**////Title: Exploring How Sydney’s Population Growth Impacts Its Governance**

**////Standfirst:**

Rises in population and demographic changes can have significant effects on the development and governance of urban environments. Associate Professor Glen Searle of the University of Sydney recently published a paper that highlights the ways in which Sydney’s rapid population growth is supported by national immigration targets and the state government’s desire to keep Sydney ahead of other Australian cities as a global city. This population growth then drives important governance decisions at state and national levels, particularly relating to development. By prioritising rapid dwelling construction to accommodate Sydney’s rising population, but lacking adequate funding for new transport, the state government has had to reduce checks and balances needed for more democratic planning and sustainable development.

**////Main text:**

Over the past decades, the population of urban areas worldwide has been growing exponentially. This includes the population of Sydney, the most densely populated city in Australia, which currently has over 5 million inhabitants.

Rapid rises in population are known to influence government decisions, both at a city and national level. For instance, they can encourage governments to invest more in sectors that support urban development, such as the construction of large residential areas or increased transportation provision.

Associate Professor Glen Searle at the University of Sydney has recently published an article exploring how Sydney’s population growth is encouraged by national and state governments, but also drives decisions and actions of the state government.

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In his paper, Associate Professor Searle suggests that Sydney’s rapid rise in population, which is expected to continue over the coming decades, is influencing important government decisions related to the city’s development at both a national and state level.

Firstly, he highlights that immigration and population growth are supported by Australian national and state governments, including the government of New South Wales – the state of which Sydney is the capital. In fact, growth in urban populations can create jobs, promote economic growth, prevent recession, reduce the average age of citizens, and increase taxation intakes. In a federal system like Australia’s, the state governments also seek population growth as part of interstate competition for economic development.

While rises in urban populations can be economically advantageous, they also force governments to build new housing and infrastructure to accommodate additional residents. As the New South Wales government does not always have the necessary funds to build new infrastructure, it must often rely on financing from the private sector.

In recent years, the Australian government has increased its funding for the development of urban infrastructures through a series of measures, including the City Deals program and Infrastructure Australia agency priority projects. As these resources only cover some of the costs of development, the state government often partners with the private sector.

This has been particularly favourable for the development of highways and motorways, which can generate profits via tolls, and are thus more appealing to the private sector. Road-building projects, however, can also increase traffic congestion and air pollution.

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As Associate Professor Searle highlights in his paper, Sydney’s population growth is also prompting the New South Wales state government to prioritise dwelling construction projects, such as building apartment blocks and housing estates. Unfortunately, to facilitate dwelling construction, the government increases its control over development, and limits community opposition to projects.

In his article, Associate Professor Searle explores the ways in which the government facilitates dwelling construction in great depth, suggesting that they might hinder sustainable development in favour of economic growth.

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Given that national-level funding in Australia is unable to cover the costs of necessary development interventions, some politicians have expressed concerns about the rapid rise in Sydney’s population. Nonetheless, nothing appears to have been done to slow down Sydney’s growth and development.

Sydney’s continuous growth has led to two main policy imperatives – namely, the generation of jobs for the expanding population, and the development of both housing and infrastructure to meet the needs of all citizens. Construction has become increasingly important, providing jobs as well as new housing and infrastructure, and these construction projects have been mainly funded by the private sector.

In particular, to maintain its credit-rating and reduce the risk of infrastructure funding deficits, the state government has needed to limit the money it borrows from other parties. In recent years, the government has thus tried to fund a greater percentage of infrastructure projects using private sector finance.

To promote infrastructure development projects, the government also avoided making developers pay various charges that would be beneficial to citizens. These include ‘value capture’ – a charge that developers are typically asked to pay when they are changing a plot from rural to urban, or from an area of low population density to one with higher density, which automatically increases the value of developers’ land.

This has also led to the development of fewer ‘people friendly’ green areas, with a greater focus on the construction of dwellings and motorways.

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In his paper, Associate Professor Searle also highlights the impacts that the rapid growth in population and a lack of inclusionary zoning initiatives have had on house prices in Sydney. More specifically, he suggests that very low interest rates have added to these pressures and made houses and apartments unaffordable for a large proportion of citizens.

The term ‘inclusionary zoning’ refers to initiatives that have been implemented in numerous large cities worldwide, including London and New York, which introduce tax exemptions, government bonds and density bonuses to provide more affordable housing for citizens with lower incomes.

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To quickly build new housing that can accommodate Sydney’s rising population, the state government also started reducing or eliminating vital checks outlined by its original Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. As a result, many development projects may not be environmentally friendly and might be lagging in the provision of green spaces.

Finally, Associate Professor Searle discusses the government’s efforts to reduce citizen’s opposition to development projects in Sydney. This was achieved by advertising or emphasising the job-related and economic benefits of growth, and by limiting the legal avenues that citizens can use to oppose development.

Associate Professor Searle’s paper is a valuable contribution to the discourse surrounding governance and population growth in Australia. The article raises and discusses important issues in Australia’s current governance and urban planning. In the future, it could thus inspire new research studies and initiatives aimed at tackling these issues.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Population growth and development: an outcome of Sydney’s metropolitan governance’, from Australian Planner, 2020. [doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2020.1739095](https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2020.1739095)

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