Australians' Attitudes to Migration

BOB BIRRELL AND KATHARINE BETTS

SINCE the early 1970s, a majority of Australians have favoured a reduction in Australia's immigration programme or no increase. Through most of this period the largest group was those who wanted to see a reduction. The latest opinion poll on the question (September 2001) shows that 41 per cent think that the we are bringing in too many immigrants, 44 per cent think that the current numbers are about right and 10 per cent think that the numbers are too low. Figure 1 shows that the 41 per cent figure is low relative to earlier polls. It probably reflects a recognition that since coming into office the Coalition Government has tightened the intake. It may also reflect the relatively buoyant state of Australia's labour market.

There are a variety of factors shaping this negative orientation. They include doubts about the alleged economic benefits of immigration and, in some quarters, fears about the long-term environmental implications of population expansion. But overriding these concerns are some much deeper worries about how immigration is affecting Australia's social make-up and identity. It is these concerns which make immigration such a hot issue in Australian politics.
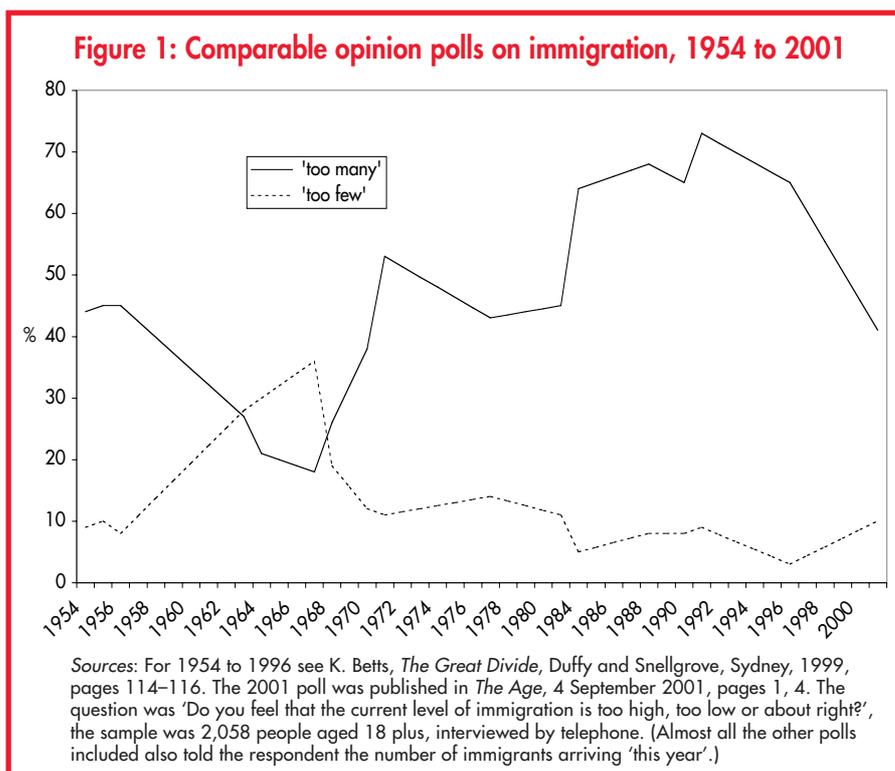
Figure 1 shows that Australians are less dissatisfied with immigration policy today than they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but that, unlike the mid-1960s, there is virtually no constituency for a larger intake. It is true that persons born overseas, particularly in non-English-speaking-backgrounds (NESB) are more favourably disposed towards high migration. But few seem prepared to vote for political parties seeking their support on the immigration issue. This is evident from the results of the November 2001 election. The Howard Government, as we all know, took a strong stand on border control. Ethnic and liberal humanitarian leaders alike cast this stance as akin to playing the race or anti-immigration card. If there were a constituency of NESB origin Australians uneasy about their status in Australia and, on this account, likely to interpret the tough border-control measures as a covert attack on them, one would expect them to vote accordingly.

The Unity Party offered itself as a political focus of these concerns in Melbourne and Sydney electorates with high migrant concentrations. It conspicuously failed, however, to attract voters, migrant or otherwise. It lost more than half its vote between the 1998 and 2001 elections, including in electorates such as Fowler and Reid in Sydney where migrants (including recent arrivals to Australia) make up a high proportion of voters. Though Labor won easily in these electorates, there was actually a substantial swing to the Coalition on a two-party-preferred basis. The only evidence of any support for open borders in the 2001 election was that registered by the Greens, but that support was on a small scale and occurred primarily in more middle-class electorates.

Why is this so? Australians are much like their counterparts in

Figure 1: Comparable opinion polls on immigration, 1954 to 2001

Sources: For 1954 to 1996 see K. Betts, *The Great Divide*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, pages 114–116. The 2001 poll was published in *The Age*, 4 September 2001, pages 1, 4. The question was 'Do you feel that the current level of immigration is too high, too low or about right?', the sample was 2,058 people aged 18 plus, interviewed by telephone. (Almost all the other polls included also told the respondent the number of immigrants arriving 'this year'.)

Western Europe. Since the early 1970s, not one Western European Government has kept a migration programme in place (whether on a temporary or permanent basis). None provide for family reunion except for spouses and dependent children. This is largely because of the social tensions stemming from the aftermath of the 'guest worker' era of the 1950s and 1960s. Most Western European nations had taken large numbers of culturally distinct peoples during this era, including Turks in Germany, North African Muslims in France, and former colonials from India, Africa and the West Indies in Britain. In each instance, this prompted popular worries about the ways migrants were allegedly reshaping the social fabric of their society and about related national identity issues. The outcome was that this removed any prospect of an active immigration programme from the political agenda throughout Western Europe.

There are parallels and differences with Australia. Government and élite support for multiculturalism has made the expression of blatant hostility to migrants on cultural and racial grounds (such as that voiced by the *Front National* in France) illegitimate here. Most Australians now agree that people should not suffer prejudice on account of their religion or ethnic background. But equally, as Table 1 shows, most Australians also expect migrants to embrace their new home and to 'do in Rome as the Romans do'.

Despite nearly 20 years of official multiculturalism, most Australians in 1994 wanted migrants to 'live like the majority'. This is true even of most migrants. The only group to show substantial enthusiasm for a form of (hard) multiculturalism, in which ethnic communities are sustained across the generations, were people with a university degree. Public commentary which insists that ethnic diversity is good in and of itself has very limited support; rather than delighting in this diversity most Australians fear that it leads to national division. There is, however, broad support for (soft) multiculturalism whereby migrants are encouraged to integrate within mainstream Australian society free of any prejudice associated with their cultural or birthplace backgrounds.

The pattern of immigration to Australia over the last couple of decades has added to fears about hard multiculturalism. Since the early 1980s, more than half the net migration to Australia has been from Asian and Middle Eastern sources. The people entering Australia from these countries have settled overwhelmingly in Sydney and Melbourne. At the same time, this newer stream of migration has been accompanied (particularly in the 1980s) by a militant, hard form of multiculturalism, which proposes to recast Australia as a community of communities. As a consequence, immigration and multiculturalism tend to be seen as synonymous. In reality it is very unlikely that ethnic communities will be reproduced across the generations, as some hard multiculturalists would like. This is because there is a high degree of intermixing and intermarriage amongst most ethnic groups. Nevertheless, recent migrant settlement patterns give some credibility to critics who assert that we are becoming increasingly divided along ethnic lines.

The greatest challenge is in Sydney—the focal point of the new migration stream. By 1996, 32 per cent of all residents of Sydney were born overseas. A third of these, or 10 per cent of Sydney's total population, were born in Asia. The reasons for this outcome are the concentrated patterns of settlement among new arrivals. By 1996, 73 per cent of all persons in Australia who were born in the Lebanon were living in Sydney, as were 56 per cent of all persons born in China, 54 per cent of the Hong Kong-born, and 39 per cent of the Vietnam-born. Most of these people (particularly those with limited financial resources) were settled in the poorer South-Western suburbs of Sydney. In several of these, including Auburn, Canterbury and Fairfield, 70 per cent of the adult population was overseas-born by 1996, with the great majority of these coming from NESB backgrounds.[1]

It may be, as with past settlement patterns of Southern Europeans in Melbourne and Sydney, that some of these concentrations will disperse. Nevertheless, the pattern described above is plain to see, and not just for

---

Table 1: Attitudes to multiculturalism, sample grouped by education and birthplace, May 1994 (percentages)

'Which of these statements comes closest to your view? "We should welcome and respect migrants who have different ways of living and behaving" or "Migrants should learn to live and behave like the majority of Australians do"?'

	Respect different ways of living	Migrants should live like the majority	Don't know or no response	Total
Whole sample	35	61	4	100
Education				
non-university	26	70	4	100
University	58	39	3	100
Birthplace				
Australia	34	62	4	100
not Australia	39	57	4	100

Source: Irving Saulwick and Associates, reproduced in Betts, *op. cit.*, page 130.

REVIEW

those who live in Sydney. Recently they have been accompanied by a series of incidents allegedly involving criminal ethic gangs. These developments have engaged popular fears that immigration and multiculturalism are turning Australia into a series of communities divided on ethnic lines. This is one reason why immigration is so controversial in Sydney. It also helps to explain the hitherto unheard of situation in post-War Australian State politics where a Premier (in this case Bob Carr) has no qualms about stating an uncompromising low-migration stance.

While these concerns are evident, it is hard to see any Australian Government embracing an immigration policy like that currently pressed by elements of the business community. In effect they want to quadruple the annual net intake so that Australia can approach 50 million by the middle of this century.[2] Immigration on this scale would have to be drawn from the newer Asian and Middle Eastern sources. It would imply an even greater ethnic transformation of Australia's major cities, with all the challenges to national identity accompanying such changes.

The business community (and worried liberal humanitarians) appears to have difficulty understanding why Australians feel so threatened. In our view, the core issue concerns conceptions of community. Most Australians have a sense that they belong to a distinctive national community; they identify with this community and are proud to belong to it. Bloodlines do not come into this; immigrants who want to join the team are accepted. Nonetheless, this sense of belonging has a quasi-ethnic feel to it, which is another way of saying that it is an affair of the heart as much as of the head.

Successful business people, and many high-level public servants (and academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences), focus on an international or cosmopolitan community. Our interpretation of the opinion poll data indicates that mainstream Australians do not. They do not see themselves as working overseas, or as having business contacts and colleagues in other countries, or caring about the opinion of foreign élites. Australia is their 'community of fate' and because of this, its boundaries are important to them.

It is a matter of some urgency for this majority that their national community remains meaningful and that it is seen to be operating as a unit capable of acting on their behalf. High migration, combined with élite celebration of cultural diversity, appear to be regarded by many Australians as a direct challenge to any notion of community which emphasizes what is shared in common. Unregulated migration of people arriving uninvited and demanding to be accommodated as refugees is another direct challenge. Hard multiculturalism implies that being an Australian is losing its meaning, while unregulated immigration implies that their community has no boundaries and has lost the capacity to determine its membership.

NOTES

1 For details, see Bob Birrell and Byung-Soo Seol, 'Sydney's ethnic underclass', *People and Place*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1998.

2 Rebecca Kippen and Peter McDonald calculate that if Australia were to reach 50 million people by 2050, net migration would have to rise to 460,000 per annum immediately, and if we were to stabilize at 50 million it would then have to stop. See 'Achieving population targets for Australia: an analysis of the options', *People and Place*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1998, pages 11–23. Net overseas migration for 1999–2000 was 99,000.

Bob Birrell is Director of the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University. Katharine Betts is Associate Professor of Sociology at Swinburne University.

I P A

Musing…
Brain Gain not Drain
by MIKE NAHAN

Is Australia suffering from a brain drain? Not according to the data.

Although we frequently hear laments about the loss of highly skilled Australians in search of work, the fact is that, on aggregate, Australia is experiencing a very large brain *gain*.

Over the five years to 1999–2000, 94,130 Australian residents with professional qualifications departed our shores, with the United Kingdom being far and away the main destination, followed by the USA, Singapore and Hong Kong. Although this sounds like a large number, it accounts for less than two per cent of all professionals working in Australia.

Characteristically, departing Australian professionals do not stay overseas for good, indeed most return within a couple of years.

During this five-year period, 190,656 professionals came to work in Australia. As a result, Australia experienced a net gain of 96,526 skilled professionals. Indeed, Australia experienced a net gain in every professional category and in each of five years, the only exception being natural and physical science professionals, for which there was a net loss of 213 over the period.

Unlike departing professionals, professionals coming to work in Australia tend to stay—often for good.

Australia: Departures and Arrival of Professionals
(1995-96 through 1999-2000)

Departures	94,130
Arrivals	190,656
Net Gain	**96,526**

Source: B Birrell, I. Dobson, V. Rapson, and T.F. Smith, *Skilled Labour: Gains and Losses*, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, July 2001.