



A Geoist perspective on

# POPULATION & IMMIGRATION

by Karl Williams

What does a guy do when faced with an issue where politically-correct angels fear to tread? Barge right in, of course! And there can be few more sensitive areas than those concerning the proposed size of Australia's population or of the related issues of our immigration policy & the rights of asylum seekers. Touchy topics indeed, but maybe the approach of George Bernard Shaw was the most effective in the way he cut through all the delicate sensibilities here when he simply said, "The world is populated by people who should not exist!!!"

Ahem!

Geoists know, however, that many of these and other economic and social dilemmas simply would not arise where Geoist sanity prevailed. The nature of Henry George's philosophy and economic proposals are so timeless that we'll still be referring to them in a 1000 years. On the question of population, George argued against Thomas Malthus basically because of Malthus's overemphasis on the importance of resources in wealth production, rather than the importance of labour. As I see it, Henry George was way ahead of his time on a vast array of social and political issues, but only correctly predicted the outcome of 2 of the 3 great poverty & population concerns:

1. Correct! – Much of our present poverty is needless, and not the result of a shortage of resources. Neoclassical economics (our present system) inevitably leads to gross inefficiency and wastage. Where land cannot be hoarded and natural resources cannot be undervalued and frittered away, the implementation of Geoism has been likened to the sudden discovery of new continents. By presently not collecting the economic rent of land, we allow land to be underused or unused because of the incentive to hold it out of use and wait for increasing population and tax-funded infrastructure to increase its market price.
2. Correct! – Disparities of wealth would, however, continue to worsen under our present neoclassical economic systems. As human history has continually shown, poverty is the greatest overall cause of high population growth rates. Almost alone amongst 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers and futurists, George foresaw that the benefits of technological advancements would be greatly offset by increasing disparities of wealth. As George showed by his elaboration of "The Law of Rent",

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poverty must inevitably accompany progress. Overpopulation is a symptom of the deeper problem of poverty, and we cannot solve the problem of poverty by focusing on population, as is the neo-Malthusian approach which focuses on resources rather than (underutilised) labour in wealth production. With a Geoist system in place, the problem will be nowhere as urgent as otherwise. Without a Geoist system in place, it is a problem that cannot be solved.

3. Wrong! – George overestimated the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, which is perhaps forgivable, given the scientific knowledge of the day.

## THE GREAT DEBATE

Conventional economists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had picked up on the theories of Thomas Malthus and developed the "wages fund" theory which maintains that there is only a fixed fund of capital set aside for the payment of wages, whereas George (and Marx) maintained that wages are not paid out of capital but out of the product of labour. Hence, Malthusians place an overstated emphasis on the scarcity of resources. Were the proponents of a wages fund correct, then efforts to increase wages must be essentially in vain; and were nature insufficient to support the Earth's population without the aid of the checks accepted by Malthus

then misery and social evil were not only inevitable, but they thereby received a tacit "scientific" justification.

George was instead pointing to our system of

taxation and land tenure as the cause of poverty, rather than the "niggardliness of Nature".

The Georgist, or Geoist, outlook of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been vindicated in many ways, not least by the affluence of resource-poor nations such as Singapore and Japan, amongst many nations which

have prospered while their populations have increased by orders of magnitude. At the same time, great poverty prevails in every country, no matter how great its national wealth – disparities of wealth within nations are worsening and reaching obscene levels.

### LIVING BEYOND OUR MEANS

But, you may ask, if population limits have not quite been reached yet, surely it is just a matter of time before we do reach our limits? Not only are you right, but I'd go further and assert that we've *already* exceeded our *sustainable* population level – at least, according to our present energy-profligate state of affairs. Simply, we are living way beyond our means in terms of energy (oils reserves especially), soil replacement, water (use and abuse), loss of habitat & biodiversity, etc. We are living in a unsustainable fool's paradise – this is simply a

matter of verifiable fact for anyone who wishes to examine the hard evidence concerning the depletion of finite resources, both mineral and organic. On this point, because there is no room here to lay out the proof, I urge the unconvinced to read the powerful "*Last Days of Ancient Sunlight*" by Thom Hartmann.

So, whether now or in the near future, the planet must come to terms with the population time bomb. Unfortunately, because this issue has become muddied with emotive (however valid) arguments concerning asylum seekers and accusations of racism, environmental groups in this country have backed away from the critical question of Australia's maximum sustainable population.

And recent alarmist media hype about our declining fertility rate has further obscured the population issue. With Victorian Premier Steve Bracks – apparently under the sway of powerful property speculators – now entertaining thoughts of boosting Melbourne's population by

another one million, it's hard to find clarity (much less sanity) in these matters anywhere.

### HYSTERIA RULES!



Put it this way: in 1965, when Australia's population was around 10 million, would there have been any hysteria if it was proposed that Australia's population should level off at a sustainable (by some calculations) 15 million? Probably not. Why, then, all the hysteria today when our declining fertility rate suggests that, in the unlikely event of a massive cutback in immigration, our present population of

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19 million might *decline* to 15 million or so? As if, with 6 billion mouths to feed and rising fast, homo sapiens is suddenly in danger of extinction?!!!

What, then, is being proposed is a clear, rational target-setting of Australia's population *based on our long-term carrying capacity*. This contrasts sharply with the ad-hocery of our current decision-makers who are swayed by emotive or politically-opportunistic reasons. How the media have suddenly given so much airplay to those calling for a population of up to 50 million without serious consideration of the sustainability of this, is downright criminal!

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But regardless of the ideal population for which Australia should aim, we'll still have to face up to the immigration and refugee issue.

### GEOISM AND THE RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANTS

Basically, I'll outline the pure Geoist philosophy (which would advocate unfettered immigration) but then partially

weaken it with a number of practical considerations.

We have no inherent right to exclude anyone from this land – it's not "ours" to claim. There is no absolute right of present occupants to exclusive use of this land as theirs because of their "right" of prior occupancy. Everyone has an equal and common birthright to land and natural resources. Just as no one citizen has the right to exclusively claim the benefits of using nature's resources, so too one set of occupants of a nation-state do not have the right to collectively claim any land as "theirs".

However, there are a number of considerations we must account for in this multifactorial equation which militate against unbridled immigration:

### FIRST AND FOREMOST, THE ENVIRONMENT

Basically, until we address Australia's grave environmental problems, we are not in a position to accept great numbers of immigrants. Simply, with our unsustainable and profligate lifestyle, we would be turning low-impact immigrants into high-impact Aussies. Research by the Australia Institute has shown that the average migrant comes from a country with less than half the per capita greenhouse gas emissions of Australia.

A higher population is possible with less environmental impact than we have now, but would involve far-reaching reforms. It's certainly a long road ahead of us – which is a call for urgent action, rather than an expression of hopeless despair.

Australia is the world's highest per capita greenhouse gas emitter – latest annual estimates include India at 1.1 tonnes, China 2.6 tonnes, USA 20.7 tonnes and – "*Aussie! Aussie! Aussie! Oi! Oi! Oi!*" – Australia at 27.9 tonnes. We are also the second highest producer of waste per head behind the USA. And, despite being the driest inhabited continent, Australia uses more water per head than any other continent except North America. There are

endless more disgraceful statistics – not that they stopped Little Johnny Howard obstructing the recent Earth Summit in Johannesburg.

While here during the Tampa crisis, Bill Clinton is reported to have said that he couldn't understand all the fuss about 400 boat-people when, unless climate change is more effectively dealt with, there will be 400,000 climate change refugees on Australia's shores!

So, anyone who advocates a higher population for Australia should be actively promoting these environmental goals. Furthermore, it's downright speciesist to argue that the desires of would-be human immigrants should override the survival of many non-human species.

### CULTURAL DIVERSITY

While not denying the benefits of multiculturalism, surely the world would be a poorer place if it was a great melting pot (albeit with lumps of little ethnic ghettos floating around)? Cultural diversity is what makes life interesting and rich, and its loss is one of the hidden costs of globalisation. Living in Denmark some years ago, I came to sympathise with their concerns for their unique, admirable and very vulnerable (because of small population) culture, in danger of being swamped by large numbers of immigrants (this is a dangerous and easily-misunderstood view, admittedly).

### A SENSE OF PLACE

This is not a major point against large-scale immigration, but perhaps is still worth a mention. A sort of tribal "belonging" to one's home or homeland does seem to be a human need or desire, though there's certainly a down-side to this (others could quite rightly argue that most wars have been fought along tribal or ethnic lines). This sense of place fits in with the environmental understanding and appreciation of what's called "bioregionalism" which, while certainly not prohibiting freedom of movement, does endorse the sense of belonging many feel for their

landscape and family home, with a range of environmental benefits. Loyalty and community spirit (from knowing one's



neighbours) are a few other spin-offs here.

### PLAIN OLD HARMONY

This is a dangerous point to make because easily misconstrued, but I'll say it anyway. Unfortunate though it is, the fact is that human nature is not yet evolved enough (in terms of tolerance) to cope with large numbers of immigrants moving into "their" territory. No, this is not pandering to intolerance - rather, it's just stating the obvious when one considers that human nature has its limits to the rate of change to which it can adapt, and the speed of migration should (in a small degree, perhaps) take this into account. In other words, there are few really successful examples of multiculturalism (Australia used to be sometimes cited as the best example).

### NITTY-GRITTY SOLUTIONS

Brevity limits us to focus on only an outline of the major solutions to which Geoism would give rise here. I'll baldly assert that the Geoist paradigm holds the keys to the riddle of unemployment and, consequentially, of needless poverty.

There is all manner of empirical evidence to back up the assertion that population growth rates correlate negatively with education levels (particularly of women) and general standard of living. Population growth rates tend to spin out of control when there is some huge distortion in the local or regional economy – such as the presence of dire poverty, people lacking access to basic health services and clean water, etc. The most important variable determining how many children a woman will have is the opportunity for the woman to achieve status outside of the role of child-bearer.

Geoism provides the big solutions here, not just palliatives. Foreign aid is not an effective solution – it has been well described as "the giving of aid by the poor of rich countries to the rich of poor countries". Neither does migration really solve the problem – it's more like transferring the problem.

The root cause of overpopulation is poverty, and the root cause of poverty is (entirely unnecessary) unemployment, basically through the private misappropriation of land and natural resources, plus a host of other inefficiencies of our system of land monopoly capitalism.

### THE ULTIMATE ECO-TAX

The Land Value Taxation (LVT) assessment process monitors land and natural resources, not people's activities and possessions, and can be elegantly customised to take account of all sorts of intangible environmental assets that might otherwise be trashed as near-worthless (as our native forests, most evidently). Because full environmental costs would be built into an assessment, we'd get much better price signals and warnings of environmental damage and looming resource shortages when those using our finite natural resources have to pay the full cost of so doing. The approaching limits to growth will be brought to the forefront.

**It's downright speciesist to argue that the desires of would-be human immigrants should override the survival of many non-human species**

Examples of the sort of price changes we would have:

- Much more expensive weekend newspapers, which feed on “near-worthless” woodchips and pulp
- Many items of food would cost more - we generally pay too little for our food at the moment, especially non-organic food which externalises the costs to soil, water, air etc. Factoring in the full (Geoist) eco-taxes, water-squandering cotton and wet rice would be unprofitable to grow in this country. Wheat-growers, who piss away 7 kg. of soil for every kg. of actual wheat produced, would be forced to drastically amend their ways.
- Public transport would become cheaper relative to private transport

It must be emphasised that, in a Geoist society, wages would inevitably be much greater.

### DECENTRALISATION

If the assessment process (not just for LVT but for prices of fuel, power, water, as well as other eco-taxes) factored in the full downline costs that residents in big cities impose on the rest of society, then an elegant, natural form of cross-subsidisation of rural LVT assessments would take place, resulting in a more balanced distribution of our population, with less environmental impact and greater carrying capacity.

### GLOBAL RESOURCE JUSTICE

Now THIS is radical! If we can ever put politics & human greed aside, we could and should redistribute the fruits of nature on a global scale (by the worldwide collection of source, site, and sink rents) – this would largely

remove the global inequities that cause mass migrations. Where’s the justice in a Yemeni having to scratch a miserable living while, over the other side of an

arbitrary border, an oil-rich Saudi lives high on the hog?

Even if we only applied eco-taxes to the Global Commons (those which lie outside national borders), then much wealth could be redistributed which could alleviate migration-causing poverty e.g. eco-taxes on fishing rights, electromagnetic spectrum rights, geo-stationary or low earth satellite slots, sea-bed minerals (already a common heritage of mankind according to law of the sea), air & water pollution charges.

But the reality is that there’s little chance in the medium or short term of such international cooperation, so what can we do in the meantime? First we’ll look at conventional economics, the Geoist economics applied within Australia only.

### CONVENTIONAL POLICIES - ENVIRONMENTAL

We urgently need a federal government population policy to stabilise Australian population numbers at a level that is precautionary and ecologically sustainable, and to be administered without discriminating on ethnicity, colour, sexuality, beliefs or wealth. We should immediately:

- Ratify the Kyoto protocol on climate change. If Australia doesn’t ratify we’re in danger of missing out on lucrative international trading opportunities.
- Introduce a carbon tax and higher water prices for agriculture and industry
- Cut the billions of dollars of annual subsidies to fossil fuel use – such subsidies are, in reality, NEGATIVE eco-taxes!
- Invest in land and water repair

### CONVENTIONAL – FOREIGN AID

We must redirect the bulk of our foreign aid towards eradicating poverty and towards those programmes which empower women – the problem, of course, is

that much non-Geoist infrastructure development, in the end, merely enriches land-owners.

We need to ensure that Australian family planning programmes, both domestically and overseas, deliver services in the context of reproductive health programmes which increase the power of girls and women to determine their own reproductive lives, and increase the understanding of men of their reproductive responsibilities.

### CONVENTIONAL – POPULATION & IMMIGRATION

The basis for Australia’s population and immigration policy, both domestic and global, must be ecological sustainability, intergenerational equity and social justice. A precautionary approach is required in order to take into account the consequences of human impact on the environment – i.e. we should allow our population to fall somewhat. As Australians we also have a responsibility towards non-human species, many of which have already become extinct or endangered since European settlement.

But exactly which immigrants? I personally lean towards accepting those on a humanitarian basis (genuine refugees), but it must be noted that many of those who arrive here as refugees are indeed so-called queue-jumpers. But wealthy Hong Kong business migrants are also queue-jumpers who “bribe” their way in! The federal government must be condemned for its needlessly-inhumane detention and treatment of asylum seekers (in part because of the privatisation of our prison/detention centres) but, on the other hand, it does have a duty to fairly “award” the scarce opportunities to settle in Australia.

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Emotive media representation of rejected applicants glosses over the fact that there are far more needy and genuine refugees who can otherwise be accepted. That Australia must, to a certain extent, put out signals to would-be immigrants that we don’t have a first-come, first-serve policy is a harsh but necessary reality, otherwise about half the Third World would set sail

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for Australia. When I spent time in Pakistan a few years ago, it seemed that just about everybody would emigrate if given the chance. There the going rate to “fix” a falsified visa to Australia was US\$9000 – a king’s ransom in Pakistan.

**“BREEDING SUBSIDIES”**

Squarely facing the hard reality that, if the planet doesn’t reduce its human population to sustainable levels, we are building a population bomb that must surely blow up in our faces, then we must deal with the individual right to have children.



With only a few modest environmental

improvements, Australia’s population ought to decline then level out at around 15 million. With a reduced immigration intake (mainly refugees) and low fertility, this could be achieved quite painlessly.

Just as we must pay for the full environmental cost for purchases and other activities, so too should people be fully (i.e. financially) responsible for the new hungry mouths to which they give birth. Rather than seeing this as a discouragement to parenting, it more like taking away those lucrative subsidies which further overpopulate the planet. Income tax breaks for children (certainly for the third and subsequent children) as well as a whole range of family allowances should be abolished – at least until we’ve achieved ecological sustainability.

To repeat: this is simply removing an entrenched privilege – a subsidy that acts as a type of negative eco-tax.

**PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER – SOME HARD FIGURES**

While many will speak on general population issues, few are game to specify an ultimate population limit for Australia – not even our federal government! For it’s become such a touchy issue that even environment

groups have backed off – one is so often branded a racist for suggesting a

low figure. Well, I’m no racist but I’m going to propose a set of relatively low figures. But it all depends, you see – there are so many variables to be factored

**But wealthy Hong Kong business migrants are also queue-jumpers who “bribe” their way in!**

However, if we lift our game and implement the (conventional) environmental policies mentioned above (Kyoto, carbon taxes etc.), Australia might well be able to sustainably support a population of around 20 million. Here immigration could be used to top up our (desirable) low fertility rate.

But if we venture into an almost unimaginably new Geoist dimension, a whole new set of factors will come into play. With land being put to its best possible

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use, we’d have much more compact city-scapes that no longer sprawled over valuable farmland. Vast resources would be saved as infrastructure no longer would have to leapfrog over underused land to reach far-flung outer suburbs. Eco-friendly public transport and other shared community infrastructure would suddenly become affordable for governments to invest in, as the enhanced land values would be “recycled” back to community coffers through LVT. Of course, all other eco-taxes (not just the limited range proposed by today’s Greens, who are only now getting to grips with macroeconomic policies) are contained within the Geoist paradigm.

Similarly, rural land would be put to its optimal use, freeing up vast tracts of marginal and other land to become national parks and wilderness – the desperately-needed “lungs” our planet requires. With LVT being based on “maximum sustainable yield” on rural land, backed by an Ecological Security Deposit, agriculture will quite rightly have a huge financial stimulus to go organic.

Brevity dictates that the far-reaching list of Geoism’s unique environmental enhancements cannot be listed here, but the point should be well-made already: it would be like the discovery of a parallel continent within our present continent! Whatever our fertility rate becomes, we’d still be able to share our fair land with great numbers of new immigrants. What’s my guesstimate of the sustainable carrying capacity of a Geoist Australia? – around 40 million.

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*Why is it that the rich are getting richer, while the poor are growing in number and getting poorer? The answer lies in the fact that we have failed to support the only remedy that will cure a disease that is causing progress and poverty to be accepted as natural partners – i.e. by the collection of the full economic rental value of land.*

**- Clyde Cameron**