



**Transcript of interview with Christina Richards
Chief Executive Officer, Australian Reproductive Health Alliance
on *Late Night Live*, ABC Radio National, 8 February 2007**

Phillip Adams: Even John Howard is now at pains to make everyone understand that he now believes there is such a thing as global warming and the papers are overwhelmed with stories about water, drought ... but heavens above, we've got to get back to one of the basic causes and that is, yes, overpopulation. Last week the British all party parliamentary group on population and development released a report which said there is overwhelming evidence that the world will fail to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goals if we don't put the brakes on population growth or if we don't put little condoms on our dickies.

The British MPs say that most of the world's population growth is occurring in developing countries and we're heading towards that unsustainable 10.5 billion by 2050 and they recommend that curbing population should be the world's number one priority. As I said Christina Richards, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, which works Australia's parliamentarians and public on reproductive issues and she joins me from Canberra to talk about the report. Chris, welcome to one of Australia's most effective contraceptive devices, *Late Night Live*.

Christina Richards: Thank-you very much.

Phillip Adams: What's your reaction to the UK report?

Christina Richards: The UK report I think is a very welcome voice of sanity at a very topical time for Australia because climate change is top of the agenda and a lot of the issues around climate change, environment, water they're all connected with overpopulation of the planet. So what I like about this report is it actually addresses the elephant in the room that people have really not addressed very well or

Phillip Adams: Well not just *the* elephant in the room, which is becoming a very common metaphor, there's really millions of the bloody elephants in the room isn't there, there's another one!

Christina Richards: The issue of population growth has really taken a bit of a backward step in the last 10 years and I think this report looks at why it has and says we've got to address this issue

Phillip Adams: Christina, why is it do you think that the "p" word has hardly been mentioned you say for the last 10 years? I would've thought it's been longer than that, it's almost as though there's a culture of avoidance.

Christina Richards: There are many reasons and that's a really interesting question. One of the reasons is that family planning has been equated with population control and I think back in the sixties there was a lot of publicity given to coercive programs that may have been happening in China or India. and we seem to have extrapolated them to the point where everybody now thinks family planning equals coercion. There was also another shift too that in the lead-up to an international conference on population and development, the Cairo conference in 1994, there was a fundamental shift away from talking about the demographics of population and looking at human rights approach to family planning and reproductive health. Now that term reproductive health is very contentious and I think it hasn't helped us.

Phillip Adams: Is there a sub text here which perhaps you're hinting at of a fairly strong effort by religious organisations, not just the Catholic church but also the pentecostals in the US who've been waging a war against the condom?

Christina Richards: Yes absolutely and not just against the condom against any form of contraception, seeking to tell people that abstinence is best. I mean I think the HIV/AIDS epidemic came along, and also stole the thunder if you like away from family planning programs. And then you saw the rise of abstinence programs, you saw the global gag rule being reinstated by the Bush administration. So there are a lot of things like that, that have happened for us too but pardon the pun contraception and family planning is no longer sexy - HIV/AIDS took over the territory in many ways

Phillip Adams: I like puns you're very free to make as many as you wish Christina. There's a lot of public awareness of the Millennium Development Goals in the UK and Europe - Britain's next Prime Minister has promised to lead the world on the issue - but I think there's very little awareness of them here, despite your efforts, Chris.

Christina Richards: Not just mine. The Australian Council for International Development which is an umbrella body for non-government organisations working in the development field have worked very hard through the make poverty history campaign to raise awareness through the parliament and with the public about the development goals, but you're absolutely right that the government hasn't really embraced the goals or the MDGs as we like to call them...

Phillip Adams: Who speaks out on the issue in Australian public life? Who speaks out among our political elite?

Christina Richards: Well you'll find that a lot of the people who speak out about these issues are members of the Australian All Party Group on Population and Development and some of those group members, such as Lyn Allison, Claire Moore, Judith Troeth, were the ones who really drove the RU-486 debate here. So they're a very vocal supporter of development issues, Millennium Development Goals, reproductive health and because they work in a cross party way they can often achieve a lot more than the NGO sector can.

I'm interested in the link between population growth and extreme poverty and hunger. Let's take the case of Ethiopia. Now in 1994 the year of the infamous famine the population was 42 million. Now you would've thought that prolonged famine would have done a lot - you know, free market forces if you like - to quell the issue but I

understand that the Ethiopian population is currently 75 million and by 2050 is expected to reach 145 million.

Christina Richards: Yep Absolutely. It's mind boggling isn't it? And if you think about that, even our best efforts to increase food production are unlikely to match such population growth. So food security is increasingly becoming an issue in developing countries.

Phillip Adams: Chris wouldn't you think thought that living in, I mean there's other examples I know that you have from Africa, but when you live in such appalling circumstances, when often you're on permanent food aid, when you're living in refugee camps, that this would itself lower the birth rate?

Christina Richards: Well often in those camps there is no access to reproductive health, and we also know that when people are in situations of conflict or post-conflict that violence against women, and particularly sexual violence such as rape, just escalates off the planet. And reproductive health - access to condoms - is just not on the agenda in those camps and in fact the All-Party Group on Population and Development in Australia are looking into this issue of how can reproductive health supplies into the camps in our region. So East Timor, for example, we're looking at how can reproductive health come back onto the agenda so that you don't have thousands of disaffected youth young people that we've got in Timor, in the Solomon Islands, In Papua New Guinea, because these are countries in our own region where population is just expanding at unsustainable rates and of course that then contributes to civil unrest and civil conflict. So it's a big job to get governments to actually look at this issue because they really don't want to address it.

Phillip Adams: Phillip Adams: Now Christina you realise that I of course am breaking to global gag rule by having you on the program. I'm doing this in defiance of George W. Bush's strict regulations, and this isn't a joke as you and I well know. Tell the listener about the global gag rule.

Christina Richards: Well the global gag rule, which is also known as the Mexico City Policy, was instituted I think by Ronald Reagan, back in about 1974, to ensure that no US family planning assistance could be provided to foreign non-government organisations that got any funding from the US. So you were not allowed to get any US money, if you even counseled somebody about abortion, or if you gave them a referral to somewhere that did abortion or even if you lobbied to make it legal or more available Then all those funds were cut off, which was a bit of a cruel choice because if you took the US funds to do essential health services and care, you then also had to agree to restrict many of the health care, that might jeopardise your patients, so you had to reject the funding and lose funds, in which case you couldn't help the people.

Phillip Adams: Chris Cardinal Pell has cut off funds to this program recently because I raise this because there is a sort of a global gag rule in Australia on foreign aid is there not?

Christina Richards: There is, but just your comment on Cardinal Pell. If he's cut off funding for this program then that's OK because the federal government and the NSW Government think have both committed \$10 million each for the Pope's visit next year for Youth Week so ...

Phillip Adams: I'm afraid I'm not even a part of Youth Week for some reason. ...there's all this, you know, there's a lot of this going on - but tell the listener about my old mate Brian Harradine.

Christina Richards: Brian Harradine was enthusiastic about the global gag. He tried to impose his own version of it in Australia's aid program. What he did was to put restrictions on family planning in the aid program so that similar kind of thing around abortion or if you were an NGO that had any links to another service that either provided abortion, talked about abortion, and so on. So no Australian aid money was to be used for abortion-related services or information. Now the effect that that had was that when you looked at those restrictions many people were so nervous about doing any family planning programs that it virtually ceased. Now also part of that strategy was to target individual public servants in a very personal way. And so you can see why there's a general reluctance by Australia to address this issue. Because of a number of different strategies that were employed to stop us rolling out family planning programs that might even have a sniff of the A word.

Phillip Adams: Well this program has devoted a lot of its attention in recent years to the Solomon Islands and one of the things you see there is an absolute catastrophic birth rate and none of the religious organisations - and they're very dominant - seem to give a tuppenny damn... so you've got societies that are already fairly dysfunctional, have minimal economies and which simply won't be able to bear that burden.

Now OK the politics of the global gag rule are part of the story but there's also of course been this massive policy shift in the Australian Government's foreign aid policies the emphasis on foreign governance anti terrorism one of the reasons for the RAMSI intervention in the Solomons Islands or 2 reasons rather than health education and so on and according to a report this week Chris, Australia is now including "migration management" in our foreign aid figures ... I know this is an area you won't want to weigh in too heavily on

Christina Richards: Well you'll find many of us in the NGO sector have lobbied the Australian Government quite fiercely on its objective of the national interest and governance and some of the very robust debate around that has been that you're not going to be able to implement good governance and you're not going to be able to stamp out corruption if the policeman's kids haven't got any food or if you're not going to have access to be able to afford to pay school fees so how about dealing with the people first before you deal with the system so that's a very simplistic take on it but that the health budget and the education budget in the aide program decreased quite significantly over the past 10 years

Phillip Adams: Do you detect a reluctance, even a fear, of speaking out on these issues in the NGO sector?

Christina Richards: Absolutely. The only reason I can speak out is that we don't receive any government funding Australian so its easier for an org like us but I'm not the only one, I mean the Australian All party GROUP are quite vociferous on these issues and keen to do as much as they can in raising awareness and they do\

Phillip Adams: Now let's go back to climate change. Population doesn't just put pressure on food production, ecosystems etcetera. it inevitably increases emissions

exponentially especially in the developing world growth countries where emission controls will take much much longer to effect. Is there a sufficiently high awareness of this as an issue within government or indeed within NGOs?

Christina Richards: I think in NGOs there is. I can't speak about government because I no longer work there. But if you just take an example that's very topical for us, water. Over the next two decades there's going to be about 50 countries facing very serious shortage of fresh water and our population size defines the demand for water. The greatest use of water is where we know from today's news in terms of the Murray Darling is for agriculture, but because of population growth the number of people facing water shortages is just growing exponentially. The forecast is that between 2.75 billion and 3.25 billion people are going to live in countries that face water shortages. Now it doesn't actually say Australia's one of those countries but I think those facts speak for themselves.