

The Population Debate: Problems, Potential Solutions and the Need for Change

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A special forum on Australia's population. From housing and transport to food and water - the challenges will be immense. Our panelists include Heather Ridout from the Australian Industry Group, Scientist and Author Tim Flannery, Director of Griffith University's Urban Research Program Professor Brendan Gleeson and KPMG Demographer Bernard Salt.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: Each night this week we've reported on aspects of Australia's projected population growth. It's a vast subject and perhaps we've just begun to scratch the surface.

But if the government's projections are true, based on past and current immigration and birth rates, then we're looking at a 60 per cent population increase to 35 million in the next four decades.

In this scenario, Sydney and Melbourne will grow to seven million people, Brisbane will more than double, as will Perth; other cities will also grow dramatically. The whole eastern seaboard would be the focus of intense growth.

For some people, that's cause for excitement; for others, apprehension.

Last night we spoke with the Prime Minister. I think it's fair to say he's more excited than apprehensive.

After tonight's program, there'll be an online forum, starting at eight and closing at 11 pm eastern daylight saving time.

But to finish the series, tonight we've invited four guests, each prominent in their field, to discuss the key questions that have emerged over this week's series of special reports.

Bernard Salt, a KPMG partner, is one of Australia's best-known demographers. He's

articulated and charted the generational and lifestyle changes of Australians from baby boomers to Generation Y. He regularly conducts forecasts and consults with big business and government.

Scientist and author Tim Flannery, Australian of the Year in 2007, has become a leading voice on environmental issues and the climate change debate and he's a member of the Wentworth Group of concerned scientists.

Heather Ridout is chief executive of the Australian Industry Group representing business employing 750,000 people. She's also on the board of Infrastructure Australia, charged with prioritising projects that might plug the significant gaps in the nation's big infrastructure needs, and she's also been a part of the sweeping Henry tax review, one of the most sweeping tax reviews in the history of the country, which goes to the heart of how we'll find the money to underwrite our future population needs.

And Professor Brendan Gleeson is director of Griffith University's urban research program. He's advised the ACT Government on planning and land development and has worked in Britain, Germany, New Zealand and the USA. He's written books on challenges facing urban planning in Australia and its suburbs.

Now I want to start by asking each of how you think this nation is well-placed to meet these challenges of the future that we have been focusing on this week. Bernard Salt.

BERNARD SALT, KPMG DEMOGRAPHER: Well the first point I would make is that the forecast population from 22 million to 35 million does in fact represent a 60 per cent increase in population over the next 40 years. However, over the last 40 years, between 1970 and 2010, the population has increased from 12 million to 22 million which is a 75 per cent increase. So in fact we have been here. We've done it over the last 40 years in fact. So that's the big picture perspective.

KERRY O'BRIEN: And how well have we done it, do you think?

BERNARD SALT: Well I s'pose this is the issue. I s'pose, in some respects, we would say we were very happy with our society at the moment. We want to keep it as it is and we don't want to compromise our quality of life into the future. The issue there I think is that a lot of the approaches that we adopted over the last 40 years are not open to us over the next 40 years. For example, we are not likely to build new dams or in fact new coal-fired power stations. So I think that what we need to look at is if we are to head towards 35 million then we need to change the way we organise society. Maybe it will be necessary for every household in Melbourne and Sydney and Brisbane to have their own water tank. Maybe every household will have a solar panel to make a contribution to the power grid. I think we'll need to reorganise society if in fact we are to go from 22 million to 35 million.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Tim Flannery, is Australia on solid foundation, on the basis of how we've been able to manage our continent thus far, to guarantee a healthy framework to

future population growth?

TIM FLANNERY, ENVIRONMENTALIST, MACQUARIE UNI: Well I'm glad Bernard mentioned sustainable development because what we've seen in Australia so far is anything but sustainable development. And the situation continues to get worse unfortunately. If you look at the key performance indicators from an environmental perspective, things like greenhouse gas emissions just continue to grow, despite the efforts of government to introduce legislation to deal with that. But the water situation has had a huge amount of focus on it from government, but water isn't getting any more plentiful; in fact the reverse is happening. So we're again seeing a decline in that indicator, if you want. One of the big surprises is biodiversity. We've lost two species of mammals in Australia over the last year, the first extinctions in 75 years and there's more in the pipeline because we can see species getting very, very close to the edge as a result of human impacts.

So, if I was to summarise overall, the situation from a sustainability perspective is continuing to decline and yet at the same time we continue to build our population. So there's a big disconnect there between what we wish to happen and what we hope will happen, and what is actually happening on the ground. And that really goes to the heart, I think, of this issue for us. Are we going to continue to build our population in this disregard of these indicators, or are we going to try to seek a balance?

KERRY O'BRIEN: Heather Ridout, you're part of a process now of governments playing catch-up on infrastructure. They've failed - this is infrastructure that they've really failed to deliver on in past years. How do you score the state of the nation now to meet the needs of the future, given its past record?

HEATHER RIDOUT, AUSTRALIAN INDUSTRY GROUP: Look, I think there's no doubt that we under-invested in infrastructure, economic infrastructure such as the big port, rail, road projects, energy grids, water - across the board we had a very big fixation on not running deficits so the easiest thing to cut was capital spending; at the same time population was growing, the economy was growing, the need was growing and we had that problem. On the social infrastructure side like education, we were having a catch-up on schools maintenance. It was a disaster. We've had a real under-investment in education. Not only in the physical side, I might add, but on the actual level of education, and we've got big skill gaps in Australia which is a real problem for our growth going forward. Across the board, I think we really did under-invest.

Now, what's in place now, I think is a much better process to deal with it going forward. We are yet to deliver on it, but it is in place.

Infrastructure Australia seeks to take a national approach to what our infrastructure needs are rather than a states-up approach. There'll always be that balance, but for the first time we're putting in place a process which prioritises projects in terms of their productivity, in terms of their contribution to sustainability - a whole prism of things. So that's very important.

In the other areas like the tax review, what we have to do is not look to the next election but to the next generation, and all these investments of time and planning will take time to deliver but we badly need to make them if we're going to improve our score card.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Do you have a sense that we've got an overall - an overarching population policy in this country?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Look, population policy's not just about numbers. It's about the structure of it.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well that's what I mean, because it's everything, isn't it?

HEATHER RIDOUT: There's two different issues. I mean, we've got about 870,000 or so people over 80 in Australia at the moment. By the year 2050, we'll have 2.7 million Australians over the age of 80 on current projections. I mean, you think of this: the next apology to Australians will be made to people in nursing homes if we don't match this age care issue very carefully. As well, we have a shrinking population. You know, we're currently - we're gonna halve the number of the dependency ratio.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So, hang on, when you say we've got a shrinking population, we're talking about a growing ...

HEATHER RIDOUT: A shrinking workforce within the population and it'll halve in terms of - in over the next little while. So those people are gonna have to support many, many older people - more older people. So we're gonna have to work out all of that. So in terms of the demands on the public purse, they're going to be - they're gonna rise, they're going to have to be dealt with efficiently and as smartly as we can and we just need to keep growing the cake, otherwise we're going to have lower standards of living.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Brendan Gleeson, we're talking all the building blocks of a civil society - housing, transport, energy, water, food, environment, social cohesion. How have we done up to this point from your perspective?

BRENDAN GLEESON, URBAN POLICY, GRIFFITH UNI: Well the starting point for my assessment, Kerry, is cities. We are a nation of cities and suburbs. We haven't been very good at recognising that as a central feature of our national life. But I think it's important that we put cities and their health or otherwise at the centre of this discussion, because the large majority of the population growth is gonna occur in our cities, so how well are they faring? How well are they suited to providing the base for another surge in population growth? And my assessment is beginning with the social, which is the most important question for - in terms of thinking about population growth, is that we've allowed some pretty serious cracks in the social base to open up and which would cause some great concern in my view for any idea about the future population extension. So we've allowed polarisation, the growth of poorer communities, which are manifesting our cities at the other end of the wealth scale, we've got the sort of opting out and gating out.

So we've seen a ...

KERRY O'BRIEN: You mean gated communities?

BRENDAN GLEESON: Gated communities, yeah. So, two forms of exclusion, in a way. But, what it has done ...

KERRY O'BRIEN: So you think that issue of equity, social equity, is getting worse, not better?

BRENDAN GLEESON: I think it has got worse over the last couple of decades and I think we went into the big growth surge which Bernard talked about after World War II with a much firmer social base, a higher degree of social cohesion, we were a fairly egalitarian society without the extremes. And I think that was probably the most important foundation for that growth after World War II which is the social base, and that is where I would say should be our greatest area of concern 'cause I think social cohesion and solidarity have diminished over the last couple of decades. And we have seen it manifesting as cultural tensions in our cities in the last couple of years, something that I think we all regret, but we can't sort of shift away; we have to confront these issues.

KERRY O'BRIEN: What about fundamental shift in the nature of our housing, much more medium-to-high density, for instance, than the kind of classic backyard suburbia that most of us have been used to?

BRENDAN GLEESON: Well urban consolidation, a rather unlovely term, has been the aspiration in urban policy for a couple of decades now, but we're in a bit of a stand-off in our cities in that debate. There a people who would like to - it's become quite polarised. There are people who'd like to Manhattan-ize our cities, go to very high densities and others who want to continue the business-as-usual growth at the fringe. And I think neither model is viable from a social or ecological perspective in Australia. And I think what we're going to have to do is much more sensible and well-targeted and well-designed medium density development in our cities to accommodate just the population growth we can expect, rather than any of the more heroic figures that are on the horizon. And I think we're gonna have to do something about the suburbs which is where the vast majority of our population lives. Built environment is fixed capital. It changes very slowly. So if we want to do things to make our cities more sustainable and more secure, we can't imagine that we're just going to be able to obliterate whole sections of the cities overnight to affect that. So we're gonna have to look at retro-fitting our suburbs and helping households become more independent in terms of their immediate resource needs.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But in all of those terms, how enlightened do you think the planning of governments is from your observations? Are governments heading in the right direction on this? Is the thinking where you believe it should be? How much resistance is there within the entire kind of urban planning and building and architectural field?

BRENDAN GLEESON: Well here's the point where I'll probably have to leave the country after this interview, but I think the biggest problem that we have is a governance deficit for cities. It is inappropriate and has proven to be so that the state governments are managers of our major metropolitan areas. They are so fundamental to our national well-being and to everyday life for most Australians that we mustn't take the governance of cities for granted. And for a variety of reasons, the state governments have not proved to be adept managers of our metropolitan areas. And we can go into a whole lot of incidences where they have mismanaged, in my view, our cities. The record of that management of the cities has been a very episodic and in many ways amateurish one. So what I think and what a lot of other urbanists think in our community is that we need independent metropolitan governance for the cities, stand-alone independent commissions that would take the everyday management and also some of the long-term planning for cities off state governments. I think many state governments would quietly be welcoming of that.

KERRY O'BRIEN: To a degree. Not many politicians like surrendering power.

BRENDAN GLEESON: Well, I think the issues around metropolitan management are coming so toxic for state governments that that situation may change. I mean, if you look at water, energy, transport, we've reached some really critical thresholds in our cities where we've got some serious dysfunction. We're now dependent in our major metropolitan areas on desalinated water. So I think we've reached some thresholds which suggest some really problematical resource futures for our cities and I don't think state governments know how to solve them.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Tim Flannery, how comfortable are you about the prospect of governments responding to critical water problems by simply building desalination plants by saying, "OK, we'll recycle the water. We'll build more dams."

TIM FLANNERY: Well, look, I think that there is a case - you know, it varies city by city around the country. There are some places like Perth where it clearly made sense to build a desal plant. There was a long-term rainfall decline, they were in crisis, they needed to do something. And that desal plant is now an integral part of that city's water supply. Interestingly, not apparently as they promised, powered by renewable energy, but through the dirty old grid making the problem worse. In a place like Sydney, we got a highly variable rainfall and it's much better to have a desal plant that's like an insurance policy that you actually need the water in a crisis situation. But the overall picture really is - is one of a sort of band aid solution because that water deficit is a symptom of a much bigger problem which is the global climate problem, and we can see as a result of that sea levels rising by three millimetres a year. We've had the Federal Government recently saying the next century we could expect a metre or more rise in sea level, which will have huge impacts around Australia's coasts. And these sort of problems are not even begun to be looked at. So water is a symptom, a little band-aid for a much bigger problem, which is the sustainability issue: how we actually deal with this and lower our footprint on the environment to give us a better future. And government so far, really, have done a very, very poor job of dealing with those issues. You said the economy seems to drive

immigration policy; really it's a triple bottom line accounting problem, isn't it? There's environmental aspects to it, there's social aspects and economic aspects. But we're not seeing that that from current government and that is a major concern.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Heather Ridout, how were you reacting to what Brendan was saying about the need for city authorities?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Look, I think there's no doubt about it, our discussion about our cities, our plans for our cities is a very underdone area. And it's very much on the agenda now, which is a good thing. I mean, Sydney hasn't had integrated transport plans since Bradfield. It is a very, very ordinary performance. And apparently one's been ...

KERRY O'BRIEN: You mean since the Harbour Bridge was built?

HEATHER RIDOUT: That's right! And so - you know, and this really came through a lot in the IA processes when we started to say, "Well, what's going on here and what's going on there?" Victoria's been much better at that. I think they've had a much - they've been more prescient about these sorts of issues. South Australia's not bad. Brisbane has been buckling under rapid growth and they're now focusing much more on it. There is no doubt about it, one of the major frontier issues for Australia over the next decade will be the future of our cities and it is not beyond our wit to shape them how we want to shape them. And it is a really good thing we're gonna have this debate and that we're thinking about transport as part of the broader issues of urban development, the broader issues of globalisation of the Australian economy and goods and services coming in (inaudible), transport issues. You name it: they're all on the agenda. As for city ...

KERRY O'BRIEN: But so much of - yeah, go on.

HEATHER RIDOUT: ... I don't think state governments will give up control of their cities. I think the Commonwealth can use their leverage over money and the Prime Minister will be a master of that; he'll try and extract as much as he can. But I think Sydney, Melbourne - I think the states will still try to keep control of their cities. Sydney's had a problem because of its planning authorities. We are in Australia building 40,000-plus fewer homes than we need every year and a lot of that is in Sydney and that's reflecting bad planning, bad urban planning arrangements, etc. So, I welcome the debate, but I think we can have great ideas about city commissions. We have a major cities unit now which is dealing with this in sort of universal but I doubt that state governments will give up control of their cities.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Bernard Salt, how well do you think we, as a culture, will adapt and are adapting to the likelihood of more and more medium-to-high density, fewer and fewer backyards? I mean, 20 years ago people talked fondly of the quarter acre block. It very, very rapidly shrank.

BERNARD SALT: Look, I think this is a big issue. At the beginning of this decade, around the year 2000, there were a series of metropolitan strategic plans that came out

effectively promoting the densification of our cities and a shift away from the quarter acre block to medium density and so forth. The problem there is that there was an assumption by planners that a strategic plan or direction from above would encourage Australians to dense it up, if you like, but Australians will not, in my view, easily let go of that suburban ideal. We invented the quarter acre block. 'Neighbours', if you like, is absolutely integral to the Australian psyche.

KERRY O'BRIEN: I thought Americans were pretty happy about suburbia too.

BERNARD SALT: Well, no, we invented suburbia, we invented the quarter acre block, the quarter acre block, the Hills Hoist, that whole culture, 'Neighbours', the whole thing, which we project to the rest of the world. And of course it's modified significantly over the last 30 years. The quarter acre block at 1,000 square metres does not exist, it's more likely that the separate block of land in suburbia is now about 450 square metres. So I think that it's actually a big ask to expect Australians to densify suburbia significantly over the next 10 years or so. I think this is a slower trajectory; it's a bit like turning a super tanker. It won't happen overnight. You've got to allow Australian values to change slowly to reflect the new reality of outer suburbia.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But in the meantime, what, we keep spreading the tentacles further out and with inadequate services?

BERNARD SALT: Well, the way I see Australian cities evolving is almost like the sub-regionalisation of our cities. Our cities work at the moment where you can commute from the city edge to the city centre, where petrol is \$1.25 a litre. At some point over the next 10 years, 20 years, 30 years that might be \$5 a litre and the entire model breaks down. What then happens is that all of the jobs in the CBD and inner city decentralise to regional locations, so people live, work, play, go to shops, go to hospital, go to university all within regions or components, almost like a mosaic of cities. You then reduce the commute time. You will have more people commuting from home. I see a mosaic of cities or regions making up metropolitan Melbourne and Sydney in 20, 30 years time. It's a very different model to this Manhattan model that we seem to be pursuing at the moment and which is predicated on the assumption that Australians will let go of their quarter acre block and happily move into apartments.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Brendan Gleeson, how does your reality match that vision of Bernard Salt's?

BRENDAN GLEESON: A large degree of overlap. I think what Bernard's saying, and it's quite true, is we've allowed our cities, our metropolitan regions to become far too over-centralised in terms of employment and other activities and we have neglected the suburban form. In fact, we did suburban form almost better than any other nation, in my view, in the World War II period; better than the United States, because we did it in a much more egalitarian and inclusive basis. In the US, suburbia's often code for white middle class, right? We had a more inclusive model which created opportunities for a wider proportion of the population and it was generally better planned. But we mustn't be

sanguine about the situation of the suburbs now and we may be underestimating the amount of stress that Bernard's talking about in the future that households in the outer suburbs are already suffering. And certainly work and analysis coming out of my centre by my colleagues Dodson and Sipe are showing that suburban vulnerability and suburban stress is reaching quite high levels in some areas, particularly in relation to transport costs. So, I think that what we need is an urgent intervention, actually, in the suburbs. We can't - and I agree with Bernard - imagine a sudden rebuilding of the suburbs; that's just not going to happen. But what we do need to do is help the suburbs to become a lot more independent in terms of their energy and water needs and also to provide public transport. We've talked ourselves out of that as an idea and it's a nonsense.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Tim Flannery, I'll come back to water. I know you're quite capable of talking about a lot of other issues as well. But one of your colleagues in the Wentworth Group, Mike Young, said in the series this week that in a sense the realities of water supply will stop the incredible growth in the south-east corner of Queensland in its tracks at some point. There will come a point where people simply will not be able to pay or willing to pay for the cost that's involved, that you can't keep building desalination plants which then draw on more and more energy which is gonna be more expensive and so on. So is there a reality that's going to keep us in check anyway?

TIM FLANNERY: Look, there is an ultimate reality out there somewhere I guess which will constrain Australia's population overall, and maybe in the south-east water is it. But could I say that all of these things are interconnected. It's not well understood that for example 20 per cent of our water supply goes to cool coal-fired power plants. So 20 per cent of it is just used for electricity. So if you want to save water, turn off the light. Everything is connected with everything else. And despite what's been said about urban planning, you can see the problems on the ground. Every time I fly into Melbourne, I see those suburbs just expanding out into the countryside. And they've all got lovely green lawns, those houses, all of their swimming pools are full. You look over the other side to the farmland, the grass is dead, the farm dams are empty and you can see what's happening, that this unsustainable model is just growing and growing and growing in the cities and we're not doing the job that we need to do in terms of constraining it, partly for the reasons Bernard suggested: you know, it is very hard to change people's views on these things. The one lever you do have control of is overall population growth, through a number of government policies. And when you increase that growth, you increase all of those problems. My argument really with this is yes, let's have the planning, let's have everything else, but we have to actually be patient enough to wait for growth before - until we've demonstrated that we actually can deliver.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well you suggested within the stories that we had on this week that we should think about having a kind of Reserve Bank institution, in other words an independent authority that would, what, set the population levels or set the immigration levels? What?

TIM FLANNERY: Set population targets for the medium-to-long-term. And the reason I said that is that it's self-evident that business will always want more customers. Business

will always argue for bigger populations. Government wants more population because it's a greater taxpayer base, you know, and makes them look more important on the world stage. But the people of Australia have their own view and they're expressing that through their reproductive rate - they're below replacement. They don't want to continue to grow forever. So somehow, we have to have an institution which looks at all of these issues and in an unbiased manner, takes that into account to try to set an appropriate target, then leave to government the issue of yearly immigration intakes or pro-natalist policies or whatever else they want. But to have at least that set at an independent level.

BERNARD SALT: One of the issues that hasn't been raised is the global population. At the moment there are 6.5 billion people on the planet. In 2070, that number will rise to a peak number of 9.1 billion. So just over 3,000 million people will be added to the planet over the next half century.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So our 13 million looks a little paltry.

BERNARD SALT: You just think about that. Think about the reality of this. Here we are 22 million people saying, "Oh, hang on, no, we're full up. We're concerned about the fragility of the environment," which is a legitimate concern. How realistic is it for us to be the only country on the planet to claim sovereignty over the resources of an entire continent with 22 million people in a global environment that goes from 6.5 to nine billion. This goes to the heart of this strategic economic imperative that I think we need to have at the back of our mind: that we need to be sensitive to what is happening in the rest of the world. We can't be Fortress Australia and say, "We're concerned about our environment, you worry about the rest of the world." The rest of the world I'm not sure is going to look favourably upon that in the middle of the 21st Century.

KERRY O'BRIEN: With the time that's left for this debate I do want to touch briefly on the issue of social cohesion and you're talking about cultural and you're talking about equity. Can we have a mature debate? Are you confident that we can have a mature debate in this country over the next decade or so about this evolving culture that we face well beyond the traditional white, Anglo-European mix, Bernard?

BERNARD SALT: Um, well, I certainly see almost like a divided Australia going forward - metropolitan Australia and regional Australia. And in metropolitan Australia, the difference between Melbourne and Sydney and the rest is quite stark. That's the main port of entry for our migrants at the moment. And I think that if there are issues of social cohesion, the flashpoints will be in those cities.

I've a very positive view about the Australian community and our inclusiveness. 40 per cent of the Australian population was either born overseas or had a parent born overseas. I think there is a great deal of sympathy, a great deal of empathy for us as an immigrant nation.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Except that some people, once they've got here, and rather like what they've got and don't necessarily want to share it with the next round that are coming.

BERNARD SALT: Well, look, I suppose so, but I would like to think that there are flashpoints that really need to be managed, and they've surfaced over the last 12 months or so. But I would not like to think that that is reflective of broader mainstream Australian thinking.

KERRY O'BRIEN: So you think we do have the maturity to deal with what lies ahead on that front?

BERNARD SALT: I do, but we'd need to manage those flashpoints.

HEATHER RIDOUT: I agree with Bernard. I think we do. I mean, we increased our population 75 per cent from the basis of the white Australia policy. I mean, we've absorbed all these differing cultures. Some of my members have 56 nationalities in their factories and they celebrate it. And I think that is a really good starting point. We shouldn't play with tawdry politics about race; we should not do it. And I really do hope we can get some bi-partisanship around that issue.

In relation to equity, we do have the most progressive income tax and transfer system in the world, in the OECD, in Australia. So, we haven't been too bad at trying to grow the cake and redistribute it. And we should celebrate that too and protect it very, very closely.

BRENDAN GLEESON: I have great confidence in us as a nation and I see this every day, including in the suburbs, which are becoming more cosmopolitan than we tend to recognise. I have great confidence in us making that transition as a society if we pay attention to the issue of economic insecurity. We've allowed the bottom 10 to 20 per cent of households to fall behind as part of a greater shift in terms of polarisation and from there will come in my fear the wellsprings of resentment if we don't do something about that. I mean, we might see this foreshadowed in the America of today, which has this incredible cosmopolitan society represented with the election of Barack Obama; but there's another America that exists in antipathy to that, an America that feels it's left behind and is very angry and I think is reasserting its voice at the moment. And we haven't gone anywhere down that track yet, but I think we oughta pay attention to the issue of social polarisation, because that is the thing that's gonna bring the cosmopolitan project undone, in my view.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Tim Flannery.

TIM FLANNERY: You know, I've got great confidence in humanity, particularly during good times, we can get on. If we've got a fairly equitable society and we're enjoying a degree of prosperity, we're much more resilient to any of these problems. But as you said, if we get inequality in our society, that's a major stresser. If we go through an economic downturn and things start to look black, then that's another really big problem. And I don't think we can go forward imagining things are gonna be like they have for the last decade for the next century. We are gonna face downturns, we are gonna face stresses and we have to build resilience into our society and a way to do that in part is building a

more equitable society and having an eye to the future in terms of our growth rates. Not to be pursuing massively high growth rates when there's a prospect of these sort of declines occurring. So I think we just have to proceed cautiously, I guess, would be my view of it.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well as I said at the start, this is just the beginning of what's obviously gonna be quite a long debate and we've barely scratched the surface, but nonetheless, it's been well worthwhile doing. Can I thank Tim Flannery, Brendan Gleeson, Heather Ridout and Bernard Salt?

(in unison): Thankyou.

KERRY O'BRIEN: And that's the program for tonight and the week and if you want to join us for our live online forum with some of the experts who've featured in this week's population series you can go to abc.net.au/news.