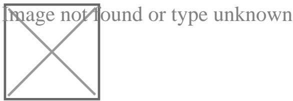

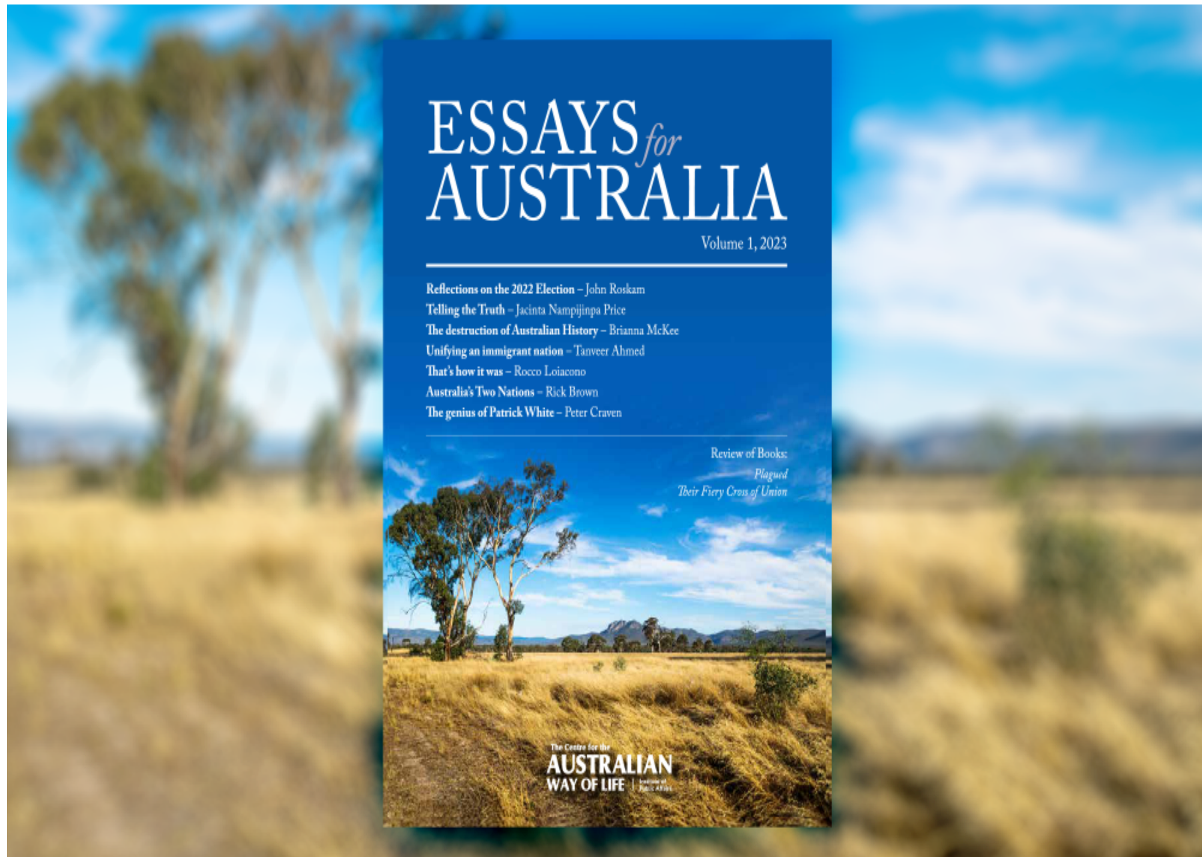

Unifying An Immigrant Nation

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ccording to last year's census for the first time in Australia's history more than half our population was either born overseas or had an overseas-born parent. Australia has the second-highest proportion of foreign born residents in the developed world (after Luxembourg). In the United States 13.6 per cent are foreign-born, in the UK 13.7 per cent, and in Australia 29.9 per cent.

The lifting of the White Australia policy unleashed a steady wave of immigrants distant from the Anglo-Saxon creed. I was one such child of these immigrants, my parents travelling in 1980 from Bangladesh with little knowledge of Australia other than the positive reviews of a handful of friends. It was how they thought the more familiar London might be like, but newer, warmer and quieter.

A few decades later we are now among the most diverse places on the planet. Australia welcomed more than one million people (1,020,00) since 2017. The largest increase in country of birth, outside Australia, was India with 220,000 additional people counted. India has moved past China and New Zealand to become the third largest country of birth behind Australia and England.

The number of people who used a language other than English at home has increased by nearly 800,000 from 2016 to over 5.5 million people. 850,000 of this group reported that they do not speak English well or at all.

Mandarin continues to be the most common language other than English used at home, with nearly 700,000 people speaking it at home. This is followed by Arabic. Punjabi had the largest increase of over 80 per cent since 2016.

The public, by and large, value such diversity. Repeated surveys have shown Australia is supportive of the notion of multiculturalism, while perhaps not entirely familiar with its political meaning.

But it remains critical for a successful multi-ethnic democracy that the bulk of citizens feel that emerging minority groups and successive waves of immigrants embrace the common norms of society. Arrivals who become permanent residents must also feel they have equal access to relevant social and economic resources. But as binding identities linked to nationalism, religion or even of a singular national story all come under threat, the question of what is it that we mean by integration and what exactly might we be integrating into becomes especially relevant.

This is especially true when a large chunk of what we hear about the national story is guilt, shame, and irredeemable racism. If all a migrant hears are tales of horrors veering from genocides, colonialism and oppression then it is understandable that outsiders see little of value to integrate into.

In the paper for the British Policy Exchange titled ‘What Happened to Integration’ the husband of murdered Labour MP Jo Cox, Brendan Cox, writes that ‘Integration is an issue without a political home… There is a lack of political commitment, slow returns and political controversy which have all led to complacency.’ Jo Cox was killed by a far right extremist and her husband has since become an activist on issues of building cohesive societies.

Cox also perceptively points out that applying integration only to immigrants is too narrow at a time when social connections are dissipating across the board. The term can equally apply to the rising cohorts of lonely, old people to the teenagers suffering worsening mental health problems. The problem overlaps with the question of how to build meaningful communities for everyone. Traditional identities linked to place, people and binding institutions are now a rarity.

The term ‘integration’ has a long history within Western democracies. It is a marker of the steady shift of societies like Australia from a white Christian dominated populace to a polyglot multicultural nation. This history is all the more apparent in the wake of the death of Queen Elizabeth II – a world-historical event that has laid bare our fundamental British, Christian underpinnings. Watching all manner of leading Australian figures pronounce their fealty to the new King was like exposing an invisible but not entirely cut umbilical cord to our roots.

But the last half century has seen staggering changes to the country's demographics. For several decades Western countries had grown their populations through migration, in the absence of a substantial fertility rate. While the migration of all the major Western countries, be they Britain, America or Australia, focused on white, Christian Europeans up until World War II, that changed considerably in the last half century.

We are in a better position than many parts of Europe in creating an identity not inextricably linked to ethnicity or a cultural history. We have the advantage of having a civic based identity more accessible to migrants, albeit a relatively weak one. Our success story has been heavily buttressed by astounding prosperity. It's much easier to feel and embrace being Australian while getting rich and having access to some of the world's best public services and safety net.

The higher levels of diversity still generate conflicting ideas of how to manage that diversity. There are differing attitudes over immigration and integration critical to political polarisation. Flashpoints over asylum seekers, crime with an ethnic hue and extremism bring a fever pitch to this polarization. Academic Eric Kaufman describes these conflicts in 'WhiteShift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities'as being debates about racial ideologies and not race as such. As he writes, ''White' is a description of a person's race, whereas feelings about whether whites are privileged or whether diversity makes the country stronger are part of a person's racial ideology.'

Integration was a term that rose to the fore amid the threat of terrorism but has since receded into the policy background. Not just receding from public view but the term itself became tinged with connotations of racism among ethnic groups, especially Muslims, along with large sections of the left.

Even local versions of the conservative party retreated from promoting integration too enthusiastically, mixing any policies around learning English or citizenship classes with proclamations of Australia's success in integrating migrants.

As someone of Bangladeshi-Muslim background, debates around terms like multiculturalism were ubiquitous in dinner parties, mosques and among folk that would otherwise rarely talk about politics. It defined an era and politicised a generation of Muslims worldwide. The connotation of the term integration among Muslims was a thinly veiled signal that they weren't Australian enough. As a result, the policy area has become a no go zone for fear of being called racist or Islamophobic.

In the 1950s in the early stages of mass migration, there was an onus on immigrants to assimilate. In other words there was a responsibility for newcomers to conform to the dominant national culture. This policy encouraged newcomers to shed their pre-existing cultural identities to fit in better with their new community. Modern ideas of integration sees immigrants and host societies co-operating to form a supportive base for the entire population. This is partly based on the influential ideas of Canadian social scientist John Berry's acculturation model, which argues integration policies are best seen as a two way street in which both the host and migrant

community learn and adapt to each other.

Australia derived their integration practices largely from Britain, where after the Second World War attitudes towards incorporating new migrants overlapped with state efforts to expand the social safety net and widen civil rights protections.

In Britain anti-discrimination policies were enacted in the 1960s as migration, and associated racial prejudice, from former colonies accelerated. Giving new migrants access to employment, health care and educational services are designed to help migrants adapt.

These integration frameworks encouraged immigrants to preserve their cultural identities, at least to a point. The change in thinking was best encapsulated by Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingilualism and Biculturalism in 1969 which stated that 'severing an immigrant from his/her roots could destroy an aspect of his personality and deprive society of some of the values he can bring to it.'

While there is no definitive index or measure for integration, indicators of integration include citizens' views on trust of their neighbours, their sense of belonging, and their civic and political participation.

On measures of education Australia does especially well, with new migrants doing at least as well as the broader population. Certain groups such as those of Asian origin do better. Others such as Pacific Islander groups do worse. There are of course other dimensions than ethnicity contributing to this, such as socio-economics.

In a paper for the Centre for Independent Studies by Oliver Hartwich, the variable of education was examined as a potential marker of success in Australia, but not necessarily with the expected results. Hartwich makes reference to a recent study published in the American Sociological Review that came to a less flattering conclusion:

'To analyze the effects of policies regulating immigration, we focused on traditional immigrant-receiving countries (i.e. Australia and New Zealand). In these countries, immigrant children perform better at school. We found that composition effects from restrictive immigration policies explain this better performance. Our analyses do not support the hypothesis that the better performance of immigrant children in traditional immigration countries can be explained by a more receptive attitude toward immigrants in these countries, nor by education policies specifically designed to meet the needs of immigrant children.'

This is still a marker of success, but the American research suggests it is not because Australia does anything in an active way to integrate migrants. It is the selection criteria above all else that has driven Australia's success story. The highly skilled migrants we select tend to be also more ambitious for their children. This quasi-success can lead to a certain level of inertia around the topic of doing anything interventionist once migrants have arrived.

Other countries in Europe especially have been less selective in their immigration intake. Who

could forget Angela Merkel's embrace of Syrian refugees at the height of the conflict in 2015, emotionally sparked by images of a dead child on the beach. There were more than five million people who sought asylum in the EU from 2015 to 2020. Of this number just over forty percent did so in Germany cementing the country as far and away the largest destination for refugees in Europe. At the time she uttered the words, 'Wir schaffen das' — we can manage it.

The German equivalent of the Department of Immigration is called the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). Their figures illustrate that just over half of all refugees found fixed employment after five years. But defining exactly how well a refugee has integrated is much tougher, with most living on the fringes of German society.

Meanwhile in America, there is considerable debate about altering their immigration policy. Immigration policy expert and Georgetown Professor Justin Gist argues America has fallen behind some of the trends around the world regarding immigration policy.

'We found that the world has largely shifted to immigration policy as an economic instrument than a statement of values. These policies reflect the logic of a global 'gig economy' that views people as commodities to recruit, employ and dismiss at will. In contrast, U.S. regulations emphasize admissions for the purpose of family reunification, limit the admission of highly skilled migrants, limit temporary migration, and—relative to other countries—facilitate access to American citizenship.'

An interesting point that Gist makes is that few countries incorporate immigration as a statement of values, yet this is exactly what the era of terrorism raised. There has been a push by many, especially on the American right, to implement a skills based entry system similar to Australia and Canada. This is resisted by many on the grounds of humanity but also the self image of America as being open to all, including the world's tired and poor, in the words of the sacred sonnet by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

There is no question there is inspiration in this, but America has the world's most illegal immigrants, significantly worse social mobility than Australia, and large pockets of ethnic underclass scattered across its major cities. But what it does have a strong civic identity, as compared to the more pronounced cultural identities in mainland Europe. It is much more difficult to feel German as a second or third generation Turk, or French as an immigrant Moroccan than it is to identity as Asian-American for example.

These are exactly the types of problems Australia has managed to avoid. Like so many aspects of Australia, we sit neatly between the welfare states of Europe and the more 'laissez-faire' economies of Anglo-America. In areas of national identity, we are a much younger country than Britain or the United States and, as events since the Queen's death have shown, are still in the process of working out our relationship to the motherland.

But our relative strengths in terms of great prosperity, an inclusive, egalitarian culture and fussy migrant selection conceals an apparent disinterest in crafting a stronger, civic identity, a critical requirement emerging from the terrorism age.

Terrorism, especially the home grown variety, illustrated that some people could be outwardly well integrated, economically secure, speaking and acting much like the majority population, yet their emotional ties could be linked to strong, supra-national identities which were characterised by contempt towards the host population and culture.

Terrorism was a kind of culmination of the driving force within politics which theorists like Francis Fukuyama identify as the concept of 'thymos', translating in the classical Greek as 'spirit'' but can be best seen in modern terms as dignity. This is the animating energy around what we call identity politics.

There is a strong psychological edge to the political as it elevates the inner self, desires and the subjective experience. This is especially true if you are deemed to be part of a marginalised group, creating a kind of status competition for victimhood.

Such identity politics has made it much more difficult to build identities accessible to large, diverse groups. There is a greater priority given to the lived experience of identity groups, one that privileges the emotional world of the inner self over reasoned deliberation.

This reaches a level among certain strands of feminism or racial movements that argue their marginalised group have their own consciousness that require accommodating. By this reckoning creating a civic equality before the law is inadequate as there must be a celebration and accommodation of intrinsic differences.

A weakness of liberalism which sees society as a collection of individuals acting with reasoned autonomy is that it can minimise the desire for belonging, a space the politics of identity fills.

The recent Jobs and Skills Summit of the federal Labor government was significant as it pointed to a return to the politics of capital versus labour. Regardless of where one lies on the debate, it is a welcome change from the politics of identity. The left has struggled to reinvent itself economically in the wake of the destruction of policies tied to radical egalitarianism such as Marxism, especially while the working classes have gotten richer and largely resemble the bulk of the middle classes. This struggle is revealed in an analysis of the outcomes of the 2022 federal election undertaken by the Institute of Affairs which shows that the majority of the thirty seats classified as 'elite' (the top 20 per cent of seats according to household wealth) were won by the ALP.

A new Labor government has already flagged changes to immigration policy, while the Minister for Home Affairs, has called for a greater priority towards ensuring migrants have a pathway towards permanent residency, partly to turn over the growth in temporary migrants under successive conservative governments.

Schools have always been a critical part of Australia's successful integration story. Integration is about where successive generations are at compared with local averages. Australia has an especially good history regarding mixed marriage too. Macdonald says Australia has form in this category, noting that even in our White Australia past we had higher rates of intermarriage among

Catholics and Protestants that the rest of the Anglo-American world. This is in contrast to Britain where South Asians in particular have especially low rates of marriage outside of their ethnic groups. A 2011 study found 60 percent of Australians intermarry in the second generation. In America it was 40 percent. Even in Canada, often touted for its multicultural success, the intermarriage rate was on 22 percent.

Importantly the evidence suggests most minorities do not wish to self-segregate and usually move in search of better housing and schools in striving for upward mobility. However migrants, even when they do move, are much more likely to do so into already diverse areas. This gives insight into the growing urban/rural fracture.

Rural areas are likely to have largely white populations with relatively limited contact with ethnic groups. They are then most likely to feel a level of cultural anxiety. This also have overlaps with the notion of white flight, where big cities become increasingly filled with immigrants, knowledge workers and essential service staff while others undertake sea or tree changes to regional areas. Minorities right across the Western world are less likely to settle in rural areas.

As a result, cities become highly diverse with their politics largely on the left and the attachment to national traditions becomes weaker. Meanwhile regional areas become less diverse, with a stronger attachment to national traditions and values. The result is that there are fewer institutions bringing us together. It is tougher to undertake collective sacrifices in the realm of policy.

Towns like Shepparton in Victoria who have been able to attract large numbers of non-white migrants and programs such as the Migration Council that attempt to link refugees in cities to employers in rural areas have been successful in bucking these trends.

Another important trend that may hamper healthy integration was explored by Jon Yates in ‘Fractured’ where he highlights how even a small preference for choosing those quite similar to ourselves, over a long period of time, can lead to strong levels of segregation.

There are similar trends in how we associate in churches, community groups and cultural consumption. Yates shows that high levels of segregation inhibits economic growth, innovation and can reduce overall levels of health. Some of this was demonstrated in the disproportionate impacts of Covid.

A surprising aspect of Yates’s analysis was the finding that cities, for all their diversity, can encourage us to hunker down. This is especially true in our current times of rapid change. We can freely exercise and often choose to be with people like us, even as we move among so many outwardly different, like ships in the night.

It is not possible to abandon the notion of identity which is critical to the way people see themselves. Modern life, underpinned by communications technologies, is characterised by rapid change and repeated choices. Liberal democracy is built on individuals’ right to build one’s life.

But the sheer degree of change, freedom and choice can leave people unmoored searching for

structured community. This makes people innately vulnerable to those who are able to speak to them elevating their sense of being part of an important, sometimes unrecognised group.

But all of us have multiple identities shaped by occupation, race, nationality or hobbies. The modern challenge of multicultural democracies like Australia is to build broad, integrative identities, making it less attractive to splinter off into smaller divisions. As Francis Fukuyama writes in a Foreign Affairs essay, 'Against Identity Politics'. 'Lived experience can become something that connects individuals to people unlike themselves'.

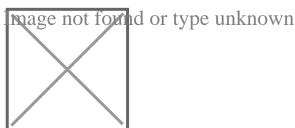
The creedal national identities can't be built around personal characteristics, ethnicity or religious convictions. While past influences need to be acknowledged, core values and beliefs must be paramount.

Public policy can then be used to assimilate newcomers into such ideals. Integration into a national culture becomes more difficult as the numbers of immigrants rise relative to the native population. As specific communities become larger, they can become more self sufficient and have lesser need to connect to groups outside of themselves. It becomes tougher to rally the entire community around policy areas such as climate change, the NDIS, or aged care spending that require shared national sacrifice.

In spite of the various battlefronts, the bigger war is around building a sense of pride and belonging around an inclusive national story. This is especially difficult in a country like Australia where there is a stigma around patriotism.

But the death of the Queen may provide the fertile ground to do just that. While some of it may be centred around any future republic, this may provide an excuse to do the necessary outpouring around traits like an unique, larrikin egalitarianism, ties to a rugged landscape and an inspiring story of a country rising from modest beginnings to become the most peaceful, prosperous place on earth.

This article is from Volume 1 of Essays for Australia 2023 and is written by Dr Tanveer Ahmed. To find out more, head to ipa.org.au/essays.



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