

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Budget Estimates

4 – 6 June 2013

Question: BET 19

Topic: David Crowe Article – the Australian

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Senator BUSHBY asked:

Senator BUSHBY: Thank you for assisting us this evening. I refer to an article in the *Australian* by David Crowe on 19 April this year, where he refers to what he calls:

Australia's largest intercensal error on record.

Apparently, that comment came from him viewing a Treasury executive minute, which was put out by the Treasurer's office. In the bureau's opinion, was this error truly Australia's largest intercensal error on record, as the Treasury minute described? What would its closest rival have been?

Mr Sutton: I am not sure if it was our greatest intercensal error or not. As you would be aware, between censuses we basically project the population increases between those periods. There is always an error which we have at the end of those periods that we adjust. On this particular occasion, it was a large adjustment compared with previous censuses. I suspect I would have to go back and have a look at censuses from perhaps 20 or 30 years ago. I think in recent times there have been adjustments of around 60,000 or 70,000. In this case, it was a 300,000 adjustment. So it was one of the larger ones in recent times, but to be absolutely sure that it is the largest we have every had I would need to go back and have a look further—if that was something that you would like me to do.

Senator BUSHBY: If it is not too much trouble. I do not want you to expend unnecessary resources doing it. If it is a relatively simple thing to do, that would be appreciated.

Mr Sutton: Sure.

Answer:

The Treasury document referenced in the Question on Notice included information on the recent 'Estimated Resident Population (ERP) rebasing' process undertaken by the ABS after the 2011 Census of Population and Housing, for which extensive explanatory material has been published.

Every five years the ABS uses information from the most recent Census, which is the best source of information about Australia's population, to 'rebase' (or 'recalibrate') ERP. To do this, the ABS uses data from the Census and makes a number of adjustments. The most significant adjustments are for Census undercount and for residents who were temporarily overseas on Census night.

The difference between the 'unrebased' 30 June 2011 estimate and the preliminary 'rebased' 30 June 2011 estimate is referred to as the 'intercensal error'. The intercensal error for the preliminary rebased population estimate for the 2006-2011 period was 294,000, which was more than three times greater than the previous intercensal error for the 2001-2006 period. Around 84% of this intercensal error (around 247,000 people) was directly attributable to an improved ABS methodology used to calculate the undercount adjustment. The residual amount (47,000 people, or 16% of the total intercensal error) was well within the historical range of previous intercensal errors. On 20 June 2013 ABS released revised historical population data from 1991 to 2011, based on the improved undercount methodology for 1996, 2001 and 2006. This has ensured that Australia's

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official population estimates not only reflect the best possible estimate of how many people are in Australia today, but also the best estimate of how many people there were in the recent past.