

# The moral dimension of immigration - a neglected issue

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*The following article is the text of a response developed at the National Immigration Outlook Conference sponsored in November 1990 by the Bureau of Immigration Research. The response was a reaction to two papers. In the first, Mr. Phil Ruthven argued that Australia's likely population one hundred years hence would be about 150 million, located mainly in the north of Australia. He suggested this to be worthwhile and advantageous and to think otherwise was to be guilty of isolationism. Using the perspective of demography, Dr. Christabel Young questioned a continuing high level immigration policy, arguing that «over the next 20 to 30 years Australia does not need immigration to stop the population from shrinking or to boost the labour force and a high level of immigration is not a solution to the ageing of the population». Both papers are available from the Bureau of Immigration Research.*

With the emergence of new patterns of international migration, the fashioning of Australian immigration policy needs to be more outward-looking. It ought not be based purely upon any self-centred philosophy focussed on national sovereignty and selfish economic grounds or ecological rationale. A humane and democratic society will be cognizant of the moral and value considerations, grounded in a larger view of humanity, that move us beyond the narrow boundaries of the nation state.

As both papers point out, historically our population growth has been inextricably linked with substantial immigration. It is this strong emphasis on immigration for economic, demographic and other reasons that is currently under critical public scrutiny. Both papers appear to adopt a slightly different policy stance on this issue. Whereas Dr Young is cautious and restrained about the future scenarios, the other presenter, Mr Ruthven, is more optimistic and futuristic in claiming that Australia is able to, and indeed, should sustain, as he puts it, significant increases in population. In the light of these two contrasting but informative presentations, and given the limited time at my disposal, let me make some brief and general observations on the wider issues being raised regarding the *nature, form and direction* of Australian immigration policy in the foreseeable future.

## I

It is clear from Dr Young's Paper, that she is not arguing for Zero nett

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immigration. The issue raised by her is the crucial but difficult question as to what should be the optimum if not ideal *size* of the population. Dr Young has shown us clearly how the facts of demography are helpful and relevant in arriving at an answer to this vexed question. But this demographic contribution, valuable as it is, is nevertheless constrained and limited by the fact that it has always to be considered in conjunction with other factors such as economic, political and ecological considerations. Furthermore, demographic forecasts are "notoriously fickle"; and it is for this reason that "very little can be said about the long term effects on ageing" (Dixon & Foster 1982: 154). In view of these limiting constraints, the demographic thesis can never be considered independently of these other factors. Indeed, as Dr Young puts it, demographers cannot by themselves decide what the ideal population of Australia should be.

Turning to Ruthven's paper, I strongly endorse Ruthven's plea that, in fashioning our immigration policy, we need to be more internationally-oriented, forward-looking and ready to challenge the conventional wisdom of the past. In this challenging task of becoming more future-oriented, the past may indeed be a poor guide to the

future, and even a hindrance. Clearly, the orthodoxies of the past such as those based on the "populate or perish" logic are no longer tenable or relevant. For instance, our defence and national security is no longer dependent on large masses of people, neither is our economic growth seen to be exclusively dependent on enlarging our domestic markets. In brief, we need to radically re-examine the prevailing philosophy of immigration for supplement in the light of the emerging economic blueprints, particularly those scenarios implicit in what is now being dubbed the "clever country". Put differently, the economic justification for higher levels of immigration needs to be substantiated differently, influenced by the choice we face in the future between "re-industrialisation" and "de-industrialisation". Labour supplementation through immigration will vary markedly, depending on what form the economy takes in the future. And this in turn, must also have profound implications for the continued, uncritical and often inflexible adherence to a doctrine that stipulates that immigration, in terms of labour flows, must be exclusively, if not primarily, for settlement.

The need for new policy strategies is further reinforced by changing patterns



of international migration evident in the 1980s and likely to continue in the 1990s. Kritz (1987), analysing these trends globally, shows that international migration has taken on a new pattern and is dominated by new types of migration flows such as increased reliance on contract labour, illegal immigration and refugee migration. While the demand for permanent residency remains high in the traditional immigrant receiving countries, total intake has fallen since the 1960s. Indeed, As Kritz (1987) asks, we need to ask whether some form of "temporary migration" is the evolving norm.

Given the impact of the forces of the international political economy, especially the increasing interdependence of the global economy, the weakening of the national state boundaries, and the emergence of powerful regional groupings (e.g., ECC and ASEAN) may weaken the Primary Labour Market (see Portes 1981). This approach suggests that we move away from simple "push-pull" or "supply demand" accounts of migration, and look at the relationship between migration and other international processes such as movements of capital, technology, displacement of workers and refugees.

All in all, international trends as well as domestic considerations appear to indicate the need for some radical rethinking about the rationale and strategies of conventional immigration policy. Among other things, this necessitates the adoption of a more flexible policy approach towards migrant recruitment and settlement, especially as regards temporary workers and residents. And, this in turn will require policy makers to devise ways and means of regulating and controlling these new types of migrant inflows that will no doubt continue to exist and grow alongside the traditional patterns of permanent settlement.

## II

Beside, looking at how Australian immigration policy reflects and is influenced, like other countries similarly placed, by changing international trends, there are, also, other powerful factors of a more domestic nature which will impact on the future direc-

tions of immigration policy. Perhaps, the most significant feature of Ruthven's presentation is his forthright account of how Australia's integration with the regional economy has a significant bearing on the directions of immigration policy. Echoing the sentiments of the Garnaut Report, Ruthven too seems to imply that immigration policy is a major component of Australia's integration with the Asian-Pacific economy. Clearly, it needs to be recognised that there is a strong link between immigration and foreign policy that became first evident with the abrogation of the "White Australia" policy in the 1970s. This has certainly become more influential today, especially as we come to terms with the *political, economic and moral* imperatives of our regional location as a middle range power whose future destiny is indelibly enmeshed in the Asia-Pacific Region.

There is no doubt that if we continue to pursue our restrictive immigration policies and tightening trade and aid policies, we will only confirm our insularity, our self-centred policies, as a wealthy and "alien" enclave in a "hostile" Asia-Pacific environment. This can only be to our long term detriment. This message is loud and clear, even if we choose not to hear.

## III

There is, however, in all this a neglected aspect of immigration policy and one which is manifest particularly in relation to our regional links. I refer here to the *normative* dimensions of immigration policy that have been recently brought to the fore by Peter and Renata Singer (1988) in their absorbing essay on the ethical and moral aspects of immigration policy. There is no doubt that we have as a country earned much international goodwill for our humanitarian policies relating to refugee settlement and family reunification. Sadly, this unenviable record is under threat from a variety of sources, especially the growing forces of the "anti-immigration" lobby. Our ethical and moral attitude towards foreign aid and immigration outsiders and in particular refugees and seekers of asylum, needs to be spelt out more clearly and forcibly.

The current orthodoxy is based on the *doctrine of rights* which states that any sovereign state has the *right* to control who comes and goes; but what is most important about this approach is the question of *how* this right is to be exercised in such matters as those involving the claims of outsiders seeking admission on the grounds of family reunion or persecution or oppression by foreign powers. The conventional wisdom is that we have no formal obligation to accept these outsiders unless we invoke in their defense Walzer's "principle of mutual aid". Interestingly, Walzer (1963) used the example of Australia to illustrate when we might invoke this principle of mutual aid. Thus, he makes pointed reference to Australia as a nation with vast unoccupied land and suggests that we have an obligation in terms of *mutual aid* to take in people from the densely populated and poverty stricken lands of neighbouring South East Asia. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Australian scholars like David Scott (1979), who, referring to the social reasons for immigration, observed that among other considerations, "more people may be needed to legitimise our occupation of a sizeable and well resourced land mass" (Scott, 1979: 75).

However, in contrast to Walzer, the Singers have adopted a different philosophical stance in justifying our obligations to refugee and other outsiders similarly placed. They argue persuasively that our immigrant policies should be governed by invoking the notion of *equal interest* derived from utilitarian theory, i.e., as one which maximises desirable and pleasurable outcomes. Immigration policies, they contend, should be governed by an *equal consideration of the interests* of all those affected, either directly or indirectly, by an aspect of immigration policy such as those concerning family reunion or admission of refugees. What this requires is that we determine rationally and morally which of the affected interests ought to prevail in a given situations such as when there is a conflict of interests. The fact is that we always encounter a complex mix of interests and the critical issue is to determine the rationale and logic underlying the choices we make. This choice lies importantly in *how* we determine



the *balance* between competing interests, and this often is a normative issue, a question of ethics and moral choices. For instance, we need to consider economic or ecological interests along with the moral claims of affected groups such as refugees. And, following the moral argument of the Singers, one solution to these dilemmas is by adopting the ethical criterion of given *equal weight to equal interests*. In short, how we strike this *balance* is as much a matter of fact and reason as well as of moral principle.

It is not my intention to explore the logic and validity of the competing ethical principles and moral arguments, but rather to underline the fact that moral and ethical issues are implicit in much of our thinking about future immigration policies and that these warrant closer and more careful scrutiny. In a humane democratic society, such as ours, we cannot and should not leave these policy decisions to technocrats, demographers, economists and social scientists. It is as well to remember that, as Martin Rain (1976) has rightly noted, policy develops within a "policy paradigm", i.e., a framework of values, beliefs and procedures and it is this total paradigm we need to consider.

Let me conclude by recalling the prophetic words of Lord Bruce in 1926 when he summarised the great problem of the Empire and Australia in three words: *Men, Money and Markets*. These still ring true, and the challenge for the 1990s remains one of apprehending the connection between *Migration, Production and Markets* in, above all, a rapidly changing domestic context and an uncertain international environment.

In facing this challenge, we need to avoid the recipe of a bland economic rationalism: the static and cold version of the "New Right" as well as the more comforting, softer versions of the Left. My plea is that we do not lose sight of the large vision of humanity, of a nation that is outward looking and has a balanced commitment to a sense of justice which goes beyond the narrow boundaries of the nation-state. To echo the perceptive and sensitive words of His Excellency, the Governor, Dr McCaughey, in this Opening Address, in a forum such as this, we need to be

constantly reminded, in an age dominated by pragmatic economic rationalism, that "morality too has its own logic".

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