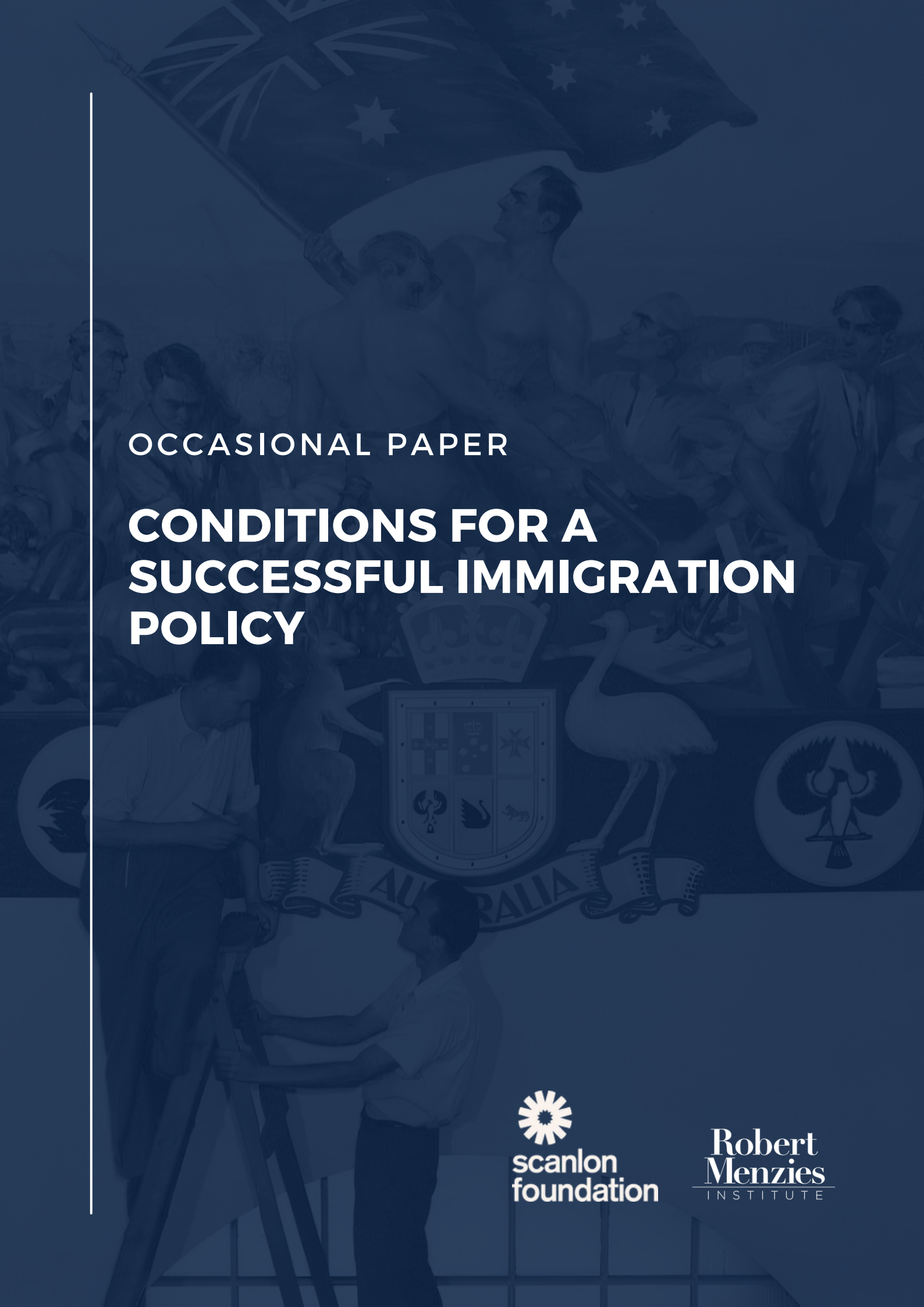




OCCASIONAL PAPER

CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMMIGRATION POLICY



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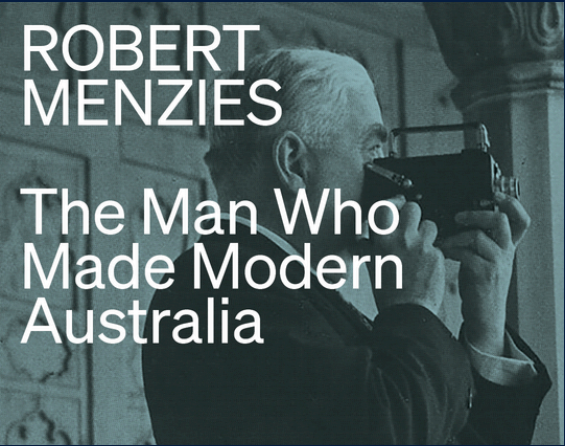
Robert
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ROBERT
MENZIES

The Man Who
Made Modern
Australia

About the Robert Menzies Institute

Established in 2021, the Robert Menzies Institute promotes the success of Australia's liberal democracy and the values that sustain it, inspired by the legacy of Australia's longest-serving prime minister, Robert Menzies.

About Dr Zachary Gorman



Dr Zachary Gorman is the Historian and Research Manager of the Robert Menzies Institute. A professional historian who has specialised in the history of Australian liberalism, he has been working as a researcher and academic since 2013, including several years at the University of Wollongong where he received his PhD. He is the author or editor of 10 books, including *Sir Joseph Carruthers: Founder of the New South Wales Liberal Party*, *Summoning Magna Carta: Freedom's Symbol Over a Millennium*, and Melbourne University Publishing's 4-volume history of Robert Menzies and his world.

Foreword

Georgina Downer is the Chief Executive Officer of the Robert Menzies Institute located at the University of Melbourne. A former Australian diplomat, she has had a distinguished career as public policy leader, foreign affairs expert, and not-for-profit executive spanning diplomacy, strategic advisory, and political engagement.



Since 2022, the Robert Menzies Institute has held annual policy dialogues that bring together a select group of leading historians, political scientists, commentators, policymakers, journalists and pollsters to address contemporary policy challenges. The dialogues are exercises in applied history, bringing the lessons of the past to help inform solutions to the unique problems that Australia's liberal democracy faces in the present.

In line with the Institute's values, the dialogues are designed to model civil, respectful debate, with participants chosen for their expertise and representing a wide range of views across the political and policy spectrum. Chatham House Rule is enforced to allow for frank and fearless discussions, but unattributed notes are kept to capture the insights of the day and assist in the formulation of an occasional paper.

The Institute has now released four such papers, each offering the distinctive benefits of historical context, which is otherwise all too absent from Australia's contemporary discourse. They include:

- 'Australia's Dilemmas: Then and Now', by Dr William Stoltz
- 'The Future of the Two Party System: Functions, Flaws and Fixes', by Dr William Stoltz and Dr Zachary Gorman
- 'Conditions for a Successful Democracy', by Dr Zachary Gorman

This year we are proud to present a timely exploration of the 'Conditions for a Successful Immigration Policy', made possible by the generous support of the Scanlon Foundation and Queen's College who hosted the Dialogue. No issue has been more formative in shaping modern Australia, and therefore none is left more misunderstood without the essential historical perspective that Dr Zachary Gorman's piece provides. The paper is replete with actionable recommendations, and supplemented by seven expert reflections to capture some of the diversity of opinion showcased on the day.

Executive Summary

Australia's immigration policy must return to its central purpose of nation-building. After decades of enjoying bipartisan support, our immigration policy is facing intense backlash amidst a cost-of-living crisis, rise in antisemitism, and fraying of social cohesion.

Informed by a July 2026 Policy Dialogue convened by the Robert Menzies Institute involving 40 historians, policymakers and thinkers, this report brings a fresh lens of 'applied history' to this emotive debate and suggests a paradigm shift in our approach towards the issue of immigration.

The report concludes that a nation-building framework must address housing and settlement pressures, reinforce a shared sense of belonging, and rebuild public confidence in immigration policy. This conclusion was translated from five interconnected priorities:

1. **Align migration with settlement capacity.** If immigration is to serve the national interest over the long term, migration settings must reflect Australia's capacity to provide housing, services and effective settlement support, with clear pathways to citizenship where appropriate.
2. **Strengthen citizenship.** Nation-building requires more than residence or economic participation. Reaffirming the rights, responsibilities and shared obligations of citizenship can strengthen civic belonging and commitment to Australia.
3. **Renew Australia's national story.** A cohesive nation needs a shared understanding of its history, democratic institutions and common values. Investment in history, civics education and cultural institutions can help foster this understanding while accommodating cultural diversity.
4. **Revitalise community-led settlement.** National cohesion is built through relationships as well as policy. Drawing inspiration from the historic Good Neighbour Movement, stronger community involvement can help newcomers establish connections and develop a sense of belonging.
5. **Remove barriers to participation.** Social cohesion will improve when both 'new' and 'old' Australians can access social and cultural activities, through which they form meaningful relationships and develop a sense of community.

Together, these recommendations advance a single objective: to make immigration policy serve the long-term objective of building the Australian nation. Such a sustainable, nation-building approach would better balance the benefits of migration with Australia's settlement responsibilities and the enduring interests of the whole community.

Overview



Amidst the furious contemporary debate surrounding Australia's immigration policy, this occasional paper seeks to utilise the lessons of applied history to shed light on our present crisis. Drawing on the full span of Australia's immigration story and particularly the successful Menzies period, the paper argues that our view of immigration has become narrowly economic, ignoring the broader nation building imperative that underpinned previous policy thinking. The paper is the result of a Dialogue convened by the Robert Menzies Institute in July 2026, which gathered forty of Australia's foremost historians, policymakers, and thinkers to assess the impact of immigration on our national identity, economy, social cohesion and political discourse, and determine what steps we can implement to foster the conditions for a successful immigration policy.

1. 'Populate or Perish' Past and Present

The 'peopling' of Australia was essential to establishing British control of their colonial possession, but it was the process of migration which turned the diverse inhabitants of the British Isles into one Australian people. Those people enjoyed the highest wages and shortest working hours in the world in the 19th century, largely due to a combination of profitable exports and labour shortages. This led to the Australian labour movement becoming long-term opponents of immigration, while the business community and centre-right parties tended to be its advocates. The transformative period of postwar migration was underpinned by strategic and nation building imperatives which broke down this partisan divide. But immigration always becomes controversial in times of economic distress, and the reforms of the Howard Government have led to the immigration issue being framed almost exclusively in economic terms thus far this century.

2. Defining Australia's National Identity

The prerequisites of national loyalty have evolved over the centuries, and Australia was innovative in opening itself up to religious pluralism from the 1830s. Australian national identity was initially framed in terms of 'Britishness', but a Britishness shorn of its religious and aristocratic components. With the triumph of Chartism and the 'democracy of manners' a distinctive Australian culture emerged, but it suffered from its association with a declining British identity which allowed for the vacuum into which multiculturalism was imported from Canada. Much of the animosity directed towards multiculturalism stems from its denial of there being a distinctive Australian culture, and as the sentimental bonds and national self-confidence such a culture provides have weakened, the conditions underpinning Australia's liberal democracy have gradually deteriorated.

3. Economic Impacts and Sustainability

Australia's cost of living and housing crises, stagnant productivity and declining real wages all act as fuel for anti-immigration sentiment. But they also undermine public trust in the economic arguments frequently used to justify Australia's high immigration intake. Immigration is at best a temporary fix for issues like our aging population, because the new arrivals ultimately incur their own costs. However, these costs are ones that will be left for a new generation of political leaders to deal with, creating an unhealthy short-term incentive for governments to use immigration to avoid spending restraint. The consensus at the dialogue, reiterated by leading economic historians of Australia, was that many of the economic benefits associated with immigration are ultimately offset. Hence, while immigration remains important, its rationale cannot rest on economics alone.

4. Social Cohesion and Integration

Although recent antisemitic attacks and concerns surrounding immigration have led to 'social cohesion' taking on a new prominence in public debate, it is an old term describing a problem that has long plagued immigrant societies. In the 19th and for much of the 20th century Australia's solution was an active culture of civic participation, exemplified in the Menzies era by the Good Neighbour Movement. In the postwar period, acculturation was viewed as a two-way street, that was as much about quelling Australian anxieties as it was about the migrants themselves. There are now fewer opportunities for acculturation to occur, particularly when many migrants end up working in the same industries, and remain digitally enveloped in their homelands. Australia has historically been successful in preventing ghettoisation and ensuring a diversity of migrant sources, but our non-discriminatory immigration policy, while clearly principled, does make this a difficult outcome to actively enforce.

5. Political Discourse and Polarisation

The discourse surrounding immigration can only be understood in the context of the wider maladies plaguing western liberal democracy. Immigration has become an issue through which voters have tried to 'take back control' amidst impersonal forces like globalisation, technological and cultural change. The Howard Government established a delicate equilibrium in which voters accepted legal migration as long as the illegal variety was firmly dealt with, but that no longer holds. Polls indicate that Australians think the past was better than the likely future, suggesting not only a rise in political nostalgia, but exhaustion at the rate of change which is no longer being viewed as 'progress'. Many first or second generation migrants support cuts to immigration, and attempts to label such sentiment as inherently racist are liable to backfire.

6. Designing the Future

The paper contends that the exclusively economic approach to immigration has failed, and that there needs to be greater investment in fostering sentimental bonds, national self-confidence, and re-establishing the explicit link between immigration and an expectation of future active citizenship. It recommends that governments:

1. Link temporary migration to Australia's capacity as a 'settlement society'
2. Consistently reiterate the obligations and benefits of citizenship to migrants and non-migrants alike
3. Resuscitate a positive and confident narrative about Australia
4. Expand community involvement in migrant settlement
5. Remove barriers to participation in the social and cultural life of the nation

7. Expert Reflections

- **Joy Damousi AM** – Professor of History in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne
- **Alex McDermott** – Author, historian, Robert Menzies Institute Fellow and curator of the exhibition, *'Robert Menzies: The Man Who Made Modern Australia'*
- **Michael Brennan** – CEO of the e61 Institute, a non-partisan, not-for-profit economic research institute, and former Chair of the Australian Productivity Commission
- **Julie Szego** – Freelance writer and journalist who has authored two longform research narratives for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute
- **Chetna Mahadik** – General Manager at the Robert Menzies Institute and editor of the collection *'Immigration & Multiculturalism: The Past, The Present and The Future'*
- **Lisa Button** – CEO of Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia
- **Alan Gamlen** – Director of the ANU Migration Hub and a Professor in the School of Regulation and Global Governance at the Australian National University

Introduction

In 2026, immigration has become the defining issue of Australian politics. Polling indicates that it is a central catalyst behind the rise of One Nation.¹ A political phenomenon of such magnitude now threatens, for the first time in 82 years, to displace one of our major parties of government. Pauline Hanson has led an avalanche of critics who are calling into question not just Australia's raw immigration numbers, but also the underlying, once-bipartisan ideology of multiculturalism that has underpinned our migration program and official definitions of national identity for the last 50 years.

While political commentators have expressed their shock at this profound period of disruption, scholars of Australian political history appreciate that it is far from unprecedented. Indeed, the immigration issue has been the driving force behind some of the most epochal moments in our nation's story: from first contact between convicts, settlers and Indigenous Australians in 1788, the debates over transportation which birthed Australian democracy in the 1850s, the emergence of racially restrictive 'White Australia' policies culminated by the inaugural Commonwealth Parliament, World War II's 'populate or perish' imperative which begat the transformative program of postwar immigration, the gradual dismantling of White Australia over the long Menzies boom of the 1950s and 60s, to the onset of multiculturalism in the 1970s which tried to redefine what it meant to be Australian.

With the benefit of this context, our present moment appears no less momentous, but it is far more comprehensible. It is revealed to be just the latest chapter in the story of an overwhelmingly immigrant nation, whose narrative arc has naturally been driven by the arrival and integration of peoples, what we have built together, and how we have either tried to open up that ongoing achievement to, or safeguard it from, successive waves of newcomers.



That is why, in July 2026, the Robert Menzies Institute convened a group of forty of Australia's leading historians, political scientists, commentators, journalists, pollsters and policymakers to apply the lessons of history, particularly the Menzies era, to our present crisis. Held under the Chatham House Rule, the policy dialogue encouraged open and honest debate on a subject that has festered and become toxic, partly because of the longstanding silence surrounding its more controversial aspects. However, the recent rise in violent antisemitism, manifest fraying of social cohesion, and breakdown of shibboleths, now make it impossible to ignore. The aim of the exercise, as this paper's title suggests, was to assess the Conditions for Australia's Successful Immigration Policy, using the lens of applied history.

This paper attempts to distil the most important insights provided on the day into a digestible format to help inform the current debate. By design, there were a range of conflicting views aired, and the paper has had to resolve those conflicts in a manner that reflects the views of the Institute and its support for Menzian liberal democratic values, rather than those of any single dialogue participant. However, seven expert reflections are provided to give insights into particular subject matter areas beyond the expertise and lived experience of the paper author.

A note on terms:

The meanings of many of the concepts the paper discusses are contested and therefore subjective in their meaning. 'Assimilation' was the term used to describe the expectation that postwar migrants would become, as much as possible, culturally indistinct from the Australian society they were joining. The extent to which an absolutist version of assimilation was ever enforced by the Australian government is subject to historical debate, but the concept became synonymous with justifying bigotry and racial abuse through which many migrants suffered.

For this reason, since the 1950s the term assimilation has taken on an extremely negative connotation, and even by the end of that decade it was already being replaced by the word 'integration' in government rhetoric. The latter term maintained the expectation that migrants would become part of one Australian community, but allowed for, and even encouraged, greater flexibility in maintaining cultural and sentimental affinities with immigrant homelands.

This paper prefers to speak in terms of 'acculturation', which is distinct from both assimilation and integration in acknowledging that cultural exchange is a two-way street, through which both the migrants and the host community are transformed to become more like each other. When this process takes place under healthy conditions, the host culture is never 'overwhelmed', but it is gradually infused with

new sources of drive and dynamism, as Menzies repeatedly highlighted in speeches on immigration throughout his career. The paper argues that this exchange has been an overwhelmingly positive one throughout Australian history, and that issues with social cohesion most often occur when insufficient transformation on the part of either party takes place.

Multiculturalism is perhaps the most contested term. For some, it is simply an acknowledgement of Australia's pre-existing pluralism and of the failure of assimilation to force people into a cookie-cutter mould of what it means to be Australian. For others, it is the denial that there is a distinct Australian culture, and a definition of national identity which maintains that we are simply a mix of the nations of the world, with our uniqueness being limited to the cultural achievements of Indigenous Australians across the tens of thousands of years in which they flourished, before being subject to the horrors of dispossession and European settlement.

As practiced since the Galbally Report of 1978, this latter form of multiculturalism has often involved government interference in actively promoting the preservation of distinct ethnic and cultural identities within Australia. To critics, this has meant crystallising the cultural divisions between distinct groups of Australians, at the expense of emphasising our shared values, history and sense that we all form part of one indivisible community. The Scanlon Foundation's own Mapping Social Cohesion report shows how Australian attitudes towards the two definitions of multiculturalism vary markedly.

It finds that 83% of people believe that multiculturalism (broadly defined) has been good for Australia, but only 33% believe that ethnic minorities should be given government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions.²

The paper often takes a critical line towards the latter form of multiculturalism, but this should not be misinterpreted as support for a return to assimilation or a denial of the established fact of Australian pluralism. Even some of the more progressive and pluralist participants in the dialogue suggested that there may be a need to move on from the term multiculturalism because it is starting to engender its own negative and divisive connotations in the national conversation.

'Populate or Perish' Past and Present

Australia's imperative to foster immigration has historically involved a mix of economic, strategic and nation building goals. This was reflected in the first book ever written by an Australian born author, William Wentworth's excruciatingly titled *A Statistical, Historical, and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales and Its Dependent Settlements in Van Diemen's Land, With a Particular Enumeration of the Advantages Which These Colonies Offer for Emigration and Their Superiority in Many Respects Over Those Possessed by the United States of America*. The 1819 publication not only made the economic case for immigration, but argued that it would only be an attractive prospect if Australia was granted a 'free government', providing 'that security of person and property which has been found to be the chief stimulus to individual exertion and the only basis on which the social edifice can repose in a solid and durable tranquillity'.³ The book thus created an early link between immigration, the promise of economic and social mobility, the demands of democratic governance, and even what we might now term 'social cohesion'.



For the British Empire to truly possess and defend the island-continent, the assumption was that it needed to be peopled by British settlers. Although in the British Isles themselves, there was no such thing as an ethnically and culturally 'British' person, but rather English, Irish, Scots, Welsh and Cornish peoples. In many respects, it was the process of emigrating to the cultural and religious melting pot of colonial Australia which made 'Britishness' a lived reality. This is similar to how the same process helped create a somewhat unified vision of what it meant to be 'Italian' or 'Greek' amongst later diaspora communities originating in countries with very strong regional identities.⁴

Before the postwar diversification of immigration had taken place and in advocating for it, Menzies himself noted that Australians drew their 'strength and resilience' from a 'mixture of English, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Cornish and, going back further, the Celt, the Angle, the Saxon, the Norman'.⁵

Suggesting a delicate balance between integration and pluralism, creating an Australian people that was never truly homogenous, yet which became remarkably successful in forming a cohesive whole that defied the divisions of the old world. This process was greatly assisted by our isolation, which forced newcomers to fully commit to their new home, because it was so difficult for anyone but the wealthy to return from whence they came.

While Wentworth may have been patriotically convinced that Australia was a more attractive immigration destination than the United States, this 'tyranny of distance' meant that convincing high-quality migrants to opt for the Antipodes always posed a challenge. Hence, from an early stage, governments pursued schemes of assisted immigration that offered to smooth the process of coming here. Convict transportation itself functioned as a form of assisted and compelled immigration, but once the financial investment no longer had a penal justification, governments became pickier in who they would use taxpayers' money to assist. The first group targeted were actually women, to fix Australia's horrendously unsustainable gender ratio. But from there, they introduced screening processes that have since become a perennial feature of Australian immigration programs, echoing in our modern emphasis on 'skilled' migrants.

Although it took some convincing in the first instance, those migrants who did make the decision to opt for Australia found a hidden treasure. Firstly, in our distinctive culture of egalitarianism, which resulted from our lack of hereditary aristocracy and the pragmatic victory of the emancipists, who wanted to give full rights to ex-convicts, in the formative decades of the colony. Secondly, in what became the highest real wages and life expectancy in the world for much of the 19th century.⁶

But there was a catch. The wealth stemmed from the highly profitable export of merino wool and other commodities. However, its widespread nature can be attributed, in large part, to what was a comparative labour shortage that forced landowners to pass on a significant proportion of their profits in order to attract a sufficient number of workers to keep their enterprises ticking over properly.⁷ The negotiating power stemming from the labour shortage was also a key factor in Australian workers enjoying the world's shortest working days across that same

century.⁸ Australians spearheaded global industrial relations reforms like the 8 hour day movement, which began after workers dropped tools at the University of Melbourne's 'Old' Quadrangle in 1856.⁹

Hence the idea of opposing immigration to protect wages and conditions became a founding principle of the Australian labour movement.

The Labor Party, up until Ben Chifley and occasionally afterwards, functioned as the 'low immigration party' and the strongest supporters of White Australia.¹⁰ The latter policy was sold as a safeguard from low-wage competition, particularly when functioning alongside protectionist tariffs as part of a comprehensive 'Australian Settlement'.¹¹

Conversely, it was the business community and the parties of the centre-right that tended to advocate for a higher immigration intake, particularly since if the labour shortage ever became too acute it would undoubtedly have jeopardised economic growth and profitability. This could be seen in the Squatters' support for the resumption of convict transportation in the early 1850s, and in conservative Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce's extensive program of 'Men, Money, Markets', which defined Commonwealth policy in the 1920s. However, Bruce's attempt to facilitate population growth within the constraints of the popularity of White Australia and a self-imposed restriction that immigration must not lower real wages, never yielded the desired level of increase.¹² This was particularly outside of Australia's major cities, which have long functioned as choke points for new arrivals, given Australia's historically high levels of urbanisation.

In this vein of thwarted attempts to achieve decentralisation and the peopling of rural areas, it is notable that the cry that Australia must obtain 'population or perish' was first raised at a 'closer settlement' conference in Corowa in 1906.¹³ However, it reached a new level of urgency during the Great Depression, with Billy Hughes's exhortations about the dangers posed by Australia's collapsing birthrate.¹⁴ The issue of birthrates and the natural increase of population they provide has always been inherently intertwined with that of immigration, both in lessening its need and offsetting its potential cultural disturbance.

During the post-war period, the Chifley Government even pegged its goal of a 2% annual population increase to be driven 50% by births and 50% by migrants.¹⁵ Hence Australia's current birthrate crisis is placing added pressure on the conditions for a successful immigration program.

It was of course World War II and the perceived threat of Japanese invasion which brought these 'populate or perish' warnings to the forefront of the political agenda. But another crucial factor was the realisation that the deaths associated with the war and other demographic factors meant that the historical phenomenon of Britain having excess population to give, might finally be coming to an end.¹⁶

Hence, in one of his famous 'Forgotten People' radio broadcasts delivered in April 1943, Robert Menzies warned about the folly of White Australia's pursuit of racial purity, and declared that:



“

*The greatest guarantee not only of the safety of Australia but of its future material prosperity, would be a population of at least twenty million... Are we going to be timid about the temporary effect, social and industrial, of large migration, or are we going to see in it a real source of strength?*¹⁷

Eighty years ago, in 1946, the Chifley Government heeded Menzies's calls by implementing a bipartisan program of postwar immigration that gradually broadened the definition of White Australia to cover the full span of continental Europe. This process remarkably avoided any significant populist backlash, in part because it was meticulously propagandised, from Arthur Calwell's 'Beautiful Balts' to Harold Holt's carefully coordinated annual Citizenship Conventions (that both Immigration Ministers were future leaders of their respective parties speaks the priority given to the portfolio at the time). The Conventions went to great pains to advertise how immigrants were acculturating as 'new Australians', and were so expensive that Treasurer Arthur Fadden tried to cut them from the budget, only to be rebuked by Holt who defended them as the best weapon yet found against anti-immigrant sentiment.

Arguably even more important in the lack of backlash was the favourable economic conditions of full employment, growth in real wages and rising homeownership rates

that managed to outpace a booming population. This fuelled an optimistic outlook that would see the birthrate reach an historic high of 3.55 births per woman in 1961.¹⁸ It was these conditions that smoothed over the arrival of thousands of Asian students studying at Australia's tertiary institutions (both Colombo Plan scholarship recipients and an even larger number of private fee-payers), the abolition of the infamous Dictation Test in 1958, and the winding up of the substantive elements of White Australia under Prime Minister Harold Holt. This completed the process of broadening Australia's immigration intake from Britain, to Europe, and finally to the world.

In contrast, the severe depression of the 1890s helped create the conditions that saw the racially restrictive immigration policies that some colonies had begun experimenting with, ultimately enshrined as a central pillar of the Australian Settlement by the inaugural Commonwealth Parliament (although notably the first of the Settlement's component parts to be abolished). Likewise, the first great wave of Asian immigration in the 1980s corresponded with a time of acute inflation and economic pressures, which explains why these changes became far more controversial than the gradual reforms of the Menzies era. During this period, public figures such as historian Geoffrey Blainey and Opposition Leader John Howard spoke out against the alleged social and cultural impacts of the growing rates of Asian immigration. There was also widespread conservative criticism of Malcolm Fraser's humanitarian response to the Lebanese Civil War, which did not discriminate in favour of Christians, despite the intervention initially being prompted by the Maronite community.¹⁹

This signalled a shift towards a policy of cultural agnosticism, that jettisoned the Holt era emphasis on 'ability to integrate' as a key non-racial criterion for migrant approval.²⁰

Another important shift is that over time, the strategic arguments used to justify high rates of immigration have diminished in favour of a narrower focus on the supposed economic benefits. In part because modern warfare is now focused on technological and industrial advantage rather than raw manpower,²¹ but also because there is now a greater appreciation of the environmental limitations that may place an upper limit on what is a sustainable population for our arid island continent. This narrowing of focus has likely made the political volatility of the immigration issue even more susceptible to declining economic conditions.

In this vein, one dialogue participant argued that John Howard and his Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock are as much the architects of Australia's contemporary immigration system as Ben Chifley and Arthur Calwell had once been. The Howard Government introduced reforms tying immigration more directly to the skills of

migrants, and ushering in temporary employer sponsorships like the 457 visa. Critics claim that these changes have helped sever the link between immigration, a sense of permanence and the expectation of the eventual obtainment of Australian citizenship.

Late last year the number of temporary residents hit a record high of 2.9 million, meaning they now make up more than 10% of Australia's population.²²



Defining Australia's National Identity

The settlement of Australia by Europeans coincided with the 19th century's trend of rising nationalism, an ideology which suggested that the prerequisites for nationhood were a shared ethnicity, history, and culture. Prior to this, belonging to a political community had often involved the more limited criteria of professing loyalty to a hereditary line of rulers. A political accommodation which was far more tolerant of ethnic and cultural diversity, as seen in the contrast between older surviving polities like the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the newly unified states of Germany and Italy by the turn of the 20th century.

Centuries before this, much of the historic success of the Roman Empire had been based on its ability to acculturate new peoples into the values of its civic culture as it expanded territorially: balancing elements of pluralism, particularly when it came to religious practices, with clearly defined civic obligations. A person was welcome to worship their own gods, provided they paid due homage to the supposed divinity of the emperor: an arrangement that only ran into trouble when it butted up against the explicit monotheism of Judaism and later Christianity. The Judeo-Christian ethos rejected the Roman civic compact so utterly that Rome initially sought to destroy it, before ultimately being replaced by it.

In the succeeding Medieval period of shared Christendom, which monarch your feudal obligations ultimately climbed up towards could change rather drastically, with much of France being subject to the English Crown under the complex marriage links of the Angevin Empire. Cultural distinctions, including language dialects, were far too localised and specific to form the basis for overarching political loyalties – until nationalism imposed a new and previously unheard-of uniformity within the border demarcations of Europe.

Australia was notably innovative in breaking the link between political and religious loyalties that had sharpened during the reformation, when Henry VIII effectively nationalised religion in England, partly to eradicate the transnational influence of the Catholic Church. New South Wales Governor Richard Bourke's Church Act of 1836 provided equal economic assistance to all Christian denominations according to their number of adherents, in defiance of the privileged position that the Anglican Church still retained in England at the time. This precedent was followed through with the establishment of Australia's explicitly non-denominational universities from the 1850s, and the welcoming of Jews like Isaac Nathan, Lionel Samson, and Sir Julian Salomons, into positions of prominence in colonial society.

However, the limits of secularism as a solution to pluralism would be exposed with the unintended consequences of the introduction of 'free, compulsory and secular' education across the Australian colonies from the 1870s.

This barred all forms of state aid to religious schools in the name of forcing people into a unitary state system. Far from fostering cohesion, this process served to marginalise the – mostly Irish – Catholic community, which felt that religion was such an essential element of education that they boycotted the system at great cost to themselves. This perversely entrenched some of the sectarian divides which Bourke had so stridently sought to avoid, and which Australia overall had dodged, until the Menzies Government healed almost a century of ethno-sectarian wounds with the introduction of State Aid in the 1960s.

Without a single religious dogma as a focal point of national identity, Australians came to define themselves as being 'more British than the British'. That is to say that they had taken the cultural heritage of Magna Carta, the Common Law, and British Liberty, and applied it in a purified form that was unencumbered by the baggage of the old world. For example, the Chartist program's demands for manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, payment of members and frequent elections, had their historical origins in the British Isles. But because they did not face the same institutional

opposition in the Antipodes, the program was implemented earlier, helping to underpin the emergence of Australia's distinctively democratic culture.

Crucially, this culture predated the birth of Australia's democratic architecture and is therefore greater than institutions alone. As Alex McDermott's Dialogue Reflection relates, our 'democracy of manners' saw relative social equality and tolerance develop organically, perhaps revealing the limits of the top-down social engineering that we often find ourselves resorting to in the present. Our democratic culture was subsequently reflected in the early granting of votes for women, the popular participatory process through which we designed and approved the Commonwealth Constitution, and even in the unique and divisive decision to take the issue of conscription to the Australian people during World War I. Australia actually held referenda and multiple elections during both world wars, in sharp contrast to the 'mother country', which did not go to the polls for the 8 years between 1910 and 1918, nor for the decade from 1935 to 1945. It is equally in contrast to the modern example of Ukraine forgoing elections in the name of wartime unity in the face of the existential threat of Russia's invasion.²³

Beyond democracy, Australia was also distinguished by our egalitarianism and social mobility. Perhaps the starkest demonstration of this can be seen at the 1913 and 1914 elections, where both major party leaders, Joseph Cook and Andrew Fisher, had grown up in the mines of Britain, before climbing Australia's social and political ladder up to become Prime Minister and later High Commissioner in the imperial capital.

Cook's endorsement of Australia as the 'Land of the Better Chance' defined the nation against the social immobility of Britain, and presaged Donald Horne's famous dubbing of 'The Lucky Country'.

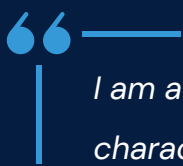
The latter phrase coined in 1964 has, despite Horne's critical intent, been firmly embraced by the Australian people as reflective of the spirit of the country.

Australians are also known for their enterprising spirit, but one that has never been narrowly defined according to the constraints of capitalism in the manner of its American counterpart. Indeed, with our propensity for 'tall poppy syndrome' we can be actively jealous of too much success on the part of any one individual. As WK Hancock put it, Australians are 'properly anxious that everyone should run a fair race' but 'improperly resentful that anyone should run a fast race'.²⁴ The Australian version of enterprise is a throwback to the pioneering effort needed to tame a land of droughts and flooding rains, best reflected in our culture of sporting achievement and belief that we have historically punched above our weight in military conflicts. Although shaped by the strategic disaster and personal sacrifice of Gallipoli, in

the interwar period the ANZAC legend focused much on the idea that Australian soldiers had outperformed the rest of the world, with the actions of General Sir John Monash – another prominent Australian Jew – on the Western Front held in particular regard.²⁵

But as the four pillars of the Isurava Memorial on the Kokoda Track so poignantly display, the ANZAC legend also speaks to the Australian value of ‘mateship’. A deeply engrained culture of compassion, communitarianism and self-sacrifice that cares about the good of the other. Menzies would frequently use biblical phraseology to describe this as the notion that ‘every man is his brother’s keeper’.²⁶ Mateship can manifest itself as a culture of volunteerism and participation in civic life, now increasingly under threat. But it can also be seen in an acceptance of the state being used as a ‘vast public utility’ for the good of all.²⁷ The historic lines of division between our major political parties could be summarised as a debate over what level of economic freedom is necessary to maintain the public utility, rather than the more libertarian argument over whether it should be a utility in the first place.

Related to mateship is a certain larrikinism, a relaxed or ‘laid-back’ attitude towards life that has often helped to aid tolerance and social cohesion by imposing fewer demands on others. This characteristic was not always thought of as a positive. Indeed, when during the first federal parliament legislation was introduced for compulsory military training, part of the explicit justification was that the government needed to impose greater societal discipline to deal with the demands that came with full nationhood. This prompted Joseph Cook to give a timeless defence of our being ‘relaxed and comfortable’ and the circumstances which had produced this cultural phenomenon:



I am aware that there is a certain amount of larrikinism in Australia... those characteristics which people deplore are the result of the natural rebound from the dull grey industrial Gradgrind existence of older countries. It is because of the greater freedom and the better conditions under which we live, that our young people show more blithesomeness and gaiety and animal spirits. Of course, a certain amount of discipline is required to impart steadiness to our national character, but I should be very sorry to see all those qualities which tend to make life happy and free, and glad, and spontaneous, disciplined out of existence.²⁸

All these Australian values and identifiers have crossed over and endured from the period when we viewed ourselves as an integral part of the British Empire, in part because they helped us understand what made us different from the 'old country' in the first place. Yet there is no doubt that the decline of Britishness, which was once described as Australia's 'civic religion',²⁹ has made it harder to articulate and defend the existence of a distinctive Australian culture. This can be seen in the rapturous reception to Queen Elizabeth II's 1954 Royal Tour, when the Crown acted as a sentimental unifier standing above politics. Apart from ANZAC, which itself has not been immune from criticism, we have not been able to replace the civic anchors that Britishness once provided the nation.

This can be seen in the adoption of the official ideology of multiculturalism, which was embraced in part because of the cultural vacuum the decline of British identity had created. On paper, multiculturalism reflects both liberal and Christian ideals of the inherent dignity of each human being, regardless of race, creed and culture. In that sense, it was a natural outgrowth of the Australian values and intellectual traditions as they had been refined over the first three quarters of the 20th century. Yet in celebrating, rather than tolerating, difference, multiculturalism carried with it the potential to entrench divisions and slow or even stop the process of acculturation and adaptation that had erstwhile turned the diversity of the British Isles, and later postwar migrants, into one Australian people.



Indeed, at its worst, multiculturalism is the denial that there is a distinctive Australian culture. Something that anachronistically views our pre-1970s history and values as direct imports from Britain, and therefore of no greater weight or legitimacy than any other cultural heritage that various waves of arrivals have inevitably brought with them, as they in turn have gradually imbued the mainstream Australian culture. This denial is further exacerbated by the additional assertion that the historic fact of Indigenous dispossession makes all non-Indigenous cultures, even ones that have exclusively evolved here, illegitimate.

Far from begetting tolerance, such a mentality has the opposite effect, promoting an unnecessary defensiveness from members of the mainstream culture. This is especially so for those whose families have for generations had no direct cultural or familial ties to any country other than Australia. After having had their legitimacy questioned and anxiety raised, such a constituency can be all too easily persuaded to view immigrants as a threat to the Australian way of life that forms the cornerstone of their identity, rather than as people who have decided to emigrate here because they were attracted to the Australian culture in the first place. Cultures will always evolve, and immigration has prompted a healthy proportion of that evolution throughout Australia's history. But there will be a toxic response if people are made to feel that their national identity is being supplanted or undermined, rather than infused and strengthened.

As French scholar Raphaël Doan has argued, in order for successful integration to occur, a country's view of itself must be such that people want to join it: there must be some kind of attraction to it, there must be some force that leads you to it.³⁰ Reading from the proceedings of the old Citizenship Conventions, or the elaborate celebrations held to commemorate the Jubilee of Federation in 1951, it is clear that in the Menzies era Australia's successful immigration program was underpinned by this confidence and sense of the Australian achievement.

The 1950s are often demonised as a period of rigid assimilation. However, while it would be wrong to ignore the discrimination and racism that many new arrivals did face, it is equally essential to recognise that the reason why Australia was able to move on from that rigidity to the more flexible 'integrationist' model by the end of the decade was because the anxieties of the Australian public had been successfully quelled. Menzies spoke reassuringly of cultural tolerance not in terms of new cultures being equivalent to that of Australia, but by how he had long cherished his Scottish roots and newcomers were welcome to do likewise with theirs. Australians had always possessed layered identities encompassing religion, ethnicity, state, national and even imperial loyalties, but they had supplemented, rather than rivalled the loyalty given to Australia, and the expectation that the enmities and disputes of the old world would be left behind.

Amidst knee-jerk calls to cut immigration during the short-term economic headwinds that saw the Coalition nearly lose the 1961 election, Menzies declared that he believed that 'the flow of good people, with a variety of cultures and experiences, and backgrounds into this country is giving to us a strength, a vigour, a variety of minds which we would never otherwise have acquired'.³¹ Diversity was our strength, but only to the extent that it contributed to one Australian society.

As well as inducing anxiety and inadvertently fuelling xenophobia, multiculturalism has also proven an ill-fitting choice as a replacement national identity because it is ultimately foreign. Not in claiming to welcome foreigners, but rather in being an import from a Canadian political context that was always more culturally divided than that of Australia itself. In contrast to the Australian success in integrating diverse groups into a blended whole, the Québécois always remained separate from their British Canadian counterparts, and multiculturalism emerged in the 1960s as an attempt to accommodate that separatism while avoiding fully-fledged secession. It is little wonder then, that multiculturalism now stands accused of gradually fostering separatism and undermining social cohesion in an Australian society it was never originally designed to reflect. Particularly when it has coincided with the erasure of the 'tyranny of distance' and strong civic life that had once functioned as the greatest forces of acculturation.

A healthy and unifying sense of national identity remains essential because, by granting broad rights and imposing corresponding duties, modern democracy gives citizens a share in the nation's sovereignty that requires a more sophisticated level of loyalty and toleration than the political systems that came before it.

Loyalty to a monarch was sufficient when everyone was subordinate to the sovereign and could be kept in line by force, tradition and the broader social hierarchy. But liberal democracy and the pluralism it engenders make so many things contested and contestable, not least the Crown itself, that there needs to be a higher level of sentiment to hold everything together. Civics education is important, but it cannot on its own breathe life into the living spirit of democracy, as explained in our previous policy paper.³² Nor can it inspire people to fight for their country should an existential threat arise. If immigration is ultimately about citizenship and nation building, then this sentiment needs to be both cultivated and mandated for the democratic system to survive.

Economic Impacts and Sustainability

The political volatility of the immigration issue is intimately linked to Australia's economic woes, such as our cost of living and housing affordability crises. According to the OECD, Australia's real wages have fallen by 5.1% since March of 2021,³³ and even this startling figure fails to reflect how inflation has been far higher for some of our most basic necessities, as the real-world experience of heading to the supermarket each week attests. Ten out of our last 15 quarters have shown negative per capita GDP growth,³⁴ leading to frequent suggestions that Australia has been dipping in and out of a per capita recession that Australia's high immigration numbers and associated GDP growth mask.

Nevertheless, economic necessity remains one of the main arguments used against lowering Australia's immigration intake. Proponents cite the benefits of covering labour shortages in the provision of essential services, or cross-subsidising a higher education system for which taxpayers are unwilling to pay for should there be a decline in international student numbers. Alarmist modelling has indicated that stopping immigration would produce a \$420 billion increase in Commonwealth debt over 10 years.³⁵ Such figures suggest that the main economic beneficiaries of immigration may be governments who do not want to deal with the political ramifications of cutting spending. Even if the short-term economic benefits migrants provide may be offset by their longer-term costs like pensions and infrastructure investments, that is a problem that can be left for political successors to deal with.

Immigration has also often been touted as a necessity in combatting Australia's aging population. However, as the 2023 Intergenerational Report outlined, the offsetting benefits are at best temporary, as any permanent migrants will themselves age and put further stresses on an overburdened system.³⁶ Additionally, as one dialogue participant pointed out, temporary migration may actually be distorting the statistical picture to make Australia's aging population issue look worse than it is. While temporary migrants, such as international students and working holidaymakers, tend to be youthful and decrease the overall average age of the population, the fact that they are temporary means that despite being of child-bearing age they seldom have children. The fall in Australia's headline birthrate of 1.69 to 1.49 births per woman from 2019 appears worse because it includes both temporary migrant women (who tend to have fewer children) and Australian permanent residents and citizens. In fact, Australian women (permanent residents and citizens) are still reproducing at a rate of 1.64, albeit down from 1.73 in 2019.³⁷ Hence, while targeted skilled migration can help to relieve short term gaps, unless immigration can be perpetually expanded, the aging population will ultimately need to be paid for through productivity gains.

Whether immigration helps or hinders productivity growth is itself a matter of considerable debate. OECD research has pointed out that areas with higher migrant intakes maintain higher average wages indicating higher productivity.³⁸ But critics have argued that correlation is not causation because migrants are naturally going to be attracted to areas that already have greater job opportunities, and the concentration of people in Sydney and Melbourne is already one of Australia's greatest logistical problems, which immigration is blamed for exacerbating.³⁹ Similar causal logic could be used to argue that the fact that Australia's high immigration figures have failed to halt a steady fall in productivity growth occurring over the past decade suggests that immigration has had little or at least insufficient positive impact on this key metric of economic health.⁴⁰ Moreover, research from the e61 Institute has shown that migrants are more likely to work in low productivity industries than non-migrants.⁴¹

Hence immigration, particularly when it is not sufficiently targeted towards skilled workers such as is the case with student overstays, may actually be a partial cause of Australia's productivity woes.

This is particularly the case if the importation of low-skilled and low-wage employees is being used as an alternative to technological adoption. Innovation which, as economists Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo have shown, managed to offset the GDP shrinkage many feared would stem from aging populations across developed economies between 1990 and 2015.⁴² This mirrors the historic process through which Australia's limited population has often acted as a stimulus to mechanisation and resultant productivity gains, most notably in our export reliant (and therefore subject to international competition even in the era of tariff protectionism) agricultural industry.⁴³

Equally contentious is the debate over whether migrant competition harms wage growth. As noted above, historians have argued that in the 19th century a mitigated labour shortage did play a role in Australia achieving world-leading wages and fostering a distinctive culture of egalitarianism and social mobility. Likewise, the assumption that competition must inevitably harm potential wages was the source of the Australian labour movement's longstanding opposition to high immigration, particularly in times of economic distress. Even Gough Whitlam, hailed for his progressive approach in eliminating the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy in defiance of the ALP's historic policy preferences, slashed immigration in response to the economic woes of the 1970s.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, modern supporters of immigration have been consistently producing

data suggesting that it has no negative effect on wages and may even help to slightly increase employment opportunities for the Australian-born population.⁴⁵ That said, even if there is a mild benefit for the labour market, this needs to be judged in the context of immigration's inflationary effect on an inflexible housing market. A market in which supply has long shown itself incapable of responding adequately to increases in demand which might otherwise produce economic benefits.⁴⁶ This is especially the case when it comes to rental properties, the cost of which is forecast to increase by up to 30% despite the recent fall in house prices.⁴⁷

Treasury figures estimate that the lifetime fiscal dividend of the average migrant to Australia is \$41,000 per head, a relatively modest figure that some argue may itself underestimate the infrastructure costs required for each additional individual.⁴⁸ Indeed, infrastructure investments necessitated by immigration may offer a partial explanation for why its high levels have not had a positive impact on productivity, given that infrastructure spending diverts savings and investments away from capital deepening, to the capital widening required to prevent a fall in overall living standards.⁴⁹ It is important to note that those same Treasury figures suggest that the average Australian born person produces a lifetime fiscal drain.⁵⁰ So it may well be the case that our overall policy settings are fundamentally unsustainable, in a manner that is beyond the scope of this paper to resolve.



All told, the consensus reached at the dialogue was that beyond a baseline intake, the economic benefits of additional immigration were little above the point of breaking even. The conclusion is clear: the crux of the immigration debate should not be about economics, but rather what kind of society Australia is trying to build, and how migrants may help or hinder us in achieving that ideal.

Neatly, this conclusion echoes that of the Menzies era, when immigration policy was overwhelmingly framed in terms of strategic and nation building goals. While immigration through the 1950s and 60s did go hand in hand with rising levels of prosperity, this actually defied the widespread



CANBERRA
AUGUST, 1959
No. 67

Monthly bulletin of the
Department of Immigration
to assist migrants.

The Good Neighbour

incorporating The New Australian

● EUROPEAN PROSPERITY

'We must step-up overseas publicity'

There must be increased publicity in all migrant source countries if Australia is to succeed fully in maintaining her immigration programme.

The Minister for Immigration, Mr. Downer, said this last month.

"I cannot emphasise too strongly that Australia must advertise her attractions in a dynamic and positive manner," he said.

"We have succeeded very well so far with slender resources, but it must be remembered that conditions in the migrant-source countries are constantly changing."

"In the earlier days of post-war migration people were ready and anxious to escape the disturbed conditions of Europe."

● Security

"Today they have the security of prosperous economies."

"It follows that to encourage immigration Australia must be prepared to spend a little more to get the kind of people we want and in the numbers we need."

"In the past we have had a glorious era of immigration with large numbers, who, by their quality and their industry, have demonstrated their great value to Australia."

"Migrants as much as anybody have convinced Australia that migration is good for us."

"My faith in Australia and our future is such that I know we have so much to offer that we need never lack sufficient migrants. But we have got to convince the people overseas of these facts."

"The only way we can do it is by using business methods to promote our own country."

"Given the adequate material we can do the job."

Off beat!



Former Scottish Master Mariner David Clark graduated as a Police Constable in Melbourne last month.

Such a marked change in careers — plus a new start in a strange land — might have daunted many a lesser man, but 15 stone, 6ft. 1in. David took it all in his stride.

"I always had a yen to be a policeman," he said, flexing broad shoulders which would have done a champion scrum-half proud.

But David's main reason for giving up the sea was that his wife, Sarah, hated "being

a grass widow."

"It was plain terrible," she said recently. "Thank heavens those days are over now, with their long separations and loneliness."

David, 28, went to sea as a deckboy when 15 years old. At 20, he won his first mate's certificate, and three years later his Master's certificate.

Eleven years in ships took him all over the world — except the country which was to be his future home.

He left the sea -to become P.C.

David decided to migrate after hearing good reports of Australia from his father and mother, two brothers and three sisters who had settled here earlier.

He arrived in Melbourne in the liner Strathaird 18 months ago with his wife and son, David, now 5.

● ABOVE: "A big smile, Dad," said David, Jr., when he took this picture after his father's graduation ceremony.

Minister reports on overseas survey -

THE MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, Mr. Downer, returned to Australia on July 13 after an on-the-spot survey of every Australian migration post in the United Kingdom and Europe.

He left Australia on May 14 to investigate the methods that would be necessary to enable Australia to recruit migrants in the knowledge that the increased prosperity of Britain and Europe had lessened the desire of Europeans to leave their own countries.

'WE CAN MAINTAIN MIGRANT NUMBERS'

Australia could without difficulty maintain her immigration programme at the rate of 115,000 migrants of the right type each year.

The Minister for Immigration, Mr. Downer, said he was confident of this after inspecting Australia's migration posts overseas.

Mr. Downer said: "As a result of new ideas and adjustments adopted in the various countries and in the light of the discussions I have held with Ministers, political leaders and Government officers of all emigration countries, I believe Australia can be assured of receiving a continuing flow of excellent migrants, including a high proportion of the skilled workers we need as well as their families."

"As I completed my survey of each country I announced a series of new measures, which have either been introduced immediately or which will very soon be translated into action, and I believe these are already well known to the Australian people."

RECRUITING

"These announcements were made in London and at Press conferences during my visits to Copenhagen, Rome, Athens, The Hague and Bonn."

"In this statement I wish to report results not previously announced."

"We are assured of an increased flow of migrants from the Scandinavian countries and Germany."

"I have plans in mind to re-organise the recruiting machinery in Scandinavia, which will entail some major changes in the operational field."

"With the implementation of these plans, I believe that in time we can reach a figure of 7,000 migrants a year from

'More from Germany, Scandinavia'

Finland, Sweden and Denmark and possibly even from Norway.

"We will draw most of them from Finland and Sweden."

"In Germany, where Government policy is unsympathetic to emigration, I have succeeded in negotiating an agreement for a 25 per cent increase in the number of assisted migrants and to provide for a 25 per cent increase in the proportion of skilled workers."

"In the overall intake we expect to get a total of 11,000 Germans in 1959-60."

"These encouraging prospects depend to some extent on arrangements to be ironed out in Australia."

"Although we can expect only a slight improvement in the numbers of migrants from the Netherlands in the coming year I am confident that with increased promotional activity we can even achieve an intake of 15,000 Dutch settlers."

'NOT EASY'

"I have completed my mission greatly heartened," Mr. Downer said.

"The task ahead will not be easy."

"We shall have to work hard and be prepared to spend more. But the reception given to my plans for increased British migration, to the continuing arrangements for migration from Northern Europe and to the arrangements for migration from Italy, Greece and France is such that I believe Australia will continue to be a most favoured nation for emigration from Europe."

VISAS FOR
HANDICAPPED
REFUGEES

● Page 3

expectation, coming out of the Depression era and to which Menzies himself readily admitted, that there would be a temporary social and industrial cost to bringing in extra people. This was especially the case because infrastructure and housing were already playing catch-up after the lost decades of the 1930s and 40s.

As economic historian Ian McLean has argued, 'immigration [was] in part the result rather than the cause of Australia's economic prosperity'.⁵¹ That is to say that many immigrants were attracted to and let into Australia because it was already experiencing gains in productivity and living standards. Immigrants fuelled, rather than caused, the cycle of growth. Hence when, like today, there is a cycle of stagnation, there is little historical evidence to suggest that immigration itself can help reset that cycle.

*McLean's view has been reiterated in the extensive Australian immigration history recently authored by economist Mark Cully, who argues that immigration's historical effect was to make the Australian economy larger rather than more prosperous per head.*⁵²

Social Cohesion and Integration

For the last three years the Scanlon Social Cohesion Index for Australia has sat at 78, the lowest measure recorded since reporting began in 2007.⁵³ While concerning, this figure at least indicated Australia's comparative resilience amidst rising anti-immigrant sentiment and the widespread outbreak of antisemitism in the wake of the October 7 attacks on Israel, phenomena which have been experienced across the Western world. However, whatever positive exceptionalism we might once have clung to was shattered by the horrific events at Bondi in December last year, which fulfilled the threats of violence alleged to have been made by large crowds at the Sydney Opera House three years ago. No Scanlon reporting is yet available to measure the impact that Bondi has had on Australia's social cohesion, but the migrant background of the perpetrators has raised serious questions over both our vetting of new arrivals and how well we have been acculturating them into the essential values that underpin our pluralistic and tolerant society. This is an existential problem, when you consider that 32% of Australia's current population was born overseas.⁵⁴

Although it may give the appearance of being a modern term that has only recently gained prominence, the concept of 'social cohesion' can be traced back to the earliest days of Australia's colonial democracy.

In 1856 *The Age* was already complaining about ‘an absence of social cohesion’ in an era shaped by the goldrush and individuals pursuing wealth with scant regard for the society they had only recently joined (and which many would quickly leave after either finding gold or giving up).⁵⁵ Indeed, if we are talking about the sheer number of migrants overwhelming a shared sense of community, the 2020s have nothing on the 1850s, when between 1851–1860 gross migration to Australia numbered 602,200 people, amounting to 93% of the 1851 population.⁵⁶

While the scale of the problem may have lessened from this historic peak, it is important to note that it has always been recognised as a problem. In 1884, long after the rush had ended, the *Sydney Morning Herald* was still making the argument that:



*One of the disadvantages which all new countries labour under is the absence of that social cohesion which binds together the inhabitants of towns, villages, hamlets and even small provincial cities in the old world. People who have grown up together from childhood, even if not thrown into familiar contact with each other, feel an interest in the welfare of their neighbours, are ready to lend them a helping hand in time of trouble, sympathise with them in sickness, and although separated by the differences of class, education, and worldly pursuits, do not regard them as strangers.*⁵⁷

Writing in the 1830s and trying to explain how the fledgling United States had dealt with similar centrifugal forces, Alexis de Tocqueville credited the strength of voluntary associations as the ‘schools’ of democracy that had helped glue a new society together.⁵⁸ This was equally true of Australia’s success in the 19th century. When, in our proliferation of Friendly Societies, Mechanics’ Institutes, Rotary Clubs and the like, we might even have outdone our American counterparts in fostering a pervasive culture of civic participation.

In the postwar period this participatory culture became a key vehicle of collaborative contact between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Australians, as the Menzies Government seized upon associative life as a tool of acculturation by sponsoring the Good Neighbour Councils/Movement (GNM). Formed in South Australia in July 1949, and launched nationally at the inaugural Citizenship Convention the following year, the GNM performed the dual role of assisting migrants and promoting positive community

attitudes towards them.⁵⁹ An army of over '300 affiliated organisations such as churches, government departments, sporting bodies, women's organisations, media, as well as employers and trade unions', the GNM focused on 'befriending migrants, inviting them into homes, introducing them to clubs and friendship groups and assisting with advice about Australian laws, customs, housing and education', while seeking 'to reduce migrant loneliness and create strong and lasting connections with Australian society'.⁶⁰

Like the Citizenship Conventions themselves, the GNM has been criticised for its assimilationist undertones, although their rhetorical emphasis would shift away from 'assimilation' towards the more culturally pluralist 'integration' as the 1950s wore on. The GNM's demise was notably linked to the advent of multiculturalism in the 1970s. It was replaced with a more state and migrant driven system of settlement assistance, that not only watered down the level of acculturation expected of migrants, but which arguably paid less attention to the need to promote positive attitudes towards migration amongst the broader community. It is this embrace of a two-way exchange which stands out as a key lesson to be learned from the approaches of this era.

It must be noted that the death of Australia's voluntary associations is more widespread than the demise of the GNM, with volunteerism having tanked even further in the aftermath of covid, at a cost to social cohesion that goes far beyond the confines of the immigration issue itself.⁶¹ This makes reviving something akin to the GNM logistically challenging, although there are positive precedents in community participation in settlement programs for refugees that have survived the participatory downturn, as noted by Lisa Button in her Dialogue Reflection.

In contrast to Australia's humanitarian intake, and the universal schemes of the past, skilled migrants now get no direct assistance in acculturating themselves to their new homes (under the assumption that their English and other skills already needed to be high to have their application accepted in the first place).⁶² Meanwhile temporary migrants are given even less incentive to acculturate, given they have no promise of becoming permanent members of Australian society. Even for those who do have access to Australia's remaining acculturation services, there are question marks over the efficacy of those services.

Peter Shergold, Kerrin Benson and Margaret Piper's 2019 report into settlement services for refugees found that only about 7% of participants in the Adult Migrant English Program achieve functional English by the end of the course.⁶³

If associations are no longer acting as conduits for the two-way process of acculturation, then employment and business connections now carry an even greater weight than they did during the Menzies era, when iconic projects like the Snowy Mountains Scheme, or even just the tangible output of a strong manufacturing industry, gave migrants a sense that they were actively involved in building the nation they now called home. What is as important, is that these visible outcomes also gave the wider Australian public a sense of what the new migrants were achieving, which the modern stereotype of a migrant job – say for example an uber or delivery driver or more positively a role in medical or aged care services – fails to recapture.

Beyond these stereotypes, which in both eras have the clear potential to be harmful, is the problem that if migrants are going into industries that are dominated by migrant workers, this severely curtails the level of social interaction taking place between 'new' and 'old' Australians. When you consider that the average job takes 8 hours of a person's day, it really is an irreplaceable opportunity for people to develop a sense that, whatever the background of their coworkers, they are all part of one community. Moreover, having industries that are only for migrants has the potential to leave people looking down on those industries, undermining Australia's longstanding egalitarianism. As union members jointly engaged in making steel or a Holden automobile, there was a genuine sense of equality, that even the most progressive recipient of a service from a migrant-dominated industry would struggle to replicate without any air of implied condescension.

The effects of technological change have altered the acculturation experience for



new migrants. The rise of working from home, means Australian workers can now spend less time interacting with their colleagues than only a few short years ago. New migrants can maintain digital connections with their family and friends back home, but also might maintain unhealthy obsessions with old-world politics or even sectarian divides, that would historically have been left behind.

Another seemingly innocuous way in which the digital world could be eroding opportunities for acculturation is in the quintessentially Australian realm of sport. Previously, one might have picked from one of Australia's many footy teams (notwithstanding the history of ethnically based soccer teams that were undoubtedly a barrier to social cohesion), these days a migrant can watch sport played in their home country online as if they had never left. This removes the opportunity that comes from actually attending games, the sense of community engendered when a local team makes the finals and all shops deck themselves out in their colours to celebrate. Australian sport remains one of the more resilient vehicles of acculturation, that can boast many successes in breaking down barriers, such as the Sydney Islamic community's embrace of Rugby League. Once again, this is a two-way street, with Hazem el Masri, or in the cricketing world Usman Khawaja, putting a relatable face on a religion that has often engendered fears in the 25 years that have passed since the September 11 attacks.

Religious faith, while often rife with sectarian animosities, can also be one of the most powerful tools of social cohesion, as an inculcator of the precepts of universal human dignity. This is particularly the case when it comes to a universalist (rather than nationalist) religion like the Catholic Church, which in the Menzies era brought together Irish, Italian and Polish Australians, and has since been interweaving an ever-growing diversity of migrants, now often from Asia, the Pacific or even Africa, into its parishes. Though Church attendance may be facing a long-term decline that even the religious enthusiasm of new migrants has failed to reverse, in the Catholic school system in particular, this process of breaking down ethnic barriers is proving as robust and fruitful as ever.

In contrast, some participants in the Dialogue lamented the strength of Australia's independent school system for weakening the potential for public schools to function as a great leveller and acculturator. However, as noted above, history suggests that attempting to coerce people into using public schools when they have faith-based objections to them, serves to entrench rather than dissolve divisions. There is a need to prevent religious schools from becoming completely cut off from the broader Australian culture, in which their graduates must ultimately be expected to participate and contribute. This problem may be greater for religious schools catering to migrant communities, as those communities may naturally have fewer avenues through which they are regularly exposed to 'Australian values'. But there is a

distinction to be drawn between ensuring this 'integration', and the more draconian 'assimilation' that restricting the choice of parents to opt for a religious education for their children would entail. It may be the case that the socioeconomic divides that the wealthier independent schools both reflect and help to entrench are a greater obstacle to Australia's social cohesion than any distinction to be drawn between religious and secular schooling,⁶⁴ but since those divides are far broader than the immigration issue they are beyond the scope of this paper.

Where religion truly becomes an obstacle to social cohesion is when it becomes the basis for political or legal separatism, such as in the rise of sharia councils and the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal that has caused widespread controversy in the United Kingdom.⁶⁵

Preventing so-called ghettoisation – whereby an ethnically and culturally distinct immigrant community reaches a critical mass such that they can cut themselves off from the broader society – has long been a goal of Australia's immigration policy.

However, the adoption of a hard prohibition on any form of discrimination between potential migrants based on their country of origin (outside of accepting refugees in response to specific conflicts) has made this a more difficult objective to actively pursue. Luckily, despite a lack of direct government intervention, Australia's immigration program still boasts a comparatively wide proportional distribution of countries of origin.⁶⁶ This has thus far helped to prevent the ghettoisation issues that have fuelled the rise of 'far-right' parties in Europe.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the problems other Western countries are experiencing should stand as a renewed warning for Australia not to become complacent, and some political parties are now openly calling for the reintroduction of restrictions on immigration from particular regions.⁶⁸

While immigration officials are currently prohibited from discriminating on the basis of country of origin or religion, they do have the ability to discriminate on the basis of political beliefs deemed incompatible with the values of Australia's liberal democracy. This includes not only support for political violence, but also things like a fundamental rejection of the rights of women. Social media vetting has become an integral part of a potential migrant's review process, helping to mitigate the inadequacies of a formal interview, in which a savvy interviewee can easily predict what answers are likely to aid their approval. The Abbott Government invested over \$100 million in an upgraded Visa Risk Assessment program, involving collaboration with foreign governments to vet potential migrants across their classified security databases. This resulted in the average visa rejection rate almost doubling from 1.8% to 3.2% by 2020.⁶⁹ The

extensive adoption of AI technology promises to further increase the rate at which potential threats are identified. However, there is never going to be a foolproof method of vetting migrants to eliminate all potential security (let alone social cohesion) concerns.

It is possible to identify groups that are more likely to be of concern. For example, it has been admitted that young men of Islamic faith are overrepresented in the case loads of ASIO and the Australian Federal Police, although the exact figures remain classified.⁷⁰ Imposing general rules based on this extremist minority would violate not only modern Australian ideals of equality, but also the longstanding Common Law precepts that justice is served individually rather than collectively and that 'it is better that ten guilty persons escape, than that one innocent suffer'.⁷¹ But, as Henry Ergas's recent submission to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion has argued, we must equally be wary of allowing cultural relativism to blind us to the fact that some theologies and belief systems are demonstrably more prone towards being used to justify violence than others.⁷²

After all, history shows us that tolerance is by no means the default setting of humanity, nor is liberal democracy the default political system of humanity. Both ideals took centuries to achieve, through a very specific set of historical and cultural circumstances, and even before our current crop of issues, that achievement was always imperfect.

When only 46% of people feel a sense of belonging to Australia, and an even more depressing 34% take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture,⁷³ our ability to defend our successes, not just amidst high levels of immigration but equally from the disillusioned masses born here in Australia, has never been more fragile.

Political Discourse and Polarisation

One cannot understand the recent expansion in the Overton Window of what is considered acceptable discourse surrounding the immigration issue, without placing it within a broader political context. Just as it was the depression of the 1890s that helped cement White Australia, and the geopolitical circumstances of the 1940s that set in motion the first steps leading to its gradual dismantling, so the current debate on immigration is inexorably shaped by the sweep of maladies currently plaguing not just Australia, but virtually all liberal democracies.

The most obvious of these, and the one where Australia is clearly faring worse than

comparable economies,⁷⁴ is the stagnation or even fall in living standards. It is little wonder that the public has become less convinced by the economic arguments in favour of high immigration numbers when their living standards are falling. Criticising migrants for exacerbating already overstretched housing markets and public infrastructure is low hanging political fruit, the picking of which is not even novel by the standards of recent memory. For example, in 2000, during a period now remembered for its comparative prosperity and optimism, New South Wales Premier Bob Carr was already declaring that Sydney was 'full'.⁷⁵ Such arguments have only gathered momentum in the wake of Covid, which slowed both private and public construction, while also leading to a backlog of migrant arrivals and departures that produced the most alarming figures for Net Overseas Migration (NOM). Alan Gamlen's Dialogue Reflection neatly explains the distortionary effect of this 'migrant splash'.

But as became clear in the salience of the immigration issue to the successful Brexit and Trump campaigns claiming to 'take back control', anti-immigrant sentiment also reflects a desire for greater political agency rather than purely economic or material considerations. Amidst a rapidly changing world in which voters feel that they have been left at the mercy of grand impersonal forces like globalisation, they want governments to respond to their demands and do something to control those forces.

Sovereign control was the core theme of John Howard's famous declaration that 'we will decide who comes to our country and the circumstances in which they come'. While controversial at the time, after the failed policy experiments of the Rudd-Gillard era, Howard proved to have established the terms of a bipartisan orthodoxy on border protection. Until recently, a delicate political equilibrium held, in which the Australian public accepted high levels of legal immigration provided strict border security was upheld.

Notably, in the aftermath of Brexit, Boris Johnson's Conservative British Government even promised to introduce an 'Australian-style' immigration system to emulate this 'success'.⁷⁶

Despite a lack of recent changes to border control settings, the general impression now is that the government has lost control of the immigration system. What might alarm even more people is that it never really had control in the first place, given that, as Gamlen explains, NOM is not a figure that the government has hitherto really tried to set because there are too many variables involved.

This can be seen in the fact that despite the government's promise to tackle the issue and the clear political imperative to do so, NOM rose by 101,000 people over the first quarter of 2026, an increase of 44,900 from the previous quarter.⁷⁷

Immigration policy settings are, somewhat inevitably, extremely complex, involving many streams, visa types, extensions and overstays. This opens the door to populist critiques that they have been deliberately made so in order to obfuscate accountability.⁷⁸ Particularly in a country like Australia which, as Hancock observed almost 100 years ago, is 'impatient of technique' and 'always disliked scientific economics and (still more) scientific economists'.⁷⁹

With the government increasingly defensive and looking for ways to make 'reasonable' cuts, it is the business community, such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce, which has been left to fight a rearguard action in defence of our current immigration levels.⁸⁰ This echoes the historic norm of political debates from Australia's past, going all the way back to the squatters advocating for the renewal of convict transportation in the 1850s. However, for that reason, it provides a foil for One Nation to take up the historic role of the trade unions, and thus potentially strengthen their appeal amongst what were traditionally Labor voters.

The feeling that Australia has lost control of both the economics of immigration and of the raw numbers is made worse by an overall pessimistic outlook, in which almost three-in-five Australians think that life was better fifty years ago, and a similar number expect it to be worse in fifty years' time.⁸¹ This helps set a mood of nostalgia in which cultural change is less likely to be viewed as 'progress' but instead the further erosion of a society that a majority believe used to function better than it does now. This is the backdrop to Hanson's call for a return to a 'monoculture', even if there are debates as to whether that is an accurate description of what we had 50 years ago when the official policy of multiculturalism was first introduced.⁸²



The rise of nostalgia is by no means limited to politics. It has been very evident in pop culture for over a decade, and many people have attributed this to the way in which the fragmentation engendered by the internet has hindered our ability to create new

cultural touchstones. Hence one of the easiest ways to replicate such touchstones is to recall franchises that existed back when we used to have a centralised media. This in itself speaks to a longing for a sense of community that heightens the potential for xenophobia. This is enhanced when so many migrants are temporary, and therefore unlikely to become a fully integrated part of the Australian community.

Such xenophobia need not be synonymous with racism. The evidence shows that many first- or second-generation migrants support cuts to immigration, a phenomenon often referred to as 'pulling up the drawbridge'.⁸³ It could simply be a response to the number of migrants being greater than we could hope to fully acculturate all at once, especially as the ratio of acculturated and recently arrived Australians skews ever more towards the latter.

Then there is technological change. This not only fuels polarisation by sending people down algorithmic echo chambers, but particularly in the case of AI, fuels a sense of instability and uncontrollable change. Immigration itself has always generated such change, and however much one can cite historic examples of positive effects, it might be the case that when there is too much change, this is a tap that people feel they at least have the ability to turn off. As progressive commentator Waleed Aly recently argued in his *Quarterly Essay*, many people:



*feel no freedom in endless, rapid cultural change and the dissolving of social norms by the internet, immigration or both. A certain stability in these norms is the thing that made them feel free action was possible, that they could act in the world in some broadly predictable way that allowed them to pursue their goals. They find themselves thrust into a world of cultural fracture in which they can make relatively few assumptions, and find themselves castigated when they fall foul of constantly changing rules they do not understand... Liberalism's confidence that humans are ultimately progressive beings seems to have overlooked how much we value stability, predictability and meaning.*⁸⁴

The last sentence refers to the rise of what has been called 'post-liberalism', the idea that complete freedom of choice has gradually eroded all social bonds and we need to re-impose some vision of 'the good life' for which the community should strive and which government policies should uphold. This is similar to what Menzies did with his famous 'Forgotten People' broadcast centred on the home, family and individual

exertion, that became the basis for numerous concrete policy interventions that were far from value-neutral.

For many modern Australian conservatives, from the Institute of Public Affairs to Opposition Leader Angus Taylor, that 'good life' is now couched in terms of the 'Australian Way of Life'. This phrase points to a far more decisive articulation of what Australian culture is than we have grown used to during the epoch of multiculturalism. What is clear, is that amidst all these circumstances fuelling a groundswell of support for immigration cuts and the defence of an Australian culture, decrying such sentiment as 'racist' is unlikely to have much political cut through – indeed, it is likely counterproductive, increasing rather than reducing the sentiment in question. There are undoubtedly elements on the fringes of the immigration debate that are explicitly racist, such as those that tried to hijack the 'March for Australia Rallies'. There is equally little doubt that this has had a negative impact on many migrant communities who feel themselves under attack.

But Australia's demographics, let alone our values, are such that explicit racism will never again be a vote winner, like it admittedly was in the first half of the twentieth century.

Channel Nine's recent attempts to link One Nation with the Ku Klux Klan were immediately repudiated by the party, and may well positively feed into their 'outsider' narrative as a concrete example of unfair treatment by the mainstream media.⁸⁵

While the latest Newspoll shows that two-thirds of Australians want fewer migrants,⁸⁶ as mentioned above, those opinions don't neatly overlap with the two-thirds of Australians who were not born overseas. Indeed, it might even be seen as a victory for acculturation and the inculcation of national sentiment that many first or second generation migrants want to 'defend' their new home by slowing the rate of arrivals to levels that they feel will be easier to socially and logistically accommodate.

A longstanding fear was that immigrants would not become politically integrated to the extent that they as individuals could support as wide a range of opinions as the local-born population. Senator Jacinta Price's controversial comments ascribing collective voting intentions to Indian migrants is just the latest expression of a line of thinking that similarly saw the Whitlam Government reject Vietnamese refugees as 'Asian Balts' whose anti-communism made them unlikely to vote Labor. Such aspersions are harmful because they treat immigrants as fixed collectives rather than free-thinking individuals, which is ironically the same charge that is often levelled against multiculturalism.

We should not fear the airing of such sentiment, which has a tendency to keep itself in check because of its liability to become a self-fulfilling prophecy by alienating the party making the claim from the ethnic group in question. But it does underscore the need to avoid tribalism, both of the ethnic and partisan variety, by keeping sufficient focus on what unites us as Australians. It could also be another argument in favour of maintaining a healthy mix of migrant origins and their geographical dispersal in settling here so that they are not in a position to be seen to sway elections or tempt governments to pursue such ends.

Designing the Future

While there are some legitimate concerns surrounding the divisive nature of the contemporary immigration debate, it has been helpful in scrutinising the limitations of our immigration system and acting as cause for reflection on the all too overlooked question of 'what is immigration ultimately for?'. As Robert Menzies declared, 'if truth is to emerge and in the long run be triumphant, the process of free debate – the untrammelled clash of opinion – must go on',⁸⁷ and that is very much the underlying premise behind the Institute's annual policy dialogues.

With the benefit of the dialogue's intense discussions and subsequent reflection, our answer to the question is clear: if immigration has made Australia, immigration continues to be about making Australia, or in the old terminology, nation building. This goal cannot be measured in raw economic number crunching, because while prosperity obviously helps social harmony, nations are not held together by wealth alone.

Menzies himself frequently warned against taking a 'materialist approach to issues which are supremely important to the future of the human spirit'.⁸⁸

Nations are held together by things that might be said to be of the 'spirit': sentiment, community, and a sense that we are all engaged, somehow or another, in a joint undertaking. Benedict Anderson's famous designation that nations are 'imagined communities' is not merely a critique, it is also a warning: you cannot ignore the importance of imagination and ideals, even if they are often difficult to pin down and define.

For this reason, the paper's policy recommendations focus on strengthening the sentimental bonds between Australians, ensuring that new immigrants are initiated into the community, and stabilising the flow of people so that this process becomes more sustainable. As befitting an exercise in applied history, the focus is very much

on fostering healthy *conditions*, rather than setting out the fine detail of contemporary policy settings:

1. Link temporary migration to Australia's capacity as a 'settlement society'

One of the strongest drivers of Australia's social cohesion used to be the manner in which the 'tyranny of distance' forced us to find ways to accommodate one another as we were all stuck in the Antipodes for the long term. We now have virtually the opposite problem, with roughly 10% of the population here on a temporary basis and given little incentive to immerse themselves in the Australian community and way of life. Australia has gone from being a 'settlement society' to something akin to a hotel.

We therefore endorse the suggestion made in Alan Gamlen's Dialogue Reflection that the vast majority of temporary migrants should be on a path towards Australian citizenship, and that the only way to do this is to tie temporary migration to Australia's capacity, both socially and in infrastructure, to take in new settlers. This may mean temporary economic costs, particularly in those industries which will have to wean themselves off temporary migrant workers.

But we ultimately need to shift our view of migrants from being mere economic units into potential 'new Australians'.

2. Consistently reiterate the obligations and benefits of citizenship to migrants and non-migrants alike

One of the greatest features of the Australian culture is that we are laid-back and tend to minimise the obligations that we impose on one another. As Joseph Cook said 120 years ago, we by no means want that 'disciplined out of existence' but we do need greater emphasis on why it is great to live in Australia and what each of us must do to keep it that way.

In the Menzies era, Harold Holt viewed Citizenship Conventions as the best weapon to combat anti-immigrant sentiment, and before that the Chifley Government had deliberately timed its Nationality and Citizenship Act to come into effect on Australia Day 1949. But these days the importance of citizenship ceremonies is often lost amidst the culture war rancour associated with 26 January – a date that continues to be the most popular day for these ceremonies, with 325 held on Australia Day this year,⁸⁹ and which has historical and cultural connections far beyond 1788. Chetna Mahadik's Dialogue Reflection reveals how disorientating our increasing lack of national celebration and pride is for recent arrivals trying to discover what this country is all about and truly buy in to their new home.



Amidst a declining civic culture, emphasising the obligations and benefits of citizenship should not be restricted to migrants, or school children for that matter. We all need an annual reminder, and indeed celebration, of the expectations and privileges that underpin our liberal democracy. Aiming such a message at the broader public also removes some of the patronising implications that may be associated with only making demands explicit to migrants.

3. Resuscitate a positive and confident narrative about Australia

This paper has made the case that acculturation is a two-way process that occurs most organically and smoothly when Australia has had a positive sense of direction. While we may not be able to solve all our economic woes and the sense of pessimism they engender, we can at least change how we talk about ourselves and our history. A sense of national self-confidence both encourages migrants to fully embrace the values of their new home, and lessens the anxieties of the existing population that often beget anti-immigrant sentiment and attempts to force assimilation.

Even Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has acknowledged this need, in his statements referring to 'progressive patriotism'.⁹⁰ However, there has sadly been little follow through in substance, as exemplified by this year's 125th anniversary of Federation, which has gone virtually unheralded. As Alex McDermott's Dialogue Reflection notes, this stands in sharp contrast to the Menzies era and the elaborate and year-long celebrations conducted for the Jubilee of Federation in 1951, which also produced long-term legacies like ubiquitous school flagpoles.

We would therefore recommend investments in Australian history, national storytelling and positive commemoration. This starts with schools, which should have curriculums with strong civics and democratic history components. But it must then expand across all levels of cultural engagement: investments in museums, public celebrations of important anniversaries, digital media, and in reversing the terminal decline in the study of Australian history at our universities.

4. Expand community involvement in migrant settlement

One of the sharpest changes to Australia's immigration program has been the way in which governments have almost vacated the field of migrant settlement, with most services now exclusively targeted at our humanitarian intake. Moreover, with many migrants brought over to work in industries that are dominated by migrant workers, chances for substantive and non-transactional interactions between recent migrants and the broader Australian community have diminished.

We therefore endorse the suggestion made in Lisa Button's Dialogue Reflection that we should create a modern equivalent of the Good Neighbour Movement, expanding on the constructive ways in which community groups are already engaged in settling refugees.

We need to encourage opportunities for engagement, exchange and collaboration between new and old Australians in as many forums as possible.

These can include everything from sporting clubs and playgroups to religious gatherings, entertainment, hobbies and other 'third places'.

5. Remove barriers to participation in the social and cultural life of the nation

While the atomisation of society is being experienced across the western world and is often linked to the rise of digital and social media, it is equally true that the cost-of-living crisis and other long term economic trends have imposed barriers to the classic forums of Australian social engagement through which we developed our 'democracy of manners'. While we cannot resort to widespread subsidies aimed at cost relief for fear of fuelling the inflationary crisis, governments should look to remove any artificial barriers to the frequent interactions that underpin our social bonding.

The most obvious is the way in which alcohol taxes have made going to the pub a luxury for the privileged few, in direct violation of our much-touted egalitarianism.



But across a whole stratum of social and cultural outlets, like football games and restaurants, taxation and red tape unnecessarily push up prices in a manner that encourages an already tempting habit of isolationism and retreat into the digital world. Food in particular has often been held up as one of the most self-evident and appreciated outputs of Australia's cultural diversity, so its accessibility is surely an important factor in selling migration's benefits.

Conclusion

The conditions underpinning Australia's formerly successful immigration policy have eroded as the discursive focus of the issue has shifted almost exclusively towards economics. For both their own dignity and Australia's benefit, migrants must not be reduced to figures in a fiscal calculation – one that often produces a fairly evenly balanced sum – and must instead be viewed as potential citizens who will make contributions towards and take on the obligations of a shared Australian community.

The intensity of the current debate should be seen as an opportunity to reset the conversation towards a more wholistic understanding of immigration's role in the broader goal of 'nation building'. We need to shift the terms of the discussion away from multiculturalism, with its implicit denial of the unique and positive attributes of a distinctive Australian culture, and instead focus on the two-way process of acculturation, through which the host culture evolves and is enriched without ever feeling overwhelmed.

Celebrating and insisting that migrants want to come to Australia, not to defy or degrade its fundamental values, but because they found them inspirational in the first place will help to reduce xenophobia and promote social cohesion, by relieving the anxieties of ordinary Australians and promoting a positive sense of direction in which everyone appreciates their role in furthering the shared project of the nation. A greater sense of civic obligation needs to be inculcated amongst migrant and non-migrant alike, particularly as surveys show national pride and hopes in the future are waning. We need to revive the Menzian principle that we are all 'part of a great procession', drawing strength from the past and passing it on to the future, particularly as the rate of technological and cultural change has left people disconnected and fractious.

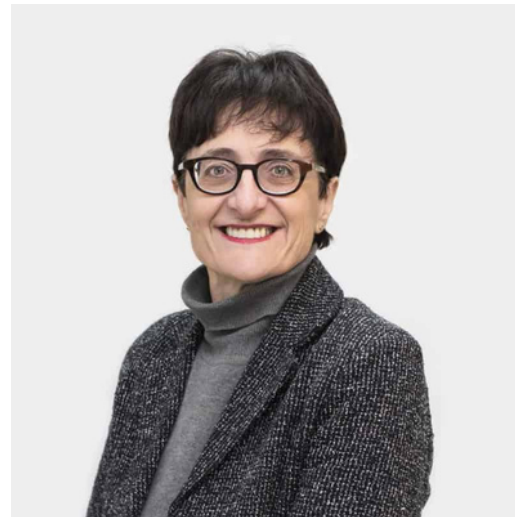
Assimilation fails because it tries to work through compulsion and eliminate the all too human sentimental ties of diaspora communities. But in rightly rejecting an assimilationist framework that was already being jettisoned by the late 1950s, Australia has lost sight of the greater imperative to ensure that our own national community is held together by bonds of sentiment that must supersede other loyalties and enmities for our liberal democracy to thrive as it has in the past.

Expert Reflections

Joy Damousi AM

I raise some issues today that might be able to point to ideas about a successful immigration program drawing on immigration policy in the period from the early-mid 20th century, 1901-1950s.

My first point is that a racial and/or ethnic based immigration policy does not work.



The cultural historian John Rickard noted how Australia's past demonstrates how Australia has wanted immigration but not immigrants. Early 20th-century legislation, such as the Immigration Restriction Act (1901), severely limited the Australian labour workforce as it actively excluded non-British citizens towards maintaining a British culture. But this was unsustainable.

The infamous Dictation Test – a 50-word test administered in any European language chosen by the immigration officer before non-European nationals could enter Australia – was designed not to be passed and few did. White British migrants did not have to pass the test, and it became an integral part of ensuring government policy of enforcing and protecting a British 'White Australia'. But workers were needed to build a modern Australia post-World War 1.

In response to this challenge, in the 1920s Prime Minister Stanley Bruce sought to modernise Australia with his slogan men, money and markets. The Bruce government embarked on a scheme beginning in 1924 to promote immigrant settlement to advance rural growth. It was targeted to British migrants – he hoped for in excess of 500,000 – but the scheme fell way short of its targets and aspirations. Only 200,000 arrived and most ended up settling in towns. The lesson had not been learnt about race-based immigration policy. At the same time, by 1924, the influx of immigrants increased from Southern and Eastern Europe with larger numbers migrating from Poland, Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania. To curb such numbers, in March 1925, the Australian government mandated that 'alien' immigrants possess £40 landing money, unless a guarantee could be provided that a sponsor would support them. Visas were also limited for Australia. From 1912, the test was used to exclude Europeans who were considered 'undesirable' for moral or political reasons, when other parts of the Act did not apply.

The post-World War II realization that Australia needed to 'populate or perish' forced the government to finally diversify its intake, eventually dismantling discriminatory

barriers by the 1970s. This demonstrated that skills and economic contribution, rather than race or origin, create a stronger, more sustainable society. But this was again not before targeting once again, British migrants in the 1950s, and then Scandinavian and Danish immigrants who did not come in the numbers hoped for. In the end, it was again, the Southern Europeans like my parents who were very low on the racial hierarchy who were eventually and reluctantly allowed in. In this context, the policy of assimilation insisted that migrants assimilate by shedding their heritage. But historical lessons highlight that successful integration requires government-backed settlement support, language services, and a broader policy and infrastructure of multiculturalism. The lesson is that calls to re-introduce a racialized policy need to be resisted; the past demonstrates how a non-discriminatory, skill-focused/humanitarian framework informs a robust policy.

Second, we have heard in recent times the call to revert back to previous immigration policies. But it is important to remember and remind ourselves that like all policies the immigration policy has evolved and changed, responding to global crises, wars, humanitarianism, labour and skills shortages, and so on. Immigration policy has never been static. Exemptions to dictation test were introduced in the early 1900s; as I mentioned in 1924 restrictions were further imposed as they were in 1938 to limit Jewish migration to Australia before the outbreak of war. In 1945, 1958, and 1966 changes were made respectively to the immigration policy, the end of the Dictation Test and the introduction of a skills-based policy, until when in 1973 the White Australia was finally repealed by the Gough Whitlam Labor Government. Calls to 'bring old policies back' or elements of it are nonsensical as they do not consider and respond to current realities, challenges and issues of our times.

Finally, let's think about principles in policy. As we are here at the Robert Menzies Institute I thought I would make some comments about the liberal tradition. In this tradition, individual merit and freedom of opportunity are at the core of classical liberalism. In some ways Liberal Party policies that promoted racial immigration policy ran counter to these principles. Prime Minister Harold Holt's reforms in 1966 where migrants were to be chosen on skills not race—could be said to embrace the true liberal principle that individuals should be judged on their skills, character, and merit, irrespective of their ethnic background. Freedom of expression is also part of that tradition. History demonstrates that granting individuals the freedom to retain and celebrate their cultural heritage fosters a resilient and dynamic society. The lesson is that true social harmony and liberal tolerance are achieved not through state-mandated conformity like assimilation, but through mutual respect and equal opportunity for all citizens under the law. My point here is that without an underlying set of principles guiding immigration policy framework, like any policy, it becomes a set of slogans – slogans which are reductive, overly simplistic and over generalising.

In summary what does early-mid 20th century Australian history tell us?

First, that immigration policy based on racial exclusion is poor workforce planning and management, and exclusion doesn't mean the need for labour goes away; in fact it makes it more urgent as it creates shortages.

Second, immigration policy needs to be contemporary, progressive, relevant and modern: it needs to be nimble and flexible and forward looking and take account of the issues of the day. It can't be retrospective or a throwback to earlier approaches. It raises questions of what it means to be Australian in the 21st century – in the society we are in now, not societies of the past. It also illuminates the question of how cultural pluralism should be embraced, celebrated and supported.

Third, immigration policy needs to be informed by broader guiding principles otherwise it will be simply slogans and catch phrases with no underlying, enduring meaning. In fact, it needs ultimately to represent a set of beliefs and values about the vision we share for our society today and into the future.

Alex McDermott

The torrent of contumely poured over Pauline Hanson for declaring that Australia needs a monoculture rather than a multicultural reveals just how thoroughly our public debate has lost its bearings.

To reject multiculturalism is now routinely condemned as racism, and enforces a taboo against interrogating a standing government doctrine. Yet in insisting that Australia's national culture is multicultural – 'who we are', as Anthony Albanese would have it – and in assuming that any monoculture must inevitably be defined by ethnicity, the political class makes a category error. By mistakenly reducing culture to a question of ancestry, contemporary multiculturalism, in one of the stranger historical ironies of national policy, repeats the foundational error of the White Australia Policy it was meant to erase.



Our national identity, our culture, is not defined by ethnicity. It never has been. If it is defined by anything, it is defined by democracy.

Ethnic diversity was a fact of our democratic history before it was converted into a defining ideology. The attributes we routinely invoke to describe the national

character—the fair go, an unpretentious egalitarianism, an easy-going tolerance, and a quiet, low-key everyday freedom—are not simply a set of idiosyncratic national quirks. These defining traits are intrinsically liberal democratic values, localised and nativised into an everyday vernacular.

Thomas Keneally called this our 'etiquettes of equality'. Historian John Fitzgerald identified it as an egalitarian ethic. Historian John Hirst has given the phenomenon the most thorough excavation, and he called it Australia's democracy of manners. Its key was treating each other as affably familiar equals, whatever the actual differences of background or status.

It took root early out of sheer practical necessity on the ground, as settlers from hostile Irish, Scots, and English backgrounds were forced to navigate an alien environment together without separate residential enclaves, and where mixing was a defining feature from the very first arrivals—residentially, occupationally, in childhood associations, and ultimately in marriage. Old World enmities were minimised, explosive sectarian subjects avoided. People concentrated instead on shared material progress, leisure, and open participation. This created an upside-down antipodean reality where status distinctions were fluid and class rigidities minimal. The striking success of Australian Jews in this early matrix stands as the first authentic proof that this social creed was never limited to those of British stock, demonstrating that a multi-ethnic experiment flourishes when particularised differences are secondary to a common civic status.

This ethos became baked into our national sensibility, our way of doing things round here. It was insistently informal, lacking the codified political religion that developed elsewhere. There was little 4th of July razzamatazz or ecstatic Bastille Day rejoicings.

The very informality of our democracy of manners is due in part because, unlike elsewhere, here we developed a democratic *culture* well before we had a democratic *politics*. Australia's good fortune meant that workers, even during the convict era, were prosperous and self-confident, and felt no need to show special respect in order to get work. The relative lack of a destitute pauper class, and the fact that the rich were largely self-made men from obscure origins, who shared the same interests, recreations and passions (racing, football, cricket and social drinking featured prominently up and down the social ladder) in a strikingly open market economy where opportunities for achieving, if not great material success, perfectly respectable modest comfort and leisure were open to the great majority.

People in other parts of the world fought for democracy because, as Hirst put it, 'they wanted respect for ordinary people, that they should not be humiliated and scorned by their "betters".' Here this was achieved outside of politics, which came after. It was built on a democratic social order which joined equality with mutual respect, and

prized an individualist form of sociability whilst seeing no stigma in manual labour nor any great claim to favour for those who had succeeded better than others.

Elsewhere civic fervour was needed to protect both the new democratic culture and the new institutions. In his 1838 Lyceum Address Abraham Lincoln warned that free societies, lacking heavy formal authority, are uniquely prone to internal collapse. To prevent public debate from degenerating into rancorous hatred, Lincoln argued that reverence for civic laws must 'become the political religion of the nation' and be taught not just in schools, seminaries, and colleges but 'preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice', whereby 'the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colours and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars'.

Yet, especially in the decades after Federation, Australia did not lack civic liturgies which aimed to build common allegiance. In the 1900s, curriculum reforms placed a deep, viscerally felt civics at the heart of schooling, specifically designed to inculcate a commonly shared civic identity. This was explicitly aimed to, in the words of Peter Board, NSW's leading education reformer, counteract the tendency to 'let the social group to which he belongs do his thinking for him'.

The curriculum was big on inculcating gratitude to previous generations. Walter Murdoch's school text *The Australian Citizen* told its student readers, whose cohort included a young Robert Menzies: 'We are born free, but we would not have been born free if it had not been for the struggles and labours of others'. A civic pledge of fealty at the school flagpole, supported by the later Menzies Government providing flags for Federation's 50th anniversary in 1951, continued well into the 1960s.

Despite this, our democracy of manners never became an official political religion. Our political religion, strange to say, was civic Britishness.

It is easy to become sniffily dismissive when talking about Britishness, but we'd do well to resist that temptation. Far from being a narrow racial category, Britishness in Australia was a liberal, creedal, and civic project—a shared inheritance extending back to Magna Carta that no single group could claim exclusively.

Crucially, this was a pervasive factor throughout the whole national culture, not restricted to those who claimed ancestral connection. Novelist David Malouf's father, a Brisbane-born Lebanese Melkite (Greek Catholic) was 'passionately Australian', but whose patriotism included a strong feeling for England, 'a place he had no connection with and had never seen'.

For Malouf senior, this British heritage represented a civic and cultural code: 'fair play, decency, manliness, concern for the weak and helpless, a belief that life, in the end, was serious'. We can see how easily this sense of Britishness co-existed with Australia's democracy of manners.

With the dissolution of the British Empire in the 1960s and Britain joining the European Common Market in the 1970s, this protective sheath was lost. The result was a collapse of our civic consciousness and a collective amnesia regarding the centuries of struggle that produced our democratic life. While the increased focus on the millennia of preceding Indigenous history offered a perspective we could all gain from, we lost any deep understanding of our democratic roots, even as we continued to cultivate, in our day to day lives, the democracy of manners.

Into the vacuum stepped multiculturalism.

Taken purely as a descriptive reality, a multi-ethnic society was of course an already established fact. Postwar assimilation under Chifley and Menzies achieved this through what Frank Knopfelmacher termed 'benign neglect and steady upward absorption'. Yet 'Assimilation', however subsequently notorious as a term, functioned as aspirational rhetoric rather than interventionist state policy—the lack of government resourcing or any concrete state programs to realise it is, in retrospect, startling.

Instead, new arrivals were largely left to their own devices to establish their own lives, while the gravity of daily life integrated them, seemingly ineluctably, into the broader nation. By any metric you care to conceive of—intermarriage rates, the absence of ghettoisation, the rapid first-generational integration, not to say the effervescence of associational life in sports clubs, chess clubs, and social groups devoted to particular regional cohorts—the peaceful absorption of such high proportions of new arrivals was unmatched anywhere in the world. The democracy of manners continued to reign supreme.

This ethos survived into the multicultural era, where its easy-going tolerance was, a little unfairly, claimed by policy advocates as the creation of their own social project. That informal, organic tolerance—getting along, eschewing airs, and ignoring status differences in pursuit of a harmonious life—remains the aspect of multiculturalism people overwhelmingly approve of in surveys.

But the actual meaning of multiculturalism as a state-driven policy is not this. However it is packaged, multiculturalism is the recognition of groups of individuals according to fixed ethnic criteria. Strikingly, the same people who by large majorities say they approve of multiculturalism are hostile to this.

It's not hard to see why. It's at fundamental variance to the democracy of manners – the willingness to treat each other as equals *without regard* to very different backgrounds and status. Whereas diversity was something in the 19th century treated with realistic wariness, because of the dangers of antagonism erupting, by this official creed the opposite is the case: not just interest in different backgrounds, but their celebration, is now compulsory.

This is what people don't like, and what they have expressed resentment about in every decade since the policy's official inauguration, especially when it is coupled with a tendency to downplay and repudiate the core national culture, to ignore it or diminish it in comparison to all the others, to the point that people are nowadays even hesitant to acknowledge the obvious, that we do in fact have a coherent and perceptible national identity and culture, for fear of sounding 'racist'.

Moreover, multiculturalism, as Donald Horne pointed out, 'gives us no clue about unity. Instead it takes for granted the existence of a unity that the embrace of diversity is supposed to build upon and be in counterbalance against'.

The challenge for a liberal democracy, then, is clear. Can we continue with a social policy formally committed to the contrary of its day-to-day meaning for ordinary Australians, and the opposite of our democracy of manners?

Perhaps we could get away with it while drawing on the social capital of a high-trust society built up by the powerfully positive democratic practices of many previous generations. We are at a dangerous point now though, I hope not a tipping point, where the disintegrative, centrifugal forces natural to any open society are becoming ever more intense.

My proposition is that multiculturalism, begun as an aspirational liberal project, is producing increasingly illiberal consequences. It needs to be discarded, and a new national policy for integrating both new migrants and our emerging generations of school students developed, one which puts at its very heart a shared commitment to the nation we live in. Restoring explicit civics and national history to the national curriculum, abandoning ethnic-specific state grants, and reasserting common civic citizenship over hyphenated identities should all be deployed as policy strategies which ensure Australia's national culture continues to be a lived, shared democratic inheritance we can pass on to the generations which come after us.

Michael Brennan

Immigration policy touches on so many aspects of our national life: politics, culture and social cohesion, settlement patterns and economic outcomes. It is unsurprising that the issue attracts a diverse range of voices, and that, at times, these perspectives can seem at cross-purposes.

One of the great strengths about the Robert Menzies Institute's forum on immigration was the way it integrated many of those disparate



approaches. If anything, the contributions were characterised by a general modesty about whether a single perspective can offer the definitive, decisive view on the matter.

So it is with economics. Immigration brings significant benefits, but also costs. On the benefit side, there are huge gains to migrants themselves, measured in lifetime incomes but supplemented by the large non-pecuniary gains that come with a new life in Australia. There are also significant economic gains to parts of the Australian community: say universities or employers. The costs (congestion, other strains on infrastructure) are usually more widely diffused across the population.

Therein lies the challenge. Immigration creates huge value, and imposes some costs, but the costs and benefits are largely borne by different groups.

When economists have sought to compare observable costs and benefits (a subset of the considerations that actually motivate individuals), the results suggest that, in aggregate, the net gains or losses are fairly finely balanced.

For example, the Productivity Commission found relatively small positive effects from immigration overall. They noted that one thing missing from the debate was a rigorous estimate of the full lifetime effect of an additional migrant on the public finances.

Traditionally this caused a distortion in the way governments decided on the annual permanent intake.

The size of the intake has fiscal consequences, especially over the four years of the Budget forward estimates. On average, those fiscal consequences are positive, because working age migrants pay tax and – within four years of arrival – cost little in terms of transfer payments (pensions or unemployment benefits).

This means that lowering the permanent intake involves a cost to the Budget over the forward estimates. Budget rules generally require that this cost be offset by savings elsewhere in the portfolio. Ministers are reluctant to make those offsetting cuts.

But is this the right way to think about the issue? Clearly migrants will age, and later in life will make more use of pensions, health and aged care. The lifetime cost is different to the four-year forward estimate costs.

In recent years, Treasury has more rigorously estimated the lifetime fiscal impact of an additional permanent migrant. The headline figures are interesting, but so too some of the detail that sits beneath the estimates.

When Treasury first undertook this exercise, it found that the net present value of the budget impact of an additional migrant was a positive figure of \$41,000. It was higher for skilled migrants (close to \$200,000 on average), negative for family reunion visas (minus \$126,000) and more negative for humanitarian (-\$400,000).

Interestingly, the benchmark for comparison – an Australian born resident – involves a net present value of -\$85,000, reflecting our persistent fiscal deficits which imply that most people draw more from the budget than they contribute in taxes over their lifetime.

Within the skilled stream, the positive numbers are higher for the primary visa holder (over \$500,000) than for the secondary visa holder (around \$50,000).

A critical feature of these estimates is that the net figure is comprised of large offsetting gross amounts. The average migrant was estimated to bring in over \$500,000 in tax revenue over their lifetime, and incur a little bit less in costs to the Budget.

Of course, the timing of these flows is key. Migrants contribute a lot early in their life in Australia and cost more later on. So the net calculation is highly sensitive to the discount rate chosen. A high discount rate effectively downplays future costs, whereas a lower discount rate emphasises them.

In many other contexts, like infrastructure project evaluation, there are calls to reduce the discount rate, which would make more projects viable. In immigration it's the other way around. A lower discount rate implies that the average migrant is more costly, and militates in favour of a reduced permanent intake.

To demonstrate the point, Treasury calculated that with a 4 per cent discount rate (instead of the standard 5 per cent), the average migrant generated net fiscal costs of \$45,000. At a higher 6 per cent discount rate, the net fiscal benefit was \$82,000.

Finally, Treasury disaggregated the main drivers of the net fiscal impact. If the average skilled migrant (back at the 5 per cent discount rate) generates net fiscal benefits of \$200,000 while the average locally born Australian generates a loss of \$85,000, then there is a \$285k difference between the two. When Treasury examined the contributors to this gap, they concluded that most (\$170k) was due simply to the different age profile of migrants relative to the domestic population.

In other words, the biggest single driver of the net fiscal benefit of a skilled migrant was their age (specifically, their relative youth). There are many ways to read that result, but one reaction might be to query whether more of the gap should come from Australia's ability to pick particularly highly performing workers, not just younger

ones. In other words, should we be doing better in terms of the migrants we select?

And could we be doing better in supporting migrants to achieve their full potential once here?

More recent work by the e61 Institute has focused on how migrant labour is distributed across the economy by examining the firms in which recent migrants work.

We found that migrants are, on average, more likely to work in low productivity industries like hospitality or in administration and support. Naturally this is truer of student visa holders and working holiday makers than it is of permanent skilled migrants.

But controlling for industry, we also found that within each sector, migrants were more likely to work in firms in the bottom two quintiles of firm productivity. Non-migrants are disproportionately employed by firms in the top two productivity quintiles.

Again, this is not true for the skilled components of the program, but it is for others. This could reflect a degree of misallocation, and some of it could be due to the complex rules we impose on the system.

Other e61 work has looked specifically at regional visas – those which provide additional points towards permanency for those working in regional locations.

The visa invokes a slightly surprising definition of 'regional' in that Perth, Adelaide and Canberra fit within it. The e61 research showed that regional visa holders tend to earn less than other skilled migrants by gaps of 10–40 per cent. On average, once their visa conditions expired, they were able to earn (on average) \$5,000 more by moving location.

It is possible that the rules we apply are holding back migrants, and reducing the size of the overall economic contribution they could be making to Australia.

If anything, the most likely upshot is that economics offers marginal guidance on the optimal size of the permanent migration intake. Economic considerations are probably secondary to the sorts of dimensions discussed at the forum around cohesion, diversity and national identity.

Economics might have more to say about the composition of the intake, and the rules governing different streams within the overall program. One key theme from the RMI discussions was the pressing challenge of a large stock of temporary visa holders

who are currently in Australia but will have challenges achieving permanency because of their sheer numbers.

The question as to whether we have relied too much on the temporary part of the program links back to the point made at the outset: there are big gains from migration, but the gains flow to particular parties. There is considerable temptation for rent-seeking when a regulated activity confers big benefits to specified groups.

The combination of rent-seeking with elements of centralised bureaucratic control (e.g. skills lists) are probably the biggest barriers to Australia achieving the best outcomes from its immigration program.

Julie Szego

Should the rise in antisemitism and fraying social cohesion prompt us to admit that we have shifted too far from the postwar ethos of insisting migrants assimilate or integrate?

Probably, yes.

It's no surprise that the global eruption of antisemitism after the Hamas invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023 prompts us to question

Australia's immigration settings. The idea that anti-Jewish hostility is an early warning sign of a democracy in peril was a guiding principle of postwar political thought. Sadly, today's intelligentsia sees the warning as special pleading aimed at suppressing debate on Gaza.



My own family history, while not necessarily typical, reveals much about the cultural and policy shifts of recent decades.

My migrant Jewish parents, Holocaust survivors, came from Hungary via Israel in 1960. I doubt they ever knew who Donald Bradman was, but they made an outsized contribution to Australian society. My mother became a GP at a time when there were few women doctors, let alone migrant women doctors, let alone migrant women doctors who arrived with an eight-year-old in tow — my older sister. My father also qualified as a GP and later, a psychiatrist.

While he was studying to convert his degree, my father took a job as a 'ward assistant' — a cleaner — at Melbourne's old Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital; humiliating enough without the German orderlies taunting him with antisemitism.

But Jew-hatred was largely suppressed as the assimilationist social compact insisted migrants leave the fixations of the old country behind. Besides, memories of the war were still fresh and shaped the political culture. It's a recurring theme in the story of Australian Jews: wars matter. The outcome of wars overseas, and the way our leaders frame those wars, directly influence the power dynamics between ethnic groups here.

My parents experienced intense cultural alienation as Europeans in an Anglo-centric country, but rarely as Jews. (My mother swiftly learned that asking for tea with lemon risked social death!) Back then, almost every minority, from Catholics to Chinese, suffered some degree of marginalisation.

What's fascinating from my vantage point is that while Jew-hatred was suppressed, my parents' Jewishness was likewise muted. For instance, my sister has no childhood memories of candle-lighting on Friday nights, a commonplace ritual these days even in secular families.

It took almost a decade before my parents experienced an awakening of Jewish consciousness — and the confidence to boldly show themselves. For this we can thank two developments: Israel's victory in the Six Day War in 1967, which unleashed euphoria across the Jewish diaspora, and the cultural earthquakes of the 1970s that enshrined multiculturalism as government policy.

When SBS was introduced, our home life changed profoundly. Finally, my parents saw themselves and their concerns reflected on TV. The tyranny of distance from the world, from Europe, eased with each episode of *Inspector Rex*, the German canine detective.

Australian multiculturalism found its sweet spot — and then lost it.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and before 7/10, I'd assumed the main threat to multiculturalism came from radical Islam. The past three years revealed the problem goes beyond migrants to the mainstreaming of regressive ideologies. You know the drill: brown-skinned people are oppressed, white-skinned the oppressors — and to which group do you suppose Jews are allocated? To be clear: I have no interest in being allocated to the victim group. The whole schema is false.

Post October 7, Jews confronted the reality that the very spaces organised around principles of inclusion and anti-racism were impotent, at best, in the face of exclusion and racism against Jews. This is the key distinction between the casual prejudice my parents encountered in the 1960s and the new antisemitism: during the era of the White Australia Policy racism in all its forms was common as a backyard weed, whereas now, at a time when anti-racism is akin to a state religion, only one minority

is deemed less worthy of protection than others.

Examples are many and absurd.

A Victorian multicultural commissioner, also vice president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, persistently amplified blatant antisemitism on social media — including posts depicting Jews as the devil — while remaining in his position as ambassador for social cohesion. The Australian Human Rights Commission responded to the infamous ‘Fuck the Jews’ Opera House protest with a statement more concerned with safeguarding the right to protest than with combatting antisemitism. When Australia’s Antisemitism Envoy recommended (contestable) measures to address antisemitism at universities, where Jewish students suffered daily harassment, leading intellectuals accused her — accused the Jews, really — of seeking to muzzle ‘criticism’ of Israel and undermining democracy.

When Jews complained about institutional antisemitism, the standard response from organs of state was condemnation of antisemitism as just one form of racism, all of them lamentable. Or, worse, they paired antisemitism with Islamophobia, obfuscating the reality that contemporary Jew-hatred has its epicentre in the Islamic world. In other words, our present crisis cannot be fixed simply by being more selective about the migrants we let in and by trying to force more integration.

Another presenter correctly diagnoses our underlying ailment: a fraying of the civic compact that governs how we manage disagreement. We can disagree on fundamental issues, he argues, so long as we agree on respecting freedom of conscience, adjudicating arguments through institutions and accepting the legitimacy of outcomes we dislike.

Alas, what to do when the professed agenda of one side of the argument is delegitimising the institutions of liberal democracy as irredeemable structures of ‘settler-colonialism’? Worse, this subversive view has become embedded within the institutions themselves. Is it too late?

So the problem goes beyond our immigration settings. Still, changing those settings is a good place to start. My daughter was intimidated on campus by an encampment set up by a Palestinian on a student visa. At least give her the dignity of being intimidated on campus by Australian citizens.

There should be nothing controversial about Angus Taylor’s proposal for ‘values-based’ immigration: it sends a timely message to both migrants and locals. Admittedly, the proposal is challenging for the progressive side of politics where, aside from the electoral considerations, there’s genuine reluctance to accept that brown-skinned people can be as racist as everyone else.

Even after the Bondi massacre it took days before Anthony Albanese was prepared to name Islamic extremism as the problem. He kept talking about neo-Nazis — a problem, undoubtedly. Just not the problem on this particular day. Let's tackle our problems a day at a time.

Chetna Mahadik

I participated in the Robert Menzies Institute's 2026 Policy Dialogue in my dual capacity as the General Manager of the Institute and editor of the 2026 collection of essays, *Immigration & Multiculturalism: The Past, The Present and the Future*.

In this reflection, I want to add another role — that of a first-generation migrant from India with the lived experience of what it takes to truly adopt a new country and make it your own.



Much is made of the difficulties, discrimination and unpleasantness that migrants face when they move to a new country.

Decades of investment in research, policy, education, activism, cultural festivals, department building and personnel training have resulted in our society building a strong and emotive lexicon to describe the experiences of migrant communities in Australia and demand change.

In comparison, the study into what a migrant must do to become a contributing 'citizen' of Australia is studied considerably less so.

If it is studied at all, it is in economic terms — how quickly can we convert a migrant into a net contributor to the Australian economy — but seldom in terms of the values and habits of mind that citizenship in our particular liberal democracy demands.

In fact, so little is this aspect studied that it goes entirely unremarked that we give migrants the *choice* to enjoy the fruits of Australia's freedoms and prosperity permanently without ever taking on the core responsibility of citizenship — namely, participating in the messy process of elections on which our freedom and prosperity fundamentally depend.

Even at the Dialogue, it was the 'residency status' of migrants that got much attention — the number of temporary residents in the country, the impact this has had on the economy and public services, and whether fast tracking them to permanent

residency would actually help resolve some of the tensions within our migration program. However 'citizenship', as against residency, and its role and responsibilities were never made explicit in the discussion.

As with everything, history helps us explain this anomaly.

Our current migration policy and programs emerged in the postwar era, when global connectivity through travel and instant telecommunications was comparatively scarce.

Until the advent of the internet, laws of physics ensured that migrating to Australia – a far-flung island on the bottom end of the planet – meant losing touch with the day-to-day minutiae of one's home country's political and cultural upheavals.

As traumatic as that might have been – and I don't underestimate the sense of unfamiliarity and isolation that must have assailed migrants – it forced their attention to their immediate physical and social environment, and attention is the currency of citizenship.

Sooner or later, most migrants would awkwardly dip their toes into the unfamiliar public conversations of their adopted country, encounter new friends, make a few faux pas, learn from them until the language, names, events, rituals, concerns and values that dominate our national conversation would become theirs too.

The hyperconnectivity of the internet, and more significantly, the arrival of smart phones and social media have upturned these assumptions. Because now migrants can physically live in one place but remain seamlessly embedded in their social, cultural and political lives of their home countries through their phones.

As an Indian migrant, I have encountered many fellow migrants who seem to know the results of every provincial election in India in real time but would not be able to name all the states and territories in Australia.

Unfortunately, the success of a democracy (as against other forms of government) requires that we pay attention to our local communities, neighbourhoods, cities and states – if we don't do that, our local environment degrades.

How do we confront this problem without impinging on a migrant's freedom of thought?

We can do so by equally investing in research, policy, education, cultural festivals, department building and personnel training on what citizenship in Australia means

how our liberal democracy depends on the people self-governing, and what obligations come with such self-government – and addressing the conversation directly to migrants.

What once happened through osmosis must be made explicit.

(In fact, all Australians could benefit from such a conversation in a world where powerful social media are constantly drawing our attention away from what is playing out in our immediate physical vicinity.)

However, lest we become too demanding of migrants, it would be worth asking ourselves why do migrants psychologically and attentively cling to their home country?

It is because human beings crave continuity, familiarity and memory.

It may be all very good to ask migrants to give up the familiar and comfortable, but are we doing enough to connect them into the national memory of Australia? Because it is only when they plug into the national memory of this country that they will start decoupling from their countries of birth.

Most adult migrants plug into the national memory of their adopted country by looking around and absorbing the national symbols and traditions – the flag, the anthem, important national days, public statues and memorials, museums – they all hold clues as to what happened on this land before their arrival.

Yet, in recent times, it has become fashionable not just to question national symbols and traditions, but to actively scoff at them or vandalise them.

While low-grade activists quite literally hack off colonial public statues and memorials (something that has happened multiple times in Melbourne in the last few years), a more sophisticated vandalism is taking place in our national museums, which are steadily purging themselves of pre-federation heroes and stories. Lest they come across as celebrating colonisation, or because it is no longer fashionable to chronologically tell our national story.

The result is the same – new migrants lose avenues to connect with how the liberal democracy they have migrated to came about. Celebrating our Indigenous past is important and worthwhile but we must acknowledge the truth that most migrants don't choose Australia to pursue Indigenous culture.

I'll end with a quote by Robert Menzies that has become the Institute's talisman as it steadily encourages engagement with Australian national history:



It's only when we realise that we are part of a great procession, that we're not just here today and gone tomorrow, that we draw strength from the past and we may transmit some strength to the future.

Migrants can't draw strength for the future, if they are unable to understand and appreciate Australia's past. So, let's be gentle with our history, so we can pass it on to future citizens – whether they come from elsewhere or are born here.

Lisa Button

Immigration is both beneficial and unavoidable. Let's focus on making it work.

This reflection is focussed on the question that seems to keep surfacing (or lurking) in pretty much every forum on immigration in Australia: Putting aside the question of numbers and different migrant pathways, how can Australia continue to embrace migrant newcomers while also remaining a cohesive, unified country?



My contribution to this important question, expanded upon below, is that Australia's immigration system needs a social strategy alongside its population, economic, housing, infrastructure and foreign policy settings. Such a strategy would guide how we build and maintain the intercultural infrastructure needed for a country in which Australian-born residents and new arrivals know one another across divides of culture, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status. That kind of connectivity – grounded in shared humanity, respect for the rule of law and respect for cultural difference – would build on the best features of modern Australia and underpin Australia's future success.

The Menzies-era Good Neighbour Movement recognised the need for this kind of strategy to support high levels of postwar immigration. Today, as policy makers and community leaders debate Australia's immigration numbers and probe questions of multiculturalism and community cohesion, we need to once again ask how to grow or regrow the connective tissue of modern Australia.

But first, as one of the few people involved in the Dialogue whose day-to-day work involves supporting the arrival and integration of migrants (specifically, refugees), it's incumbent upon me to start with a reminder of both the benefits of migration, and

the necessity.

While recognising the rich history, colonial dispossession and continuing presence of Australia's First Peoples, few would dispute that migration has delivered substantial benefits to what is now modern Australia. Migration has built the population and workforce, supported economic growth and regional development, lifted productivity and employment among Australian-born workers, and strengthened innovation through the skills, enterprise and global connections migrants bring. It has also helped Australia respond to our ageing population and expand its human capital, while enriching our communities culturally, socially and civically. In short, migration is foundational to modern Australia's prosperity, personality and global relevance.

Refugees are no different from other migrants in their history of contribution to Australia's success. They are a diverse group, with forced displacement their only common feature. Once people have had the time and support required to overcome the difficulties caused by their upheaval, they contribute as much, if not more, than other migrants.

As I shared during the Dialogue, having worked in this space for more than 15 years, I have yet to meet a refugee whose aspiration is to come to Australia and live on welfare for the rest of their lives. Like other migrants, refugees are typically robust, resilient and aspirational for their futures and those of their children, and very keen to contribute to the success of Australia. For many, resettlement in Australia has provided the first opportunity to put down roots and build something solid. Former refugees are everywhere in our communities – building homes, caring for the elderly, working in professions, running businesses, employing other Australians.

In addition to being beneficial, immigration is also inevitable and necessary in a complex, unequal and globalised world. The simplistic public rhetoric around immigration forgets that good policy needs to be considered through the lens of foreign policy as well as domestic considerations.

I recall global refugee law expert Professor James Hathaway describing refugee law as the 'sluice gate in the dam of immigration control, raised or lowered by states to avoid rampant flooding or the cracking under pressure of the dam itself'. Australia's post-Tampa attitude to asylum has already narrowed the sluice gate, with our humanitarian migration program one of the few remaining channels relieving the pressure of human suffering and need caused by global conflict and persecution. Or, put in more practical terms, the availability of safe and orderly humanitarian pathways give hope to people suffering in acute danger and prolonged states of limbo, and offer an important alternative to dangerous (mostly irregular) forms of migration.

The sluice gate analogy is relevant not only to our humanitarian intake, but to immigration in general. We may be an island, but Australia cannot stand apart from a complex world marked by globalised trade, economic interdependence, wealth inequality and eye-watering levels of human displacement. For a large and wealthy country that aspires to peace and constructive global engagement, a strong and well-managed immigration program is both a practical necessity and a responsibility.

Socially, economically, environmentally, culturally and morally – immigration is a fact of modern Australia. We can debate the numbers and the composition, but one way or another, it is here to stay so we should focus on making it work!

Which leads me to the topic of social cohesion and the social licence required for the continuation of various immigration streams and programs. Immigration will not deliver its full potential, and will remain a source of debate and conflict, if we can't overcome 'us versus them' thinking.

Through my work in promoting 'community sponsorship' of refugees over the last 8 years, I've noted a dearth of large-scale initiatives that encourage everyday Australians to get to know newcomers in ways that break through the silos of culture, language and religion. We have world-class settlement services but the gap I'm flagging is not a case management gap, it's about social connectivity. Many Australians are simply not engaging with 'stranger newcomers' (i.e. those with whom they have no pre-existing social links) other than in incidental or transactional ways.

I can't tell you how many times I've met newcomers who claim that they've never been in the home of 'an Australian' (however they may define that term). Unfortunately, conflation of nationality and race are common in these sorts of discussions – notwithstanding that I am a first-generation migrant, my whiteness apparently labels me as clearly 'Australian', while my more ethnically colourful Australian-born peers are frequently assumed to be migrants.

To ensure a cohesive, multicultural society that can continue to benefit from immigration, we need to be intentional about ensuring that more newcomers and established Australians meet one another in meaningful ways and I'm not confident that we have the necessary tools. The public school system has traditionally played an important role. Indeed, many Australians who grew up in the 1980s or earlier talk about positive and formative intercultural experiences during primary school days (sampling their classmates' food, homes and ways of living). But with private education on the rise, parents increasingly time poor, and location-specific demographics, we can't rely on school communities alone to forge these connections.

Some places of worship embrace a wide range of different ethnicities, but do not engage with people who have different religious beliefs.

While local sporting clubs play a helpful role, their capacity to build intercultural links is also limited by suburban demographics, with socio-economic and structural forces leading to the clustering of many new migrant groups in certain locations.

Nor can we rely on workplaces, as building understanding and trust require people spending time with one another in contexts where they show up as 'whole people', not just as workers or consumers.

Australians, new and old, need to meet one another in ways that highlight that we have far more in common than we have differences.

The Good Neighbour Movement of the post WWII era was an attempt to create the social connective tissue that I'm referring to. Launched nationally in 1950 after earlier instigation in South Australia, a Commonwealth-supported network of state Good Neighbour Councils mobilised churches, welfare bodies, community organisations and thousands of volunteers to help newly arrived migrants settle and to build public acceptance of postwar immigration.

It was a creature of its time, operating during the 'White Australia' era and often critiqued as being assimilationist rather than multicultural in its agenda. While I'm not an expert on this initiative, I also suspect it was heavily reliant on the usual members of the unpaid care economy – women and retired people. However, while we might critique it through a contemporary lens, the instinct behind it was well-founded.

More recently, national programs like the Community Refugee Settlement and Integration Program (CRISP) show what can happen when everyday Australians are invited to take an active role in welcoming and supporting the integration of refugee newcomers. Aside from boosting economic participation and other settlement outcomes, the value of the social capital created is priceless. An ABC Australian Story episode recently featured a group of Jewish Australians who welcomed Naima, a Somali Muslim woman, and her 21-year-old son Feisal through the CRISP, leading to a deep and abiding 'family like' relationship that transcends differences in religion and culture. In Feisal's words, the question that really matters when people meet face-to-face is 'Are you a good person, and can we get along'.

Whatever the numbers, whatever the composition, an investment in a culture of 'welcoming' and fostering strong intercultural social connections is needed to ensure that we truly capitalise on the nation building benefits of immigration. Such an investment would also support strong social cohesion and inoculate our leaders and citizens from the temptation to scapegoat migrants in times of social or economic stress.

Alan Gamlen

Governing migration beyond the headline number

One of the clearest points to emerge from the Robert Menzies Institute Policy Dialogue was that Australia's migration system has lost public confidence. Participants differed about how much migration Australia should have and which categories should be reduced. Beneath those disagreements lay a more fundamental question:

why does the system appear so difficult to control, and what framework might restore its legitimacy?



Australia faces two distinct migration challenges. The first is the short- to medium-term task of stabilising the system after the global pandemic. The second is the longer-term, poorly governed growth of the temporary migrant population. Public debate has blurred these challenges together. We have mistaken a short-term migration splash for a permanent flood, and a long-term migrant stock problem for a short-term migrant flow problem.

The extraordinary net migration figures after COVID were not simply the result of a government deciding to admit an unprecedented number of new migrants. The pandemic produced the largest disruption to human mobility in modern history. Borders closed. Arrivals collapsed, but so did departures. When borders reopened, migration did not return smoothly to its previous trend. It rebounded, overshot and then began to settle. This pattern, which my colleagues and I call a 'migration splash', occurred across many high-income countries.

Australia's experience was unusually dramatic, and the resulting pressures were real. Unplanned population growth can pressure rental housing, infrastructure and public services. Governments should have anticipated the rebound and coordinated migration more closely with housing and services. Yet the interpretation of the headline figures was often wrong. Australia still experienced fewer cumulative arrivals than expected without the pandemic. The unusually high net figure arose substantially because departures remained depressed as delayed movements, extended visas and disrupted plans worked their way through the system.

This distinction matters because net overseas migration, or NOM, is useful for describing what happened but a poor target for deciding what should happen. NOM is not a visa category or a number government can directly set. It is the net result of temporary and permanent migrants, Australians and New Zealand citizens arriving or

departing, and people changing their plans. It is inherently volatile, especially after a major shock. Chasing an annual NOM headline encourages reactive policy and obscures the choices migration policy requires.

The deeper structural challenge is not one year's flow. It is the stock of people living in Australia temporarily. The temporary migrant population has grown from about 2.7 per cent of Australia's population in 2012–13 to more than 6 per cent by 2024–25, while the permanent program has remained comparatively small and stable. Australia increasingly relies on people who live here, work here, pay tax here and form relationships here, but remain conditional members of the community.

Many public concerns sit here. Temporary migrants are heavily represented in rental housing and particular labour markets. Their status can expose them to exploitation. Many spend years moving between temporary and bridging visas without a realistic pathway to permanence. Employers become dependent on a rotating workforce, while communities absorb growth without the stability of settlement and membership.

This is why the conventional argument between 'higher migration' and 'lower migration' is inadequate. Lower what? The permanent program? International students? Skilled workers? Working holiday-makers? Partners of Australian citizens? New Zealanders? Returning Australians? An instruction to 'cut NOM' sounds decisive but conceals rather than resolves these choices. We could reduce permanent migration while leaving a large temporary guest-worker population in place. We could deter students who leave on time while ignoring long bridging-visa queues. We could cut skilled pathways needed in health and construction while preserving dependence on insecure, low-wage labour. Where precise control is required, focusing on NOM invites imprecision.

Peter McDonald and I have therefore proposed a different governing rule. The temporary population grows when temporary net inflows exceed the number of people converting from temporary to permanent status. It shrinks when conversions exceed temporary net inflows, and stabilises when the two are equal. This is an accounting identity, not a theory or a forecast. Its policy implication is straightforward: temporary migration should be anchored to Australia's permanent absorption capacity.

When Australia admits more people temporarily, it must either provide more realistic pathways to permanence or accept continued growth in the temporary population. When it does not want that population to grow, temporary net inflows must remain broadly aligned with conversions to permanent residence. This would replace pursuit of a volatile net number with deliberate governance of the population Australia is creating.

It would also reverse the order of migration planning. At present, Treasury arbitrarily assumes a NOM number, projects the resulting population, and governments then scramble to provide housing, transport, schools and hospitals. We should start at the other end. First, determine transparently the population growth that housing, infrastructure, labour markets and services can sustain. Second, decide what temporary population is consistent with that capacity and with Australia's democratic values. Third, set temporary and permanent immigration streams to achieve and maintain that balance.

This is not a defence of unlimited migration. It would constrain temporary inflows and force harder, more public choices about the permanent immigration program. Employers would lose some short-term flexibility, and housing and workforce needs would sometimes point in opposite directions. Better administration, data and visa decisions would be essential. But the trade-offs would at least be explicit.

The philosophical issue matters too. Australia is not merely a labour market. It is a settlement society and a liberal democracy. A large population of long-term temporary residents—subject to our laws but unable to become full members of the political community—sits uneasily with Australia's egalitarian tradition and social cohesion.

The central question is not whether one is 'pro-migration' or 'anti-migration', or whether next year's NOM should be 200,000, 250,000 or 300,000. It is how much long-term temporariness a settlement state can responsibly sustain. Australia should stop governing migration through a noisy annual flow target and start governing the temporary population directly—linking temporary mobility to permanent absorption, and linking both to the country's capacity to house, employ and include people. That would produce a system that is smaller where it needs to be, more permanent where it ought to be, and more accountable to the Australian public.

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Appendix

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