**PM Must Face Real Posers on Population**

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Politicians can never admit the world is neither black nor white. The voter who wants to understand the pros and cons of some complex policy proposal has to listen to simplistic, emotive and disjointed arguments from both sides and then try to marry them up. One side offers apples, the other oranges. Even sadder than being insulted by clumsy attempts at framing is being preached at by someone who appears to be genuinely ignorant of the issue they are discussing.

Which brings me to Kevin Rudd. This is the man who got my vote because he was better. Now he'll be getting it because he is somewhat less pathetic than the alternative.

What has angered me is last month's interview with Kerry O'Brien on ABC television. Asked for a reaction to projections of a 60 per cent increase in Australia's population over the next four decades, Rudd's response was: ``I actually believe in a big Australia. I make no apology for that. I actually think it's good news that our population is growing. I think it's good for us, it's good for our national security long-term, it's good in terms of what we can sustain as a nation.''

Media interviews do not allow for much in the way of follow-up questions. Let me imagine that, in a moment of inattention, Rudd agreed to give written answers to as many follow-up questions as O’Brien wanted to ask. Written answers can't be brushed off. What a fascinating program that would be! Here are my briefing notes, Kerry:

* ``Mr Rudd, you give the impression that population growth is something that just happens, something to be adapted to rather than something that can be adjusted through immigration and (anti)-natalist policies. Is my impression correct?''
* ``If you agree that there are policy levers for managing population growth, how powerful are they? Could Australia drive its population to 50 million by 2050 or restrict it to 28 million? Which move would be better for the average Australian in terms of quality of life?''
* ``The reason you give for believing in a big Australia is that it is good for security. Accepting security as your primary justification for a population of 35 million in 2050, would a population of 50 million make us even more secure?''
* ``Remembering that in the time we acquire 10 million to 20 million more Australians, Asia's population will grow by hundreds of millions, I presume you are not measuring our extra security in cannon-fodder terms? What is the threat that rapid population growth will secure us against?''
* ``As a result of growing the population rapidly, rather than stabilising it, will quality of life improve more or less rapidly for the average Australian? Are there ways in which quality of life could actually fall under a 60 per cent population increase? In particular, could you comment on urban water supplies, carbon and other pollution, wilderness losses, urban sprawl, housing affordability, traffic congestion, public transport, crime rates, food security, oil security and, given that Australians don't want this scenario, social unrest?''

*Doug Cocks is the author of People Policy: Australia's Population Choices (University of New South Wales Press 1996).*