



YOU CAN'T MOVE FORWARD WHEN YOU HIT THE BRAKES

Labor is pulling up the immigration drawbridge in an attempt to win votes

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PRIME Minister Julia Gillard's sustainable population policy is an admission of failure. It is an admission that the Rudd-Gillard governments have failed to manage refugee and immigration policy, and hence population policy.

It is also an admission that long-standing state Labor governments — NSW (16 years), Victoria (12 years), Queensland (13 years) — have failed to provide adequate infrastructure in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

The sustainable population policy announced variously at the Lowy Institute, Sydney (July 6), the Eidos Institute, Brisbane (July 18), and again in Western Sydney (July 20) suggests that the Prime Minister is seeking to throw a blanket over big political headaches — refugees, immigration, population growth and infrastructure — at the same time making soothing noises to the Australian Greens.

Two matters now become blindingly apparent. Some Green “sustainable population” policies must be incorporated into a future Labor government's suite of urban and population policies as a price

for the Australian Greens' preference deal. The price will be extracted if the Greens gain the balance of power in the Senate.

Second, the part of the \$52 billion spent on the stimulus package, that was of no earthly use, cannot be devoted to policy solutions.

The wasted Rudd-Gillard years have two major flaws: the massive waste of public money and the foreshadowed loss of policy autonomy. Think what now faces the electorate and what will not now be possible because of those catastrophic spending decisions of 2008-09 and the need to lean on the Greens to survive.

At the Lowy Institute Gillard suggested that Labor “support(s) sustainable population growth and reject(s) the idea that Australia should hurtle down the track towards a big population”.

“In many faster-growing parts of Australia — like western Sydney, southeast Queensland and the growth corridors of my own electorate in Melbourne's west, Wyndham and Melton — people would laugh if you told them population growth was intended to improve living standards.

“People in these communities are on the front line of our population increase and they know that bigger isn't necessarily better.

“If we move forward together with sustainability guiding our way, there are also new industries we can grow, new jobs we can cre-

ate, new skills we can teach, new technologies we can develop and, if we get this right, a quality of life that will continue to be the envy of the rest of the world, something very much to aspire for.”

At the Eidos Institute Gillard noted, “The direction I choose for Australia is the path of sustainability, taking the pressure off regions under stress and supporting regions that need and welcome growth.” It took only nanoseconds for the National Farmers Federation to step in and put up its hand for funds for regional centres.

The message is that western Melbourne (and the southeastern suburbs) and western (and southern) Sydney and southeast Queensland are full up: that “it's time” to lift the drawbridge and shut out the world.

Or so it seems, as Prime Minister Gillard runs up the green flag on population growth and a lot more besides. This retreat may be emblematic that the Labor Green alliance is retreating to fortress Australia.

Gillard's announcement, or more accurately musings, is an echo of former NSW Premier Bob Carr, who also considered that western Sydney was full up. In doing so, he and his colleagues admitted that they could not provide the urban services that the electors desired. The only way to cope was to give up on growth.



The Queensland and NSW governments, for example, have preferred to use demand management — rationing — to solve the water crises, instead of relying on pricing and an astute mixture of rain and non-rainfall sources of water. As a result, in southeast Queensland there are now two big stranded assets, a recycled water treatment plant and associated pipes and a desalination plant and associated pipes.

The Queensland and NSW governments have been reluctant to let go of their electricity systems and have their water systems run in a commercial environment. At the same time, they have deprived them of the capital they need to keep up with new demands.

The story of sustainable population is that the parts that can be fixed lack funds and the parts that cannot be fixed will be romanced away with Green options.

The former is heavy infrastructure, the latter bikes and trees and

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a population policy that has no policy instruments to deliver it. The key to sustainable population is not population policy per se, it is liveable cities. Liveable cities, like healthy bodies, need good circulation. The key to liveable cities is good traffic management and reliable services. For this read tunnels and roads and separating people from them.

The politicians' favourite solution, directing people who would not otherwise have located there to regional centres, is not going to happen. And liveable cities mean reliable water and electricity systems. Under Green economics these will become more expensive and less reliable. Forcing people to

buy “renewable” energy and forcing energy companies to build more non-renewable capacity to cover for renewable unreliability are headaches waiting to happen.

All of the hard edges that really affect quality of life in a big city, like water, electricity, roads, trains and buses are state issues, and in Sydney and southeast Queensland, state Labor is on the nose, despite having spent billions in a belated attempt to catch up.

The reason is that, from time to time, Labor governments have toyed with the idea that restricting supply chokes off demand. It does not. Populations continue to grow and good government must create the conditions under which services are provided that can sustain that population growth.

Sustainable should not be code for putting on the brakes. It makes it rather difficult to move forward.

Gary Johns was a minister in the Keating Labor government