated over several programs, it is very hard to argue that excesses in one particular program were re-balanced by the views expressed in other programs during the week that the Programs were aired or published. And it is hard to avoid the conclusion that in this instance, these outcomes expressed an implied editorial stance of the ABC towards the desirability of a Big Australia.

## APPENDIX: TEXT OF VIDEO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO QANDA

**From:** John Coulter  
4/3/2018 11:27 AM

The Global Footprint Network uses carefully calibrated measures to calculate the impact populations in particular countries have on their supporting environments. It shows that if all humans lived like Australians we would need 5.2 Earths to sustainably withstand humanity's environmental demand. How do our political parties reconcile this figure with their rush to increase Australia's environmental impact by seeking both a larger population and larger consumption of resources, i.e. increasing GDP? Do they not care about this unsustainable course?

**From:** MarkOConnor1  
4/3/2018 11:03 PM

The last elected Labor PM Julia Gillard promised to "get us off the Big Australia path". She didn't. The Bureau of Statistics says Australia's population is growing at 1.6 % a year, faster than many third world countries. The Greens express concern but promote high-rise. Liberals and big business frankly like more people. Meanwhile wages and jobs stagnate, a house is unaffordable, infrastructure cannot keep up. Is any party sincere about reducing Australia's rapid population growth?

**From:** MikeTBay  
7/3/2018 2:38 PM

Hi, Michael from Sustainable Population Australia. Many people say that growing our regions is a solution to the pressures that are being placed on our capital cities. However, if Victoria's three major centres were to absorb just 7 year's worth of Melbourne's growth, they would each have to double in size. So at what point do we accept that our current rate of population growth cannot go on indefinitely? That we should instead work towards a population policy that places more emphasis on proactive measures such as foreign aid and supporting refugees rather than growing the population for economic purposes.

**From:** Dr James Ward  
8/3/2018 3:52 PM

Very few highly-developed countries live within their ecological carrying capacity. Only a handful – including Australia, Canada and New Zealand – are in this enviable position and we could start demonstrating what it means to have a sufficient, desirable, sustainable society by stabilising both our population and consumption. But we seem to be deliberately squandering that opportunity, by adhering to an outdated, physically impossible goal of expanding forever. When will business and government recognise that growth and BAU are environmentally impossible?

**From:** Bob Couch  
8/3/2018 10:16 PM

Good evening. I left school in 1960. I had 2 good job offers even before I left school. When I married, we built a nice house near the sea financed by a mortgage affordable on one wage. There was sufficient moderately priced electricity and water available, traffic jams were infrequent, and all essential services readily available. In 1960, the population of SA was under 1

million. It is now 1.7 million. Does the panel dispute my contention that population growth has made our lives worse, not better

**From:** Chris O'Rourke  
9/3/2018 9:22 AM

The 5 most prosperous countries in the world, according to the Legatum Prosperity Index, have fewer than 10 million people. 15% of our people are over the age of 65. In Japan it's 25% yet their health costs per capita are lower than ours. The GDP of Norway, the most prosperous country in the world, has fallen over the last few years. The GDP per capita of Germany and Japan has increased while their population growth has decreased. Why is there this idea that our population must always increase? Why do all those people who seek to influence public policy, all but a few, continue to think that bigger is better?

**From:** Peter Schlesinger  
9/3/2018 12:09 PM

The current unendorsed, non-legislated tripartisan parliamentary population policy is to grow this country as fast as possible. The rising existential problems resulting from this attitude (both locally and globally) questionably now outweigh the benefits. In light of our cities becoming top-heavy, stagnant wages growth, ballooning un- and under-employment, along with rampant environmental destruction including other species extinction, air and water pollution, deforestation, collapse of fisheries, declining resources and climate change, when are our politicians going to understand that progress is no longer about being bigger and perceptually stronger, but that stabilizing our population is the best means for becoming truly economically and environmentally sustainable?

**From:** Mark Allen  
9/3/2018 12:23 PM

According to a recent report by the Grattan Institute, community opposition to development is negatively impacting people on low incomes. However, many people are being forced out of share-house communities such as this one here because they are increasingly being demolished to make way for apartments. This is one reason why an increasing number of people are moving to the mostly car dependent urban fringes of our cities. Should we not be better utilising our existing housing stock rather than constantly feeling the need to flatten our suburbs at great ecological and social cost? And should we not be working towards lowering our rate of population growth so that there isn't this constant pressure to increase densities in an ever losing battle to limit urban sprawl?

**From:** Peter Cook  
11/3/2018 2:02 PM

The Productivity Commission has called for more genuine community engagement in the development of population and immigration policy. Several opinion polls show the majority of Australians think Australia already has enough people, or that the population should be no more than 30 million. Do the panelists support a national plebiscite or postal vote to determine what the Australian public believe ought to be the preferred maximum population for Australia?

**From:** Michael O'Brien  
11/3/2018 2:24 PM

My question is for the growthists on the panel. Considering the simple mathematical truth, that you cannot have infinite growth in a finite space, what do they consider to be a maximum population for Australia? Do they have any evidence to support that figure? And considering housing affordability, water shortages, environmental degradation, and Australia's record extinction rate, how do they think that will impact on quality of life for ordinary Australians?