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Immigration Taking a Long View*

Nancy Viviani

Immigration is once again a topic of current controversy yet five central questions endure over time. These are:

- How big a population for Australia?
- How many migrants?
- How many refugees?
- What should we do about the boats?
- What about settlement policy?

I cannot attempt answers to these questions here but I'll try to put them in some context so you can make up your own mind.

*This essay is an adaptation of a paper first delivered to the Australian Institute of International Affairs.

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How big a population for Australia?

On 22 October 2009 in Brisbane, Ken Henry, the Secretary to the Treasury, said that “our long term projection for Australia’s population had increased from 28.5 million in 2047 to more than 35 million in 2049” (Henry 2009, p.6). When asked about this the Prime Minister immediately made no apology, said he wanted a big population for Australia and backed the 35 million figure. As this all went on while the boat people swamped the media, there was very little serious discussion of the substance of Henry’s paper or the issues attached to such a big increase in population, not to mention the ‘more than’ attached to the 35 million. Our present population is around 22 million, so Henry is projecting an increase of 13 million people or 60 per cent over the next 40 years. A recent poll showed that 40 per cent of respondents thought 35 million by mid century was too many.

Henry raised some serious arguments in support of this increase. He said that the well understood ageing of the population – the baby boomers going into retirement – would mean a fall in the workplace participation rate and thus a decline in future per capita output growth. A rising population from natural increase (remember Peter Costello’s “one for the country”?) and increased migration would offset this, though there is quite a bit of scepticism around as to whether migration, with its particular age profile has much impact on an ageing population over time as compared to more babies. Henry raised all the issues of the politics of the environment, the problems of infrastructure, the employment issues, and the problems of our cities: doubling Brisbane’s population in 40 years for example – but not the social impact of transforming our cities and people.

The clincher however in Henry’s speech, is the impact of the huge growth projected for our trade with China and India. They have a long way to go in catching up with us in per capita income terms, so the resources trade will grow exponentially for a long time, other things being equal. We will then have a two speed economy in which the share of manufacturing shrinks further over time, real wages stagnate (as they have over the last decade) or fall, and labour productivity declines. One way of managing these structural changes is to increase skilled migration. This leads to higher workforce participation and it changes the dynamics of the structural adjustment so that the resource sector’s growth has a less negative impact on the manufacturing sector.

This argument is persuasive but it too raises a lot of questions about the costs and benefits of such an apparently unending high migration program. Let me raise just one big issue. If having a highly skilled population is the key to smoothing this big structural adjustment, why do we persist with failing to educate those born in Australia? Around 40 per cent of Australians over 15 have less than 12 years of schooling (Immigration, *The People of Australia*, Table 15), and we are 20 percentage points behind the US, Canada and Germany in the basic qualifications of our workforce (Lindsay Tanner in *The Australian* 5 November 2009). Just catching up with our peers in education achievement would not only take some pressure off the need for accelerating migration and it would pay huge dividends in social terms. Of course this would require real change in our schools, our TAFES and our universities and some substantial investment. Presumably from the point of view of Treasury it is cheaper to free ride on the educational investment in our migrants by other countries.

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There are social limits to migration and one of these is the political and social effects of a relatively low skilled population under pressure from high levels of migration.

How many migrants?

It does seem that the prolonged economic growth which we had before the crash and the government's baby handouts have helped raise the birth rate. Decent maternity and childcare arrangements as in Scandinavia would also help fertility and women's participation in the workforce. Leaving this aside, what has been happening to our migration?

Our biggest migration intakes are still the 1.6 million we took in the fifteen years after the war when we had a population of around 7 million, and the 1.3 million we took in the decade of the '60s (all statistics here from Immigration, various *Fact Sheets*). That was huge by anyone's standards and their settlement has been a success for those who came and for those who were here. This should give us some confidence about big migration numbers and about managing the politics and social impact of that. In the ensuing decades, migration numbers have been around a million a decade, though annual levels have fluctuated from 50 to over 100 000 according largely to economic circumstances.* From the 1970s Asian migration grew gradually to a larger place in the program. More about this later as well.

In the present decade migration numbers have been steadily increasing. Strong economic growth, skills shortages, virtual full employment (and all these roughly maintained despite the global financial crisis and recession), have allowed the government to ratchet up numbers presumably for the reasons outlined

earlier. So in 2005–06 there were 143 000 new settler arrivals from overseas rising to 160 000 in 2008–09, including around 30 000 New Zealanders. Skilled migrants are now generally around two thirds of the program, the remainder family reunion. In addition, the government granted over 60 000 people already in Australia permanent residence status – hence the attraction of studying here. This 224 000 does not include some 15 000 in the refugee and humanitarian category – a number that has not increased since the 1970s. It also does not include around half a million overseas students nor three and half million overseas visitors who we are told generated some \$22 billion in export earnings in 2006–07. If you thought it was getting crowded round here you were right.

If we just take current levels of migration and refugees we are well over 200 000 a year or two million a decade. You can see this is a substantial step up from a million a decade in the past. Of course the economy is much bigger and seems to run better due to all the structural change we had in the 80s and continuing, but the GFC showed how vulnerable even quite well run economies are to earthquakes (see Garnaut 2009). Also, the changes in the future to China's and India's growth will inevitably have their fluctuations. One good thing about migration is that you can adjust the numbers relatively easily if trouble persists as we have done in the past.

Two million migrants a decade makes eight million by 2049, 40 years from now. Mr Henry needs five million more to reach his 35 million target – presumably one part will come from natural increase. Around 40 per cent of Australians think migration is too high (Nielsen 2009). This is down from around 60 per cent in the 1980s and 1990s (Goot 2007), but it is a bedrock of opposition to migration that governments have to bear in mind, particularly as the local effects of more migrants intensify.

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* Figures here are total migrants not net migration.

I want an informed public debate on the various social as well as economic impacts of such major population growth. As Henry acknowledges, the implications of such a rapid and large increase in population are serious and the heavy lifting required by ordinary Australians is likely to be more than in the 1950s and 1960s.

How many refugees?

There are really three issues here, numbers, composition and settlement. There is not much bipartisanship over refugees these days (though we had better policy at times in the past when there was.) But the opposing parties seem to be in de facto agreement that something around 13 to 15 thousand refugee and humanitarian places a year is about right. They don't say this but these are the numbers we have had mostly since the 1970s. I guess the reason these are the numbers is the persistence of adverse public opinion polls. The poll numbers on refugees and asylum seekers are even more polarised than on regular migrants (Nielsen, 2009). These opinions are strongly held, they move a bit with particular issues and governments think, correctly, that this particular mix of opinion is dangerous. So they don't plan to move on refugee numbers much. If they increase them, they will be accused of "sending a signal" – that is, encouraging more boats to leave for Australia. There is no chance of a cut in numbers for that too would cause a political outcry.

My view is that there is room for a gradual increase in refugee and humanitarian numbers, say to 20 000 a year and that this could be achieved without fanfare and when current preoccupations die down as they will. I also think the mix of refugee and humanitarian places – about half and half – seems about right as

given the volatile nature of refugee flows the Minister needs to have a degree of flexibility.

Most of our refugees are taken from camps in Asia and processed by the UNHCR or arrive by air and are processed by us. Only a minority come by boat despite the media hysteria on this issue – there were 60 persons in 2006, 148 in 2007, 161 in 2008 and around 2 000 in 2009 due to the Sri Lankan issue. There is an important difference in the outcomes of applying the refugee definition by the UNHCR and by Australia: typically only 10 to 15 per cent of applicants processed by the UNHCR achieve refugee status while around 60 to 90 per cent of those processed by us do. This is a complex issue and bears on the number of boat arrivals but there is no space to canvass it here.

One of the constraining factors in raising refugee numbers is the extra difficulties of settling refugees as compared to regular migrants. The latter mostly settle themselves. Refugees typically have a small group of well educated alongside a large group of low education, a fractured community basis, they are often divided by religion and social status and traumatised by refugee or detention experiences. In fact, the Rudd government has to be applauded for stopping long term refugee detention (practised previously by both parties in government) because it is self defeating in severely undermining refugees' capacities to settle well. We brought some of those settlement problems on ourselves.

In short, refugee groups have higher unemployment over time, they need more support than other groups, but they generally make good over the long run as the Vietnamese have shown. Sometimes refugees do spectacularly well in this country – like Arvi Parbo or Frank Lowy.

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What should we do about the boats?

Here is a simple table:

2009

TOTAL SETTLER MIGRATION 160 000

REFUGEES 15 000 BOAT PEOPLE 2000

Boat people are around one per cent of total migration and have 100 per cent of the media's attention.

My ten year old grandson told me recently that Australia was the smallest continent and the largest island. I said that while we Australians were all originally boatpeople, we were unique in that our one people controlled the whole continent, and that our country had no land borders with others. Unlike other countries of migration we are able to control our borders almost completely. The USA has more than 12 million illegal immigrants from Mexico and an ongoing problem; Canada has a permanently leaky border with the USA; Europe's borders are virtually open due to the Schengen agreement. Only New Zealand, an island not a continent, resembles us but it too is open to South Pacific migration, and that makes us open to that and other migration.

Being able to control our land borders almost completely has several important implications. It means we must rely on our neighbours, principally Indonesia but also Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, to help protect the approaches to our land borders. Their cooperation in this is essential and in the case of Indonesia has been repeatedly tested over the last 30 years. It ill behoves us to wrongly criticise or arrogantly disrespect Indonesia when it has saved us from very large numbers of Vietnamese boat arrivals in the past and continues to cooperate with us in the current difficult situation. The failure of this Indonesian cooperation at times has been usually a response to our actions hurting their interests.

Our expectation that Indonesia should hold all boats so that we don't have to process them is completely unrealistic. Equally, the idea that boat people should be encouraged to journey on to Australia and not deterred from this is also equally unrealistic. Sometimes the Australian media argues both propositions in the same piece – always with huge headlines.

So here are some propositions to discuss:

First, since we cannot tell beforehand who is a proper refugee and who is not, all claims to refugee status by unauthorised arrivals in Indonesia or Australia need to be tested, against the Convention criteria, as quickly as possible. This is what happens at Christmas Island now but takes longer being done by the UNHCR in Indonesia.

Second, we need short term mandatory detention in order to run status, health and security checks as at present occurs. We do not need punitive long term mandatory detention to deter boat arrivals as occurred under previous Labor and Liberal governments. Despite Liberal statements and Labor beliefs to the contrary, it is not clear that long term, punitive mandatory detention under the so called Pacific solution or previously in the camps at Baxter and Port Headland by itself, or in combination with Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) reliably deterred boat arrivals. It certainly did not deter much larger Vietnamese flows earlier (see Viviani 1996). Indeed in Indonesia at present, where there is detention, this has not deterred flows from Sri Lanka or elsewhere. Other, more important dynamics are at work – not least the proportion of applicants for refugee status who obtain it and the rate of repatriation of failed asylum seekers. That news travels really fast.

Third, those who succeed should get permanent visas as at present. TPVs meant that men who took to the boats and got temporary residence could not have their

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wives and children join them. So these wives and children journeyed themselves to Indonesia and took to the boats for Australia and in the case of SIEV X were lost in their hundreds at sea. We cannot be party to those horrors again. It is plainly appalling that the Liberal Party should readopt this policy on the back of the Oceanic Viking issue.

Fourth, genuine refugees always come accompanied by economic migrants, those seeking a better life but unable to satisfy our migrant entry criteria. They also come accompanied by people smugglers like 'Alex', some bad guys and self described freedom fighters. We have been long enough at this game to be able generally to tell the difference. To read the papers one would think that all who come are either refugee angels, economic refugees or terrorists. T'was ever thus. All those who are not genuine refugees have to be sent back. Now this is often not easy – some governments are glad to get rid of their troublesome ethnic minorities and are unwilling to take them back, as the government of Vietnam tried to do in the 1980s and as perhaps the government of Sri Lanka now. Presumably Ambassador John McCarthy has encouraged Sri Lanka to constrain departure and to repatriate non refugees. (According to *The Australian* 6 November 2009 whole fishing villages are preparing to sail to Australia).

In this respect, being on good terms with one's neighbours is essential, especially if things get out of hand and a regional solution has to be found. I think this unlikely in the case of the Sri Lankans.

Fifth, we need to cleave to International Law in all this. Passing boats will not pick up vessels in distress if landing protocols are not observed. Those rescued at sea do not, repeat not, get to choose where they disembark and claim asylum. Kevin Rudd was perfectly in order on those 38 on the Oceanic Viking despite the media hysteria.

Sixth, we need to take more of our regular refugees from those certified by the UNHCR in Indonesia. It has long been axiomatic in boat people flows from Indonesia that when those who are genuine refugees have to wait too long in camps they set sail for Australia. If Indonesia holds boats for us, we should play our responsible part and take our fair share. Indonesia was left too long with the residue of non refugees from Vietnam and wore the odium of repatriation. It is unsurprising it does not want that again and in its new democracy its people rightly do not see why they should do more than us.

Finally, those ethnic groups calling their former compatriots to set sail for Australia and paying for the voyage, as do our Tamils, bear a heavy responsibility. The boat journey is hazardous even in the sailing season, people smugglers are frequently unreliable, do or die tactics on the high seas often result in death as we have seen in the first week in November this year. More than 10 per cent of Vietnamese boat people died at sea – thousands of people.

Australian governments, though in a privileged position due to their country's lack of land borders, are always vulnerable to some or many boat arrivals. If they are not clear about their principles in this, and do not practise good relations with their neighbours and if they do not lead their fellow Australians to understand what is possible and what is not in these circumstances, then they wind up politically vulnerable as well. As George Megalogenis said, the media has no memory on these boat people issues and this is part of the reason for the ill informed commentary we have witnessed recently.

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What about settlement policy?

This footy season, when Hasem el Masri stood with his beautiful wife, in hijab, and his two children on a Sydney oval being cheered for being the highest points scorer in the Rugby League I'm sure many Australians, whoever they barrack for, felt a real sense of pride. Many will have felt the same about Terry Tao, the young Princeton professor raised in Australia who won the Field prize for mathematics. There's a lot to celebrate in Australia about the achievements of our settlement of migrants, not least my own parents and children.

If you really want to know how settlement happens you need to turn to our art: the writings of David Malouf in *13 Edmonstone St*; of Raymond Gaita in *Romulus, My Father*, to Nam Lee's *The Boat* and to Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap*. These are works of high artistic achievement but they are also sociological documents showing how hosts and settlers get along or don't. *The Slap* is particularly good in holding up a mirror to our contemporary values and preoccupations. There is no room here to celebrate our painters, sculptors and dancers (or indeed our business leaders, scholars and others) but it is worth noting in the current renaissance of our arts that we no longer bother to comment much on the origins of our artists.

The Australian Census is a work of art too and it tells us the story that numbers matter in settlement. Here are a few to set the scene. In 2006 when we last had a census, there were some 20 million of us, of whom 71 per cent were born in Australia. About half a million or some 2 per cent of us are Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islanders. Of those born overseas, around two thirds come from non English speaking countries (all statistics from Immigration, *The Australian People*, various).

Australia is a country with one big majority and multiple tiny minorities. No minority, by birthplace, is over 5 per cent of the population, and only one – the English born at 4 per cent is over 2 per cent. New Zealanders come next at 2 per cent and all the rest are one per cent or less. This is a fortunate situation which allows us to avoid the problems of places like Belgium, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. It also allows us, if we are sensible, to avoid the politics of identity in large part.

When we look at when these major birthplace groups came, we can see that the major British, Italian and Greek migrations were before 1980, the Vietnamese before 1990 and the Chinese and Indian migrations are much more recent, around 40 per cent since 2000. This means of course that the British, Italians, Greeks and even the Vietnamese are aging, like us, and not being replenished, while the Chinese and Indians have a young age structure and their migration is continuing at high levels (ibid, tables 18.3, 18.4). The New Zealanders keep on coming and interestingly the Lebanese birthplace group which attracts such attention, stayed roughly the same at some 75 000 or 0.3 per cent of the population from 2001 to 2006.

Birthplace of course is not ancestry and it is this that Australians are interested in: how big really are our ethnic groups? Not only parents but their descendants. This is a hard one to measure but we get a fix on it by asking people, checking this with languages spoken and birthplace. You can get an idea of the problem in working out the ancestry of my grandchildren who have Scots, Italian, English and Aboriginal forebears. Since this is really common most Australians answer the Census question on ancestry by ticking the 'Australian' box, or give two or more ancestries.

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Nearly a million Australians claimed Italian ancestry, of whom around three quarters were born in Australia but only half of these spoke Italian at home. Compare those who claimed Chinese ancestry, 670 000 of them. Nearly half a million were born overseas and most of these speak Mandarin and Cantonese at home. All of this is as we would expect – old migrant groups learn English and integrate, new ones start the process.

What about religion? In 2006, 64 per cent of Australians claimed to be Christians of such a bewildering number of denominations they took up pages and pages of the census results. Nearly 19 per cent claimed no religion. Some 340 000 or 1.7 per cent of the population claimed Islam as their religion, up 20 per cent from 2001, indicating the new refugee arrivals from Africa, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. About 150 000 were Hindus rising rapidly with fast Indian migration, and the number of those claiming the Jewish religion was about 90 000 and not growing much (for a fuller look at this see Jupp 2009).

Residential ethnic concentration (or as some call them ghettos) has long been a concern of Australians for such concentrations of one or a few ethnic groups convey perceptions of a failure to integrate, a rejection of Australian culture and free riding on our welfare state. Earlier these concerns fed the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party putting our politics under extreme pressure for a while until the centre regained ground. When these complaints are allied with concerns about radical attacks on Australians or the state, as we have seen in recent convictions of Islamist radicals, the politics of this become explosive.

Jim Coughlan of James Cook University, Jim Jupp of the ANU, Bob Birrell of Monash and others have done us a signal service by helping us to understand the

dynamics of residential concentration over time. In short, migrants cluster strongly in the early years of their migration, since without English or help from their group they cannot get jobs or function in our society. Over time more arrive through chain migration of family and friends and ethnic concentration increases. Some prosper and move out of the ethnic village to middle class areas, some stay since they make their money from their compatriots, some fail to thrive and remain on welfare there over time, just like the rest of us. These areas become in general, zones of transition with layering of remnant ethnic group upon ethnic group. West End in Brisbane is one such now being gentrified, Carlton is another where the tide of Italians has shifted leaving good coffee and Mick Gatto in its wake.

Australians are quite familiar with this generally positive process. It works well if economic growth provides enough low and mid level jobs, it is retarded badly in recessions. Sometimes numbers really do matter if large concentrations can persist by developing their own economic base underpinned by welfare, engage in cultural closure due to their religion or perceptions of host antagonism, educate their own kids in their own community and generally avoid integration in the wider society. We have seen this in Britain and Europe with Muslim minorities and it is a serious political and social problem there.

In 1996, when I last did serious work on this problem, the strongest degrees of residential concentration were by Vietnamese in Fairfield (Cabramatta) in Sydney, in Footscray in Melbourne and in Darra in Brisbane (Viviani 1996). We concluded that movement out of these areas along the lines I've described was occurring apace along with movement in due to family reunion. Ten years later Vietnamese migration to Australia has virtually ceased, Vietnamese are still over

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represented in our universities are well settled quite widely and that ethnic panic is a distant memory.

So where are we now on this issue? Since we are having high migration levels we are right in the middle of it. More than 20 per cent of the populations of our capital cities and the Gold Coast are overseas born. This tells you that our migrants settle in our cities, not our regional areas and will continue to do so. Over to you Mr Henry.

These migrants are not evenly spread – they go to already established zones of migration. So many local government areas (LGAs) have around 50 per cent of their population born overseas: Auburn, Dandenong, Fairfield, Strathfield, Burwood, Parramatta. Ten years ago we used to think having 30 per cent was a lot. More than 30 LGAs – mainly in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne – have more than 30 per cent overseas born (Immigration, op cit Charts 5, 11).

When we look more closely, and move from the LGA level to the suburb level, concentrations increase, as in my own suburbs of Sunnybank and Sunnybank Hills in Brisbane, where the Chinese concentration has risen to more than 30 per cent (Coughlan 2008) and where I am frequently the only whitefella on the bus. Again there is both concentration and dispersion. But Sunnybank Hills is a zone of transition too: the Vietnamese have moved on to more expensive suburbs, the Indians and Koreans are moving in, the ubiquitous Chinese restaurants languish while the Korean ones thrive. There's no white flight, property values are up and the new arrivals are good neighbours. But this is not the same everywhere and we need more research on these settlement problems.

Finally, the 2006 Census tells an interesting story about the education and employment of various birthplace groups in Australia (ibid Table 15). For Australians

as a whole, only 15 per cent of those over 15 have a university degree and nearly 60 per cent have only year 12 education or less. The Chinese, the Indians, the Filipinos, the Malaysians, the Koreans and the Sri Lankans have more than double the proportion of university educated and far fewer of the less educated. So this is a middle class migration on arrival, unlike our Italians and Greeks from the farm and the slum who transformed their children's lives here. Thus those born in Italy and Greece, and Lebanon have low education levels, while those born in Vietnam have the same as other Australians.

In terms of unemployment, the general Australian rate was five per cent in 2006 at the height of the boom, while those born in China, Vietnam and Lebanon had double this rate, other groups resembling the Australian rate. For the Vietnamese and Lebanese these rates were an improvement on higher rates common to refugees earlier.

What can we conclude about all this? Settlement is proceeding pretty much as expected, refugee groups don't do as well in general as other migrants, the new big groups of well educated Chinese and Indians are turbo charging into the economy, the professions and society more generally. We need much more work on ethnic concentration and on the groups who are being left behind in economic growth – the Lebanese, the African refugee groups. The places which are areas of concentration of ethnic disadvantage are often also the places of disadvantage of the Australian born. This is an explosive mix. It is not simply that settlement policies for migrants need to recognise this, but that social policies for all Australians have to tackle local area problems regardless of ethnicity.

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