

ETHNICITY AND IMMIGRATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

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POVZETEK

NARODNOSTNA PRIPADNOST IN IMIGRACIJSKA POLITIKA V SODOBNI AVSTRALJI

Raziskane so sodobne zakonitosti v etnični sestavi prebivalstva, ki se odloča za selitev v Avstralijo. Razprava obravnava spremembe, ki so posledice nastajanja Nove globalne ureditve, planetarne možnosti udejanja lastnih želja ter poglobljene, geopolitične povezave med Avstralijo in Azijo.

Ethnicity has always been an important factor, explicit or implicit, in immigration policies. This is shown particularly clearly in the three countries of the world that have maintained for two centuries expansionary policies of immigration for *settlement*, whereby immigrants acquire a range of rights on entry and quickly become eligible for citizenship. The rationale for such settlement-immigration policies in Australia and Canada – and with some qualifications also in the United States – lies in the perceived potential of countries rich in natural resources but short of people. Larger populations have been actively sought as development strategies – to achieve economies of scale in resource development, market enhancement and services provision. In addition, both Canada and Australia have used immigration to consolidate national sovereignty. In Canada, this has been in response to the cultural, demographic and economic dominance of the adjacent United States. In Australia, the post-World War Two slogan ‘Populate or Perish’ illustrates the acute fears then about Australia’s vulnerability to invasion by the ‘Yellow Peril’ of densely peopled Asia – whether from Japan in the 1940s or China and Indonesia subsequently.

The role of ethnicity in immigration policy has evolved with remarkable similarity in all three countries. All maintained and rigidly enforced until the 1960s ethnically-discriminatory selection policies that virtually excluded non-European immigrants; all dismantled such policies by the early 1970s in response to pressures, grounded in arguments of equity and human rights, from newly-independent, Third World countries; and all by the 1980s had more than three quarters of their immigrants coming from the Third World and less than a quarter from Europe. In many

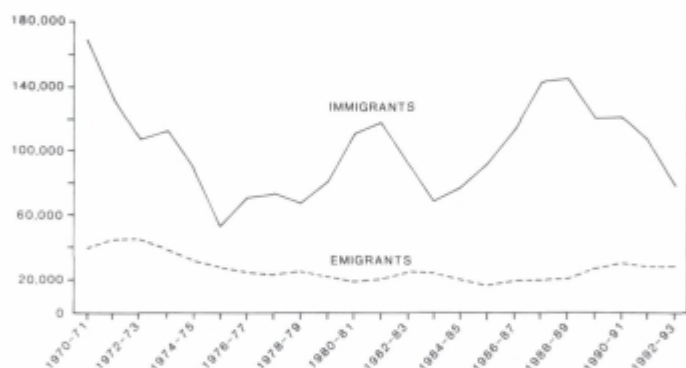
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ways, however, ethnicity still remains, although unofficially, an important consideration in the immigration policies and practices of all three countries, as this case study of Australia will demonstrate.

The 'White Australia' Policy

Since the beginnings of British colonial settlement in the late eighteenth century, Australia developed as a white settler society closely linked culturally, politically and economically to Britain. The rigid exclusion of non-whites, grounded in racist theory, meant that even the Asian wives of Australian soldiers serving overseas were excluded from entry until well into the 1950s.

The 1947 census showed Australia to be one of the most monocultural societies in the world. Aboriginals comprised less than 1% of the population, and those of Asian descent even less. The population was 99% white and 96% of British stock. The major cultural differentiation was simply between Catholics and Protestants (Jupp, 1991).



This monolithic society began to change rapidly from the late 1940s as labour demand surged in Australia, particularly in its heavily-protected manufacturing sector, at a time when full employment in Britain curtailed the traditional supply of preferred immigrants. For the first time, immigrants were actively recruited from outside Britain, but still only white Europeans. The first recruitment was of refugees and displaced persons in central and eastern Europe in the years immediately following the Second World War. Then, in the 1950s, as this source dried up and as emigration from northern Europe fell away with economic growth, Australia turned – with some reluctance and with little of the financial assistance granted to British and northern European immigrants – to southern Europe, particularly Italy, Greece, Malta and Yugoslavia. The crucial cultural significance of these two post-war immigration waves was in demonstrating to Australian policymakers that large communities of

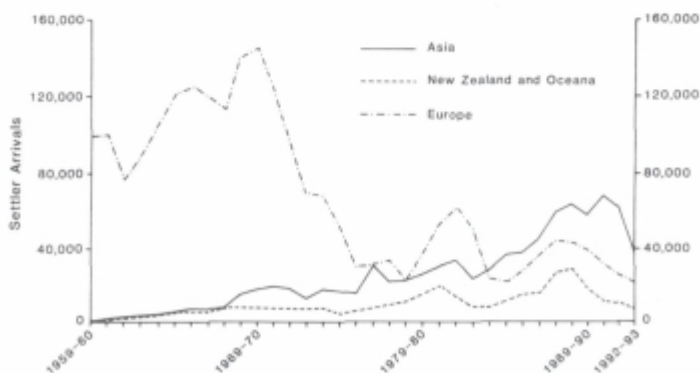
non English-speaking immigrants could be accommodated successfully with social friction. The exclusive British connection had been broken.

Towards Multiculturalism

The 'White Australia' policy was beginning to crack by the 1960s. Racist claims for genetic superiority had been discredited by the collapse of Nazism and the economic rise of Japan; and newly independent governments in Asia protested vociferously about racist exclusion policies. Minor concessions on entry were granted almost annually in the 1960s in an incrementalist approach which gradually modified the exclusion policy without prompting popular protest within Australia. The formal abolition of the traditional policy had to await the advent of the socially progressive Whitlam government, which declared in 1973 that future admissions would totally ignore the racial, ethnic or religious background of applicants.

At the very same time, the Whitlam government followed the lead of Canada in repudiating assimilationism and espousing multiculturalism, which welcomes the increased diversity of society as a cultural enrichment. There has not been any legislative basis to multiculturalism, but rather a series of initiatives, such as preventing ethnic discrimination, promoting immigrant welfare by subsidising ethnic organisations, and developing the Special Broadcasting Service for ethnic-minority television and radio programmes. However, the overall emphasis of multiculturalism has been on social justice and equity rather than on the maintenance of minority languages and cultures (Castles, 1990, 1992).

With the emergence of New Right ideologies in the 1980s, as Australia became strongly influenced by Reaganism and Thatcherism, multicultural programmes have come under increasing attack as interventionist social engineering and as unjustifiable expenditure in hard economic times (Blainey, 1984). Much of this concern stems from the appreciable Asianisation of immigration in the last two decades:



The Asianisation of Immigration

Causes

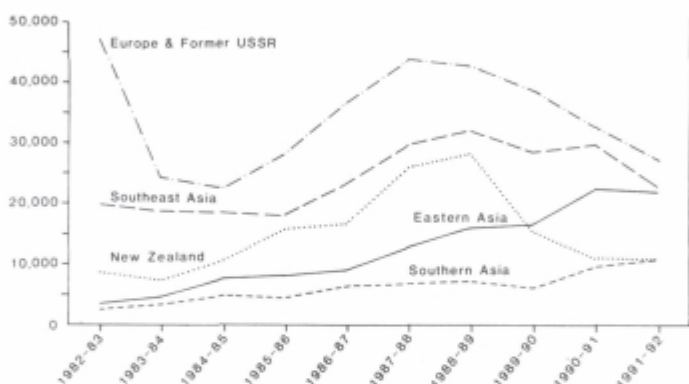
Figures 1 and 2 show that in the 1970s the numbers of immigrants fell sharply as economic conditions deteriorated in Australia but improved in southern Europe, which had been the dominant source of the 1960s immigrant waves. At the same time, the liberalisation of immigrant selection allowed the Asian proportion of immigrants to grow from a mere 2% in the 1960s to 30% in the early 1980s and 40% in the late 1980s (throughout this paper, 'Asia' is taken to exclude the Middle East and the former USSR).

New regional trading and political alliances have been emerging in the modern world. Australia's traditionally close economic and diplomatic links with Britain, Europe and the United States have been declining as those with Asia have been growing (Chalkley and Winchester, 1991). Partly this reflects the trading exclusions of the European Community and the diminishing strategic value of Oceania to the United States in the post-Cold War period. Additionally, there are the positive attractions to Australia of economic linkages to some of the world's largest markets and most buoyant economies in eastern Asia. The Australian establishment regards Asia no longer as a military and demographic threat but rather as an economic opportunity. Indeed, *The Economist* (4 April, 1992) argues that 'Australia's main task of this decade is to fit into Asia'. Certainly the complementarity of Australian and Asian economies is advantageous, with the mineral, agricultural, recreational and educational resources of Australia being increasingly sought by densely peopled Asian neighbours. Accordingly, between 1970 and 1991, the proportion of Australian exports going to Asia grew from 49 per cent to 67 per cent, while those to western Europe dropped from 23 per cent to 15 per cent. Similarly, the considerable growth in Australia of overseas students (10,000 in 1983; 39,500 in 1993) and overseas tourists has largely been from Asia.

Some Asian governments and businesses, however, remain sceptical about Australia's new-found warmth and good intentions. They need to be convinced that Australia is no longer a white, isolationist, racist society; and some governments (China, Malaysia, Indonesia) have been offended by Australian criticisms of their human rights records. In these circumstances, one of the more obvious ways in which Australia can demonstrate its multi-cultural claims and its good-neighbour intentions is by willingly accepting a predominantly Asian immigrant flow. This can be done relatively painlessly - indeed, self interestedly - when one considers the large numbers of well-educated and often English-speaking prospective migrants in several Asian countries who cannot be absorbed in their national economies at a level they think appropriate to their skills and aspirations (Hugo, 1991). Moreover, such mi-

grants can provide some of the key human resources to facilitate trading relations between Australian and Asian businesses.

A secondary cause of the Asian inflow has been the refugee crisis in Vietnam. Australia has been mindful of its international responsibilities as a civilised, democratic and relatively affluent country, reserving a significant proportion of its immigrant intake for refugees and those of comparable status (10–18% in the early 1990s). The regional setting – and a feeling of some responsibility and/or guilt as an active participant in the Vietnam War – has ensured that the humanitarian inflow in the last 20 years has been dominated by the Vietnamese, a significant proportion of them arriving via the Hong Kong detention camps.



Regional Origins

The extent and regional origin of the Asian intake is shown in Figure 3. In the decade 1991–92 the number of Asian countries in the top ten sources of immigrants rose from four to eight. Figure 3 shows that southern Asia, with some of the continent's poorest and largest populations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), has provided only small numbers of immigrants. South East Asia has been the leading source (dominantly Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines), but the major recent growth has been from eastern Asia (in order: Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, South Korea).

This suggests that, with the sole exception of Vietnamese refugees, Australia has been increasingly targeting its intake on countries that can be expected to deliver relatively skilled, well-educated and often English-speaking migrants. The populations in several of these countries are well regarded for the achievement ethos thought to characterise the wider Chinese culture realm (even 34 per cent of the Vietnamese-born at the 1986 Australian census stated Chinese ancestry). Accordingly, a massive 71 per cent of immigrants from eastern Asia in 1991–92 entered

under the employment skills category, compared with 33 per cent of all other visaed immigrants (New Zealand citizens can enter freely for settlement, without the need for migrant visas). One sub-division of the employment skills category is business skills, where applicants are assessed on business experience, age, English-language ability and capital assets. Eastern Asia as a whole (not simply Hong Kong) has dominated this sub-division, providing 79 per cent of the 6400 admitted in 1991–92.

Acceptability

There is every sign that the Asianisation of Australian immigration is set to continue, with its effect on the ethnic composition of the Australian population accentuated by a low return-migration rate; only 12 per cent of the intendedly permanent departures from Australia in 1991–92 (excluding those of Australian birth) were Asian-born. Accordingly, projections made on the basis of late 1980s levels of immigration, emigration, fertility and mortality suggest that the Asian-born population of Australia would rise from 2.6 per cent in 1986 to 7.2 per cent in 2021 (Bureau of Immigration Research, 1991); the proportion by ethnic group would be much higher, since it would incorporate the Australian-born children of Asian parents.

Until the 1960s most Australians believed that non-white immigration would lead to social disharmony and the breakdown of national identity (Castles, 1992), so that the modern Asianisation of immigration and official espousal of multiculturalism have naturally attracted popular concern, especially in the context of a deteriorating economy from the late 1980s. Nevertheless, Far Right groups like the Australian Nationalist Movement and the League of Rights enjoy much less support than their counterparts in western Europe, and any taint of racism can seriously damage national politicians, as evidenced by the overthrow of the Liberal Party leader, John Howard, in 1988.

Australian cities have been spared ethnic violence and race riots. The main reason must be the wide variety of national origins among Asian immigrants, with no visibly monolithic, immigrant concentrations comparable to American, British or French cities (Grimes, 1993). Another factor is that the great majority of immigrants, in contrast to those in western Europe, quickly become citizens, giving them access to full political rights. This reduces marginalisation and residential concentration. The one exception has been the Vietnamese, who are concentrated in unregulated, exploitable activities like the outworker garment trade in areas like Cabramatta in Sydney (Burnley, 1989; Wilson, 1990). A major problem in 1989–91 was that the rate of inflow from Vietnam increased appreciably, essentially because of family reunion rights, at the very time when Australian unemployment was rising sharply. This problem is now receding as most of the close relatives of refugees have already entered, and more distant relatives are subject to increasingly rigorous, skills-based

selection procedures. Thus the Vietnamese intake in July–December 1992 was less than half that in recent comparable periods.

Overall, then, the growing Asianisation of immigration has been tolerated by wider Australian society. With the partial exception of the Vietnamese, acceptability has been eased by a diversity of origins and a relatively skilled intake. In reality, however, the Asianisation of immigration has been rather less liberal than it appears. There are relatively few immigrants from the poorer populations of southern Asia, and one doubts if Australian society, given its attitudes towards its aboriginal population, could cope with any significant black immigration. Less than 3 per cent of immigrants in 1991–92 were from sub-Saharan Africa, and even half of these were from white South Africa.

Immigration Implications of Current Crises in Eastern Europe

The acute geo-political disorder in several parts of the post-Cold War world has undoubtedly increased pressures for both legal and illegal immigration, even in relatively remote destinations. Australia had significant migration linkages with eastern Europe between the Second World War and the 1960s, so that Australia is likely to provide pools of co-ethnic sympathisers and sponsors for those now fleeing the region. The strength of these ethnic loyalties is illustrated by well-supported soccer teams like Sydney Croatia and Wollongong Macedonia and by highly partisan letters in the Australian press on the Balkans crisis. Croatians, in particular, have been very successful in passing on their language and traditions to locally-born descendants. On the other hand, migration sponsorship opportunities are reduced by the fact that many of the earlier immigrants from Yugoslavia are concentrated in the very sectors, like Wollongong's steel industry, that have suffered most from restructuring and recession (Morrissey, Mitchell and Dibden, 1992).

What is the evidence for Australia now accepting people displaced by very recent geo-political disorders? Between July 1992 and March 1993, Vietnam was supplanted for the first time in almost twenty years as the leading origin of humanitarian immigrants. Of those permitted to enter in this category, 25% came from former Yugoslavia, 17% from the former USSR, 13% from Iraq and 15% from Vietnam. Australia is, therefore, undoubtedly subject to pressures from the increasing globalisation of refugee flows. However, the likelihood of any significant increase in humanitarian-category places has to be assessed within the context of an increasingly pro-skills selection policy at a time when a combination of recessionary and environmental concerns (Fincher, 1991; Jones, 1992) has led to deep cuts in the Australian immigration programme; overall immigration targets have been reduced from 140,000 for 1989–90 to 76,000 for 1993–94.

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