Years 9-10 Category Highly Commended

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Every Citizen Matters - rethinking Australia

Every day our global population increases by two-hundred thousand people.

The boom in Western populations started after the second world war when prosperity followed trauma. Countries were eager to repopulate, families eager for a new start.

But new research by the United Nations suggests that in developed areas like North America, Australia and much of Europe, populations are starting to drop. On the contrary, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, India, Pakistan and the Philippines will be responsible for contributing over 50% of the world's population growth in 2050.

By the end of the century, one-third of the global population will reside in sub-Saharan Africa. To give some perspective on this, in the past year Nigeria has grown by 5.2 million people.

So there are some pretty dramatic changes in our global population figures.

But what's at the core of all of this?
Fertility rates guide the future of the population. In the 60s, women were having, on average, 5 children each. Fast forward a few decades to the 21st century and the fertility rate in Australia is at 1.7. If the average amount of children people have drops below 2.1, then a country's population will start to fall.

This combination of a boom in childbirth in the 50s and 60s, along with low fertility rates in today's society, leads to a future in Australia where a large percentage of our population is "elderly", and there will not be sufficient numbers of younger, working class citizens to support the overwhelming amount of elderly citizens in need of support.

The 1950s was a prosperous era; it was also the time when the majority of our cities and suburban areas in Australia were built and developed. By young people. The cities we live in today are designed for the generic "family of four"; a family that sleeps amongst a sea of houses, then commutes via car/train to work and attend school in the city. But are our cities going to be able to function with the rise of an older population? Furthermore, are our cities the very best design for all of our citizens?

The way that we live, the way that our environment is designed, matters. And the way that Australia's cities are designed right now does not work for everyone. Australia needs to be reconsidering the layout of our cities. Instead of having a segregated urban layout, we need to have neighbourhoods that incorporate living and services within a 15-minute walk, which would achieve a country that is more accessible to an ageing population. We need to be investing in solutions to transport that are future-inspired; instead of planning new highways and railway lines, should we be investing in a lighter transport system, such as buses or driverless vehicles?

How walkable are our cities? Not very. Now think about how walkable our cities are for the elderly. Before the 1940s we had tight-knit neighbourhoods and communities of which everything could be accessed within a 15-or-so minute walk. But after the war, when prosperity pathed the way for a new Australia and our lives became car-based. Is it unreasonable to consider going back to the layout of our cities in pre-war times, or even medieval village times? I believe that we can learn from how older cities were planned and incorporate these ideas into how our cities are being rethought today.

This is an invisible crisis that is falling upon Australia, which impacts not only our urban areas but our health and aged-care facilities as well.
So let's re-think Australia, because every citizen matters.

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