THE PEOPLE

A.W. MARTIN

I N 1939 just over seven million people lived in Australia, making the Australian continent in theory the most sparsely populated in the world. But thin settlement was not part of the daily experience of many Australians. The picture of an empty Australia must have seemed remote indeed to the poor who lived in the slums of the capital cities, or to officials who wrestled with problems caused by metropolitan congestion, or to shop and office workers who travelled every day on crowded trains and trams. It was, however, a picture fostered in popular consciousness by illustrated books and magazines, newsreels and even occasional feature films: an image made up of such things as gibber-strewn deserts, thin forest lands and vast cattle stations.

The romantic vision of an 'empty' continent: a shearer lingers under the verandah of the Birdsville pub to watch the sunset over a vast Queensland plain. Walkabout, Dec 1966.

Ironically, those who did understand this remoter Australia, the Aborigines, were not always thought of as people at all, let alone Australians. When population figures were produced for censuses or published in year books, Aborigines were not normally counted. Nor did they enter seriously into the calculations of geographers and economists who between the wars vigorously debated the population 'problem' posed, as they saw it, by Australia's 'emptiness'.

How many people could, or should, Australia support? In the early 1920s, when ambitious plans were being made for British settlers to migrate to the Dominions, some enthusiasts thought the sky the limit. As the Sydney geographer, Griffith Taylor, wrote: 'One may pick up almost any daily paper and read some statement to the effect that Australia has unbounded natural resources'. Taylor found such ideas 'tiresome and absurd'. So too did a number of economists and scientists who then and in the next decade became interested in trying to work out an 'optimum population' for Australia: the maximum number of people who could be supported by a changing local economy without lowering living standards.

Their calculations were ingenious, complicated and never free of guesswork. The extremes differed enormously. A German geographer, Albrecht Penck, thought in 1924 that Australia could easily carry 480 million people, while a

pessimistic Australian, Gerald Packer, decided in 1933 that the existing population of 6.5 millions was already too large. Summarising the dozen most important estimates of the interwar period, W.D. Borrie has shown that, if the extremes are omitted, they range between 10 and 132 millions, with an average of 36 millions. The 'experts' were less optimistic than the journalists and popular orators.

Pessimism was strengthened by the difficulty of imagining where new population could come from. No-one seriously hoped for any natural increase, for in the depression years of the 1930s the Australian birthrate had declined so steeply that statisticians were predicting an actual fall in total population without immigration. But not many held out hopes for that, either. In an article on 'The future of the Australian population', S.R. Wolstenholme in 1936 argued that if past experience was any guide, immigration would be too irregular and too small to stop an overall decline in the population beginning in about 30 to 40 years. Eight years later, a report of the National Health and Medical Research Council predicted that migrants coming from traditional sources would be far too scarce in the foreseeable future to offset the continuing decline in the birthrate.

Far from declining, in the next 30 years Australia's population doubled—from seven to fourteen million people; and far from proving unobtainable, immigrants and their children accounted for more than half the increase, as a succession of Australian governments mounted one of the largest mass migration programs of modern times. Instead of failing to replace themselves, native-born Australians registered to 1961 an upsurge of births so striking as to be called a 'baby boom'. For 30 years there was no more talk of the 'problem' of 'optimum population'.
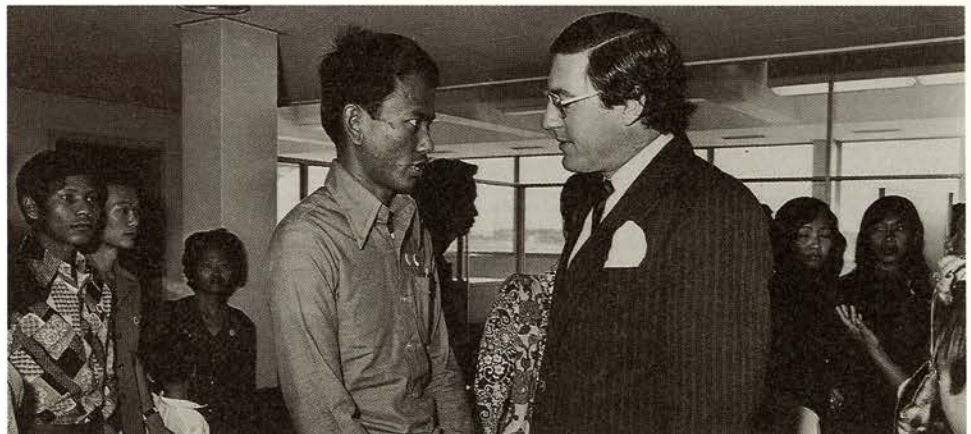

Early postwar British immigrants greeted by the prime minister, J. B. Chifley, and his immigration minister, Arthur Calwell, 1947.
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC AFFAIRS

Michael MacKellar, minister for immigration and ethnic affairs, with Indo-Chinese refugees on their arrival at Tullamarine airport, 1977.
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC AFFAIRS

Spectacular economic growth, it seemed, made population increases not simply acceptable, but essential. Growth did falter eventually in the 1970s—to revive the old population debate in new forms. But in the meantime the ethnic and cultural composition of the Australian people had been transformed, and Australians had been left groping self-consciously for new understandings of who they were.

How did the change come about? Why did the gloomy predictions of the 1930s and early 1940s prove so wrong? One part of the story begins with World War II. The invasion scare of 1941–42 bred a sharp sense of insecurity in which most politicians were quickly converted to 'population-building'. As one of them put it, there was a need 'from a defence point of view, of populating this country with virile people'. War's requirements had also forged new developments, particularly in industry, which suggested that Australia could tackle many other tasks besides defence if only it maintained a growing population. Meanwhile, the sufferings of war in Europe produced the migrants that the prewar pessimists despaired of finding—refugees seeking asylum and people anxious simply to find somewhere to live a fuller life. 'I hope', declared Arthur Calwell in 1942, 'that ... the people of Europe, who will be tired of two blood baths in one generation, shall have ample opportunity to come to this country and settle after the war'. Then a backbencher, Calwell spoke often and imaginatively about the mutual benefits which immigration programs could offer both to Australian society and to the distressed of Europe. In 1945, partly at his prodding, the Chifley government established a new Department of Immigration and appointed Calwell its first minister. By 1947 he was ready to announce an ambitious scheme for increasing the Australian population by one per cent a year through immigration.

By then Australians demobilised from the armed services, men particularly, were being taken relatively painlessly into the labour force, and 'full employment', the government's major postwar aim, was being maintained by sustained economic growth. The problem was to find workers, not—as in the depressed 1930s—to

'Back home', *oil by Sali Herman, Sydney 1945. Returning servicemen were quickly absorbed into the labour force after 1945, and a search for migrants began.*
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Soldier into shop assistant, G.J. Coles' staff magazine, Sept 1946.
COLES MYER LIMITED

create work. The traditional Labor fear that immigration would rob the Australian-born of work evaporated before this unfamiliar oversupply of jobs. The immigration program won support on all sides. Translated into people, the one per cent target meant that 70 000 migrants a year had to be found, transported and persuaded to stay. All would be Caucasian, and nine out of every ten, the government promised, would be British. The old White Australia policy was to remain intact.

But not enough people wanted to emigrate from the United Kingdom, and ships to carry them were in short supply. In Europe, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), which had shipping at its disposal, was meanwhile looking for homes for the thousands of displaced persons (DPs) in its camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. Most DPs came from Baltic or central and eastern European countries, to which they had no wish to be repatriated. In Calwell's eyes they were ideal immigrants. 'Many were red-headed and blue-eyed', he wrote later. 'There was also a number of natural platinum blondes of both sexes. The men were handsome and the women beautiful. It was not hard to sell immigration to the Australian people once the press published photographs of that group.'

To these people, and to other refugee groups then in need of asylum (Maltese and Dutch were the most numerous), the Australian government decided to extend assistance with passage costs, jobs and accommodation. It was a genuine humanitarian gesture, but hard-headed administration also made it pay well. As Egon Kunz has noted, careful selection creamed off 'the young, strong and healthy' and left behind 'the maimed, ill and incapable'. The passage-price was an agreement to work for two years in any job to which the immigrant was directed. Thus the immigration authorities created a healthy and flexible labour force which could be used quickly for essential services and development projects and at the same time kept out of competition with Australians.

The fall of the Chifley government in 1949 brought no change in immigration policy. Harold Holt, the new Liberal immigration minister, was if anything more enthusiastic than Calwell. Between 1947 and 1951 310 000 assisted settlers arrived, 165 000 of them DPs and 120 000 British; another 160 000, chiefly British, Dutch, Italians, Greeks and Cypriots, paid their own passages. About one per cent of them decided not to stay, and some Australian-born people emigrated during the period. But when all such losses had been allowed for, the annual net migration in the first five years of the program that Calwell had started was 110 000, well over the original target of 70 000. But the British proportion of new settlers was only 41.4 per cent, a long way from the dreamed-of 90 per cent.

The new government hoped at first to push the annual inflow of migrants to an unprecedented 200 000, but economic difficulties in the early 1950s made this impossible. Though confidence grew again later in the decade (the official target for 1958, for example, was 125 000), net immigration averaged only 78 000 or 0.8 per cent a year. The 'credit-squeeze' of 1960–61, during which unemployment rose to 3 per cent, again briefly retarded immigration. But migrants had accounted for 73 per cent of the increase in Australia's workforce between 1947 and 1961, and continuing growth in their numbers seemed to some employers and politicians essential for economic prosperity. In line with these sentiments Menzies and his ministers steadily increased settler targets from 145 000 for 1966 to 175 000 in 1970—the highest since 1950.

So successful was the Immigration Department's recruiting at this stage that its policy attracted renewed criticism. While economists worried about inflation, others were concerned that migrant numbers were growing too quickly for state governments to supply enough schools, hospitals and other welfare institutions.

Arthur Calwell, architect of the post-World War II migration program, greets a happy newcomer.
NATIONAL LIBRARY

Harold Holt, Menzies' first minister for immigration, shows as much enthusiasm for migrant newcomers as had his predecessor, Arthur Calwell.
NATIONAL LIBRARY

LIFE AT GRETA CAMP

I was seven and a half when we arrived. My earliest reactions were of heat—it was very hot and the heat got worse. I was, for the first time, acquainted with flies in great numbers—I still remember them everywhere—in the food, the drink, stuck on the floor and on the sticky table. Evelyn and I both got scarlet fever and had to go to hospital because we were infectious—it was our first stay among Australians, as we saw only nurses and doctors. We tried very hard to swallow our mince whole, and our sago pudding we called 'frogs eggs'—we couldn't eat it at all.

I remember learning carols on my first Christmas and not knowing what the words meant—I only knew they were Christmas songs.

We had a very unchristmassy tree all decorated up for us. We received presents and had a party—but what a party! There were things that we had never seen before and could not seem to get down our throats—red sauce which spoiled the food, cakes with thick hard icing which we broke off and fruit cake which took me years to get used to. There were things like fruit salad that were sickly sweet and lollies we used to call 'chalk lollies' because that is how they looked and tasted. But we had as much food as we wanted to eat at the camp, and that was something none of us were used to in war-torn postwar Europe. Food was a luxury and there was plenty of it—heaven! I remember my sister Evelyn put some food into her pockets and my mother, instead of being cross, just cried when Evelyn said to her, 'I put it away for tomorrow because tomorrow they may not have enough for us.'

C. MEDER

The history and recollections of an immigrant family (unpublished manuscript)

Children playing at a migrant hostel in 1950.
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

The lively argument which these and other criticisms raised was still in progress when in 1972 the Whitlam Labor government came into office. Heeding the concern of social critics, it first cut the immigration target moderately, then, as economic inflation mounted, pruned it drastically. Just 25 years after it had begun, the era introduced by Calwell's policies came to an abrupt end.

Where had the migrants come from, and why? Had the whole movement been what the statistics suggested: a successful transplanting of population from one side of the world to another, to everybody's benefit?

People from the United Kingdom, while not coming in the numbers hoped for by Calwell and the later planners, were still the largest group of migrants. Almost a million had arrived by 1970, accounting for more than 40 per cent of all settler arrivals during the period and 86 per cent of those who received government assistance. They did not come in a steady stream. At the end of the 1940s, as we have seen, shipping difficulties restricted their movement. Then in the 1950s improved conditions at home, including social services better than those Australia offered, dampened the urge to emigrate. But in the 1960s tougher economic times made Australia more attractive, and who, after a dreadful northern winter in 1962–63, was not tempted by propaganda that told of sunny Australian beaches?

Meantime, as refugee programs drew to a close in the 1950s, the numbers of displaced persons had dropped off. New refugees appeared in their place: Hungarians fleeing after the failed revolution of 1956, White Russians escaping from communist China, people leaving Tito's Yugoslavia. At the same time German, Dutch, Greek and Italian migrants came in unprecedented numbers, many of them—especially Greeks and Italians—at their own expense. Official policy perpetuated the old Australian prejudice that southern Europeans were less desirable settlers than northerners. As a result only 18.5 per cent of the Italians who arrived in Australia between 1945 and 1957 received government assistance. The others paid their own way or were financed by relatives already in Australia, a tribute to the continuing power of the 'chain' migration which had brought many of these people to Australia before the war. But in the early 1960s, while the attractiveness of Australia for British migrants grew, the numbers of other Europeans willing to migrate fell away. The countries of the new European Common Market were now tasting the rewards of economic co-operation; and some, Germany in particular, were enticing 'guest-workers' from southern Europe to their factories. Why travel across the world for work, especially if one had to pay one's own way?

So in the late 1960s, just as pressure was mounting in Australia for higher immigration targets, the old sources of settlers, except the United Kingdom itself, were drying up. To attract the desired numbers the government had to adopt new policies and look for migrants in communities not tapped before. Changes that began in this way were soon to have far-reaching consequences.

First, assistance with passage costs was extended to Greeks and Italians, whose numbers began to recover after 1966; and when Spaniards and Portuguese were
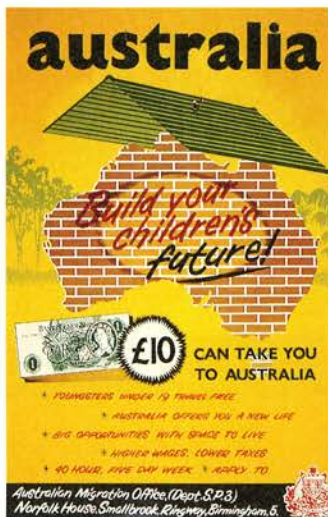
similarly treated, a trickle of settlers arrived from those countries too. Then in 1967 came something altogether new: an agreement with Turkey to extend the assisted-passage scheme to selected Turkish citizens.

The new groups of migrants came to receive government assistance because both public opinion and government policy had gradually revised earlier attitudes about the kinds of people who might be welcome to become future Australians. Already, several years before the Turkish agreement, the Department of Immigration had been actively seeking migrants in the Middle East and interpreting entry rules loosely enough to encourage some Lebanese and people of mixed European and non-European descent to come to Australia. The strict White Australia principle was slowly crumbling. Calwell and the postwar Labor government had sternly applied that principle, even forbidding Australians who married Japanese women during the Allied occupation to bring their wives home. Liberal governments after 1949 proved a trifle more adventurous, allowing a few thousand Asians who were wartime refugees to stay, but such changes were timid and did little to satisfy increasingly outspoken opponents of the old policies.

Two celebrations of the Italian presence.

Below.
A mural in Fremantle.
AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

Italians make good Australians

ITALY IN SUBURBIA

Left.
The Hills hoist shelters a wine press in a Sydney backyard. Bulletin, 3 May 1969.

Far left.
For migrants or 'new Australians' to become assimilated was the ruling ideal in the first phase of the postwar migration program. Pix, 31 Mar 1951.
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

Yet the old policies were on the way out. After a hard battle led by E.G. Whitlam and Don Dunstan, the Labor party's federal conference in 1965 removed the traditional reference to White Australia from its platform, while in 1966 the Liberal minister for immigration, Hubert Opperman, allowed a substantial increase in the intake of part-Asians. A quiet revolution was in progress. By the end of the decade the number of new non-European settlers admitted was almost 10 000 a year.

Keeping migrants was sometimes more of a problem than finding them in the first place. Official propaganda—success stories and photographs of happy 'new Australians'—could not hide the fact that 'migrants' were not necessarily 'settlers'. In the 1950s the 'whingeing Pom' became the stereotype of the disgruntled newcomer, ungrateful for Australian hospitality, anxious to return home or move

'... the heat, the humidity and
being cooped up like rabbits in
Army Nissen huts with iron
roofs that made ovens out of
the rooms ... If they'd shown
us pictures of this place you can
be sure I would never have left
England.' Mary Rose
Liverani describes migrant
camp accommodation in
The winter sparrows.
Photograph by Ruth Waller.

on to another host country. For a time such people were thought of as an insignificant minority. Immigration ministers and government officers subscribed to what one scholar has called 'the 6 per cent dogma', believing that only 6 per cent of British migrants returned home, and that many of these came back to Australia. But when demographers began looking carefully at the figures they found the dogma wildly astray. Early estimates by Charles Price and Reg Appleyard put the British return rate as high as 14 per cent, and further calculations made it clear that losses had become greater each decade. In a paper prepared for the National Population Inquiry in 1973, Price calculated that between 1947 and 1973 19 per cent of all 'settlers' who arrived in Australia had left, and that more than half of these (68 per cent) had come with government assistance. The greatest losses were of Germans (30 per cent of those who came) and Dutch (25 per cent), followed by British and Italians, 22 per cent each. Refugees, the people for whom it was difficult or impossible to return home, naturally showed the lowest rate of return.

Though by international standards these losses were not excessive they did emphasise how expensive the migration program was for the Australian taxpayer. Recruitment, passage and settlement costs for the 420 000 who had left by 1970, Price thought, must have been well over $100 million. This was bound to cause concern as the development lobby pushed migration targets higher and higher.

The few studies we have of people on the move in this way bring out the great variety of human emotion and experience hidden behind the statistics. However amusing, the 'whingeing Pom' is a misleading caricature. As Alan Richardson, a student of returning British migrants, put it in 1974:

It is sometimes assumed that anyone who decides to leave Australia must be profoundly discontented with the country. This assumption is as untrue as the comparable one that emigrants to Australia must all have been profoundly discontented with Britain.

Richardson found psychological unsettlement, homesickness and unanticipated family difficulties (the illness or misery of parents left behind) to be as important as economic dissatisfaction in decisions to return home. And once there, some were

Magda Bozic, of Gather
your dreams, came to
Australia from Hungary
in 1947.
IN PRIVATE POSSESSION

THE 'FEEL' OF IMMIGRATION IN THE EARLY 1950s
THE 'ASSIMILATION' PHASE

The old occupational hazard of immigration, homesickness, was catching up with me. I had left home but I hadn't arrived.

Like so many other migrants, I came here because I was born in the wrong country, a country where history runs amok at regular intervals. But there were also times of peace when memories of a different kind were imprinted in my heart. I have not forgotten the hours of fear and the wait for the Midnight-knock. Neither have I forgotten those hours when life was as sweet as acacia-honey.

Was there ever a migrant in this country without moments of aching thoughts for some personal niche abandoned thousands of miles away? Perhaps it was a village square or a small piazza with a fountain, a green paddy-field or a fishing-boat paddling on a river, or a bridge on the Danube gleaming in the moonlight. Maybe it was nothing more than the taste of water, the echo of a melody, the ghost of someone silently looking at you in the twilight hours of a summer day.

There is no logic in homesickness—it is stubbornly resistant to rational arguments.

Magda Bozic
Gather your dreams, Richmond 1984

again disillusioned, for the home to which they returned was not always what they remembered. They and the people to whom they returned may have changed. As one returning migrant put it plaintively: 'We weren't wanted. People not interested in us. People didn't even want to see our photos.' In this case Australia successfully beckoned back. Contrast the woman for whom the return to Britain proved all it could be: 'I just felt good. Everything felt so homely here—just houses out there, not homes. Everything clean and fresh here, after the dust, dirt and sand out there.'

Non-British migrants experienced similar emotions, strengthened, no doubt, by the unfamiliar language and culture of Australia. Their difficulties impinged only slowly on the established Australian community, and the degree of prejudice they often faced was long underestimated. For at least the first two decades of the migration program newcomers were expected to adopt the local language, beliefs and customs and merge invisibly into the community. At its height the self-congratulatory myth of assimilationism was popularly celebrated in *They're a weird mob*, the best-selling 'autobiography' of perky Italian immigrant 'Nino Culotta'. Culotta sweated as a labourer on Sydney housing sites with tough building 'workers'—in fact petty subcontractors—whose strange ways he came to love and who cheerfully accepted him as a dinkum Aussie for his 'guts' and readiness to adapt to their crude mateship. It was in fact an ebullient fiction, an idealisation of the Australian worker, written by an Australian, John O'Grady.

Nino Culotta shows Australians how to conquer spaghetti. Nino Culotta, They're a weird mob, *Sydney 1957.*

Young immigrants learn a new language and culture, 1955.
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

LANGUAGE

My mother and father they had a bit of an accent. I can remember my mother went to Nock and Kirby's years ago to do some shopping and the girl that was serving her turned to the other girl and she laughed at the way my mother spoke, and she said to her 'What are you laughing at?' She said, 'I'm laughing at your accent.' She said, 'Yes, you laugh at my accent and I'll laugh at you if you speak Maltese. At least I can speak English. Can you speak Maltese?' She always had a quick, ready answer for them.

Maltese migrant.
Ethnic Affairs Commission, NSW, Oral Histories Project

Though real experience no doubt veered in the Culotta direction sometimes, there could be twists. One unhappy Italian explained his decision to return home by relating what he thought of as a typical experience. 'On one occasion', he recalled,

I was in a bar having a drink with a paesano and a man from Friuli. An Australian came in, stood with his back turned to me, and every few minutes he said 'bloody dago'. I took no notice, not even when he lit a cigarette and flicked his match straight at me. He kept on flicking matches straight at me. So then I took off one of the sandals I was wearing and whacked him on the head with it. Then everyone wants to know: 'Why are you fighting?'

The immigrants who were the first to feel Australian prejudice, the refugees, were less fortunate, for they usually lacked the alternative of escape. 'Working people', said one of them in 1953,

are usually jealous of New Australians. The only ones they like are those who drink and gamble, that is, the poorer types. But anybody who is a little bit polite, reserved, well-dressed, quiet, the Australians don't like him. To the working people, New Australians would always be second-class citizens.

An old Australian food shop caters for tastes widened by the new migration, 1953.
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

The interviewer reporting this noted how success stories about relatives or friends who had settled somewhere else—usually the United States—circulated freely, 'adding to the favourable images of these countries already existing in the minds of many refugees and aggravating their discontent with Australia'. Few moved on, however. In pathetic explanation of their condition one said: 'We are only New Australians now. That is like being a DP, just nothing. If you went to America and said "I am a New Australian", what would that mean?'

Professor W.D. Borrie, a foremost student of Australian demography and director of the population inquiry, 1970–78.
ANU PHOTO

All told, the net population gain from migrants who came to Australia between 1947 and 1973 and ultimately stayed was almost two and a half millions; and over the whole period they and children born after their arrival contributed 59 per cent of the country's total population growth. That was certainly remarkable, but perhaps it is just as striking that the people already in Australia in 1947 should have been responsible for the rest of the increase. For as we have seen, the common belief in the early 1940s anticipated no notable growth in population in the foreseeable future. In fact, natural increase took off at the end of the war, side by side with immigration, and before long Australian births were contributing as heavily as immigration to a population growth totalling 2 per cent a year. It was enough to double the population in 30 years. The demographer W.D. Borrie called it 'by far the most fascinating pattern of demographic change in Australia's history'.
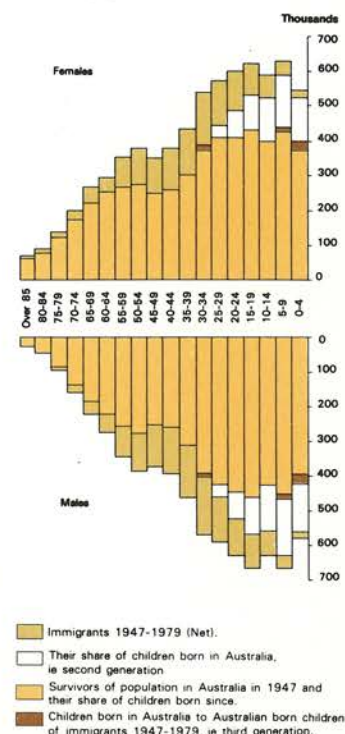
At the centre of this remarkable birthrate were changes in marriage rates which began in the 1940s and became common after World War II in most affluent and

highly urbanised countries. The number of people marrying went up, and the age at which they married came down. The percentage of Australian women aged between 20 and 24 who were married was 48 in 1947, 60 in 1961, 64 in 1971; and whereas in 1945 85 per cent of women in Australia married before the age of 40, by 1975 95 per cent did so. Thus in 1975 only about 5 per cent of women were unmarried during part at least of the child-bearing stages of their lives.

It was to be expected that births should rise in the years immediately after the war, when servicemen returned to their wives or contracted marriages delayed while they had been in the armed forces. That had also happened between 1920 and 1922, at the end of World War I, though in that case, after a brief rise, births soon steadied and declined in number. In the 1950s the number of births rose each year to peak in 1961. This 'baby boom' did not mean that parents were having larger families: indeed, over these years a long-term trend towards small families of two to three children seemed to be confirmed. There were simply more families. Between 1947 and 1954, for example, marriage rates went up so quickly that demographers talked of a 'marriage revolution' as well as a 'baby boom'. Couples were also tending to have their children at closer intervals and at an earlier stage of the marriage, and this resulted in a kind of 'bunching' effect in births, lifting their number over the short run. More and more women, it seemed, were coming to think of child-rearing as a passing phase rather than the principal commitment of their lives—a phase to be completed as quickly as possible.

Age pyramid 30 June 1979

Immigrants 1947-1979 (Net).

Their share of children born in Australia, ie second generation

Survivors of population in Australia in 1947 and their share of children born since.

Children born in Australia to Australian born children of immigrants 1947-1979, ie third generation.

We can plot precisely the changing size and structure of the majority of the Australian population—the immigrants and the 'white' locally born—because census and registration procedures required by law effectively recorded their numbers and condition. The only group about whose numbers there has always been uncertainty are Aborigines. This failure to collect precise information stemmed partly from the difficulty of defining what it was to be an Aborigine, and partly because of what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner once called 'dis-remembering'—the effect of white guilt in closing Australian eyes to the Aboriginal presence.

After the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901, 'disremember-ing' was embodied in the ruling 'assimilationist' theory which shaped official policy towards Aborigines in all states. This theory pictured the Aboriginal people falling into major biological (and, by implication, cultural) groups: 'full-bloods' and 'mixed-bloods'. The former, according to available figures, were declining in numbers. As the full-bloods died out, and the 'mixed-bloods'—the people of only part-Aboriginal descent—became more and more assimilated into the white community, Aboriginal culture and identity and with them the Aboriginal 'problem' would, it was thought, fade away. This belief was embodied in s.127 of the federal constitution which decreed that 'in reckoning the population of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives shall not be counted'. In 1902 the attorney-general clarified the meaning of s.127 by explaining that 'Aboriginal natives' meant full-bloods, and that people of mixed descent were to be counted with the general population. Assimilationism, in other words, was to be *statistically* asserted, the more so as a large proportion of people who could be classed as full-bloods still lived in remote areas and were virtually impossible to count systematically and accurately.

During the long supremacy of assimilationist theory it was not to the part-Aborigines' advantage to claim their Aboriginal heritage, even though they may have cherished it. But in recent years, as Aboriginal protest movements emerged, it became easier for people to call themselves simply Aborigines, rather than 'part-Aborigines' or Europeans. Then at a referendum in 1967, 89 per cent of the Australian people voted to repeal s.127. Aborigines would now be counted and identified in all national censuses.

But how, for this purpose, were Aboriginal people to be defined? This crucial question was not settled until 1973: Aboriginal people who so wished were simply to identify themselves. As the official definition (which proved acceptable to Aborigines) put it: 'an Aboriginal is a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted as such by the community with which he or she is associated'. This definition was used in the census of 1976, in which all pretence of distinguishing between 'full' and 'part' Aborigines, or suggesting that the latter were not Aborigines at all, was abandoned. In the statistical sense at least, assimilationism was dead.

Such shifting attitudes and definitions have been the greatest cause of ambiguity when it comes to judging what has been happening to Aboriginal numbers. And, at least until the census of 1981, the problem was compounded by the difficulty of collecting statistics about people who still lived in bush and desert areas in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. But the statistics that do exist (and though fragmentary they are sometimes extensive in state records) make it clear that in the 1930s the long decline of the Aboriginal population ceased. Early calculations suggested that by the 1950s and 1960s the growth rate of the Aboriginal population was as high as 3.5 per cent a year, more than three times the increase among non-Aborigines, even during the 'baby boom'. But all such

A mural at Sydney's Redfern railway station in 1983 celebrates Aboriginal pride in self-identification.
AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

calculations ran into difficulties of definition. If, for example, the circumstances that discouraged people from claiming Aboriginal status in the 1920s and 1930s were reversed in the 1950s and 1960s, it is likely that numbers were deflated in the first period and inflated in the second, exaggerating the later growth rate. Recent studies suggest that this was indeed the case, but they nevertheless accept a growth rate of between 2 and 2.5 per cent, levelling off and declining somewhat since the 1970s.

By the 1980s people who claimed to be Aborigines and were recognised as such totalled between 150 000 and 200 000, a little less than one per cent of the nation's population. They were not distributed evenly. In 1980 L.R. Smith calculated that, though much less than one per cent of the population of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, Aborigines made up 1.7 per cent of Queensland's people and 2.1 per cent of Western Australia's. In the Northern Territory they accounted for 27 per cent of inhabitants. At that stage the description of their circumstances made in 1975 by the National Population Inquiry was still broadly accurate: they had 'the highest birthrate, the highest deathrate, the worst health and housing, and the lowest educational, occupational, economic, social and legal status of any identifiable section of the Australian population'. A key question for the 1980s was whether governments and people, black and white, would have the wit and the will to find ways of changing these unhappy circumstances.

It is no doubt a coincidence that the birthrate stopped rising in the same year, 1961, in which the contraceptive pill came to Australia. The pill's effects are, however, evident in another development: the remarkable leap during the 1960s in the number of married women of prime childbearing age who took paid employment. Between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s the proportion of the 20–24 age group engaged in such work rose from 50 to 59 per cent, and of the 25–29 age group from 27 to 41 per cent. These changes no doubt help to explain a continuation of the trend towards smaller family size. The increase in the number of families also slackened as the marriage rate began to fall during the first half of the 1970s.

In 1970 the Liberal government commissioned a National Population Inquiry to inform it on 'all aspects of population growth'. The head of the inquiry, W.D. Borrie, had his first report ready to be presented to the Labor government of Gough Whitlam in 1975. Unemployment was rising and a severe economic recession was in progress, and the government was not unhappy to be told of changed fertility patterns and slower population growth. Already, on coming to office in 1972, the ministry had cut the last Liberal immigration target from 140 000 to 110 000; and in 1975 it brought the figure down to 50 000. When former settlers and Australian-born persons permanently leaving were allowed for, this gave a small net population gain of between 10 000 and 20 000.

The days of mass migration, originally designed by the Labor leaders of the 1940s, were indeed over. Worries about population and defence were no longer as acute as in the years just after the war. The government saw it as more important now to conserve resources and try to provide jobs and welfare services for people already in the country. And as if to mark decisively its break with the past, the Labor ministry dismembered Calwell's proud creation, the Department of Immigration, merging it with the Department of Labour and giving appropriate parts of its work to Foreign Affairs and Social Security.

The governor-general's shock dismissal of Whitlam in 1975 brought to power a Liberal–Country party coalition under Malcolm Fraser which, in opposition, had made much of migrants' difficulties and angled for migrants' votes. Obliged now to cope itself with the economic troubles that had destroyed Whitlam, the coalition took a path on immigration opposite to his, declaring migrants to be vital both for economic recovery and for what it called 'broader national strategies'. Foreshadowing a bigger intake of migrants, the government reassembled under a fresh Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs the chief functions that Calwell's old department had performed. The novel tag 'ethnic affairs' registered a now-inescapable awareness of what one scholar aptly dubbed 'the migrant presence'. Politically, that presence had been most vociferously declared by Whitlam's minister for immigration, Al Grassby. In his paper entitled *A multicultural society for the future*, Grassby set down in 1973 a theme he never tired of reiterating: that migrants' cultures and customs were precious, to be respected and preserved rather than washed away in a mindless process of 'assimilation'. 'Where', he asked,

> is the Maltese process worker, the Finnish carpenter, the Italian concrete layer, the Yugoslav miner—or dare I say it—the Indian scientist? Where do these people belong, in all honesty, if not in today's composite Australian image?

This paper, in which Grassby discussed a wide range of questions, from child migrant education to ethnic group organisation, has been called 'a manifesto for the plural society' of which he dreamed. Observers such as the sociologist J. Zubrzycki who had asked in 1968 for a modest commitment to cultural diversity through the maintenance of immigrant languages, had already glimpsed the same goal. It received an even more official affirmation in *Australia as a multicultural society*, a paper published in 1977 by the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council, an advisory body set up by the Fraser government.

Also in 1977, Fraser commissioned a review group under Frank Galbally to assess the work of government and non-government organisations in providing 'services to migrants'. Galbally recommended in 1978 that $50 million be spent over the next three years on migrant welfare services, and urged that ethnic communities and voluntary agencies should undertake as much of the work as possible. Self-help was his report's keynote: migrants must be encouraged to define their own problems and, within the limits of available funding, decide on the best solutions. The prime minister, accepting the report in full, tabled it in parliament in ten languages. That was symbolic, for Galbally's central argument was that ethnic cultures must be preserved, not repressed. Though some critics were soon describing the report as window dressing, and though cutbacks in public expenditure during the economic recession reduced much of its practical effect, it did enshrine, once and for all, an official policy of multiculturalism. In 1980 one of Galbally's main recommendations was carried out when an Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs was set up to carry out research and develop awareness and understanding of the diverse cultures within Australian society.

These changes were especially important because a new refugee problem had emerged at the end of the 1970s. The fall of Saigon in 1975 ended the long agony of the Vietnam War, but set off movements of population on a scale not experienced since the aftermath of World War II. Between 1975 and 1982 almost two million Indo-Chinese people fled their countries, and of these at least 800 000 sought resettlement abroad. Australia was at first slow to respond to appeals to the international community from the United Nations and the United States for assistance in resettling these refugees. In 1975 the bitter emotions aroused by the

A minister for immigration as flamboyant as Al Grassby is an irresistible target for sensational journalism.
Bulletin, *23 Mar 1974.*

THE BULLETIN

MIGRANT SHAMBLES
Thousands flood in illegally
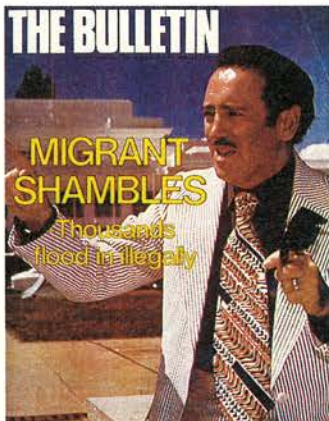
The free telephone interpreter service, established by the Australian government in 1973, provides help for migrants unable to speak English. Its expansion beyond all expectations is one sign of the unreality of old assimilationist expectations.
AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

war were far from dead, and the Labor government seemed understandably nervous at the prospect of an influx of Asian settlers, many of whom, as former opponents of North Vietnam and the Vietcong, could also be expected to have conservative political leanings. Whitlam did, however, arrange in 1975 for just over 500 refugees to be selected from staging camps in Hong Kong and Singapore and brought to Australia as a humanitarian gesture. He also commissioned a sociologist, Jean Martin, to carry out a five-year study of these people's experiences and difficulties as settlers in Australia. 'In the present climate of world events', Martin wrote later,

> new waves of refugees are emerging every few months; Australia has made its own contribution to the resettlement of some of these hapless peoples in the past in accepting, for example, Displaced Persons, and later, victims of the Hungarian and Czech coups. We will doubtless have occasion to respond to international disturbances in this way again, but we can do so humanely and effectively only to the extent that we understand how refugees differ from other migrants and what in fact has been the outcome of our manner of dealing with and responding to those who are already here.

The Fraser government, while abruptly discontinuing the funding of Martin's research on taking office, did announce, through the immigration minister, Michael MacKellar, that 'Australia fully recognises its humanitarian commitment and responsibility to admit refugees for resettlement'. The new government accepted from camps in Thailand a small intake of refugees who had family or other links with Australia. Then the first of the so-called boat people arrived in Darwin. Uninvited but desperate refugees in search of asylum, these people had set out in flimsy vessels to travel a hazardous 6500-kilometre voyage from the South China Sea. Two boats came almost unnoticed by the public, but a third, in December 1976, raised a sense of alarm that was to persist over the next two years. In the crude words of the Melbourne *Sun-News Pictorial*, it seemed to some that 'today's trickle of unannounced visitors to our lonely northern coastline could well become a tide of human flotsam'.

By the end of 1977 nearly 5000 refugees, almost 1000 of whom had made their own way across the sea, had been permitted to enter Australia. Against this background the government moved to include a refugee component in the ordinary immigration quota and to put the selection and resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugees on a regular basis. Then internal developments in Vietnam —most notably the attempt of the regime there to abolish 'bourgeois trade'— brought a dramatic increase in refugee numbers. Partly in response to American prodding and partly in return for agreements with Indonesia and Malaysia to allow Australian officials to select and process would-be boat people at ports north of Darwin, the government agreed to increase the refugee intake. It was set at 9000 for 1978, then substantially raised in each of the subsequent years. All told, almost 65 000 Indo-Chinese refugees were admitted between 1978 and 1982.

As the Fraser government's immigration policy settled down, refugees (mostly Indo-Chinese but including Latin Americans, Poles and Timorese) became one of four basic categories of people who composed each year's intake of migrants. The other three were those qualifying for entry under 'general eligibility' (people with skills, capital or experience judged to be of use in Australia's development), migrants wishing to join relatives already in Australia ('family reunion'), and New Zealanders. In accord with its election promises, the government gradually expanded the overall intake from a low point of 52 700 in 1975–76 to a peak of

Vietnamese boat people brave the South China Sea, 1982.
UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

With orderly immigration arrangements in operation, Indo-Chinese refugees arrive in Sydney by air from Singapore, 1980.
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

Migration to Australia
top 30 source countries. October 1945–December 1984

Country of citizenship	(estimated) No.	(e) %
Britain and Ireland (b)	1 813 400	42.5
Italy	380 100	8.9
Greece	225 900	5.3
Yugoslavia	182 700	4.3
The Netherlands	165 400	3.9
New Zealand (a)	144 600	3.4
Germany (c)	142 000	3.3
Poland	102 800	2.4
Vietnam	78 000	1.8
United States of America	72 400	1.7
Lebanon	59 100	1.4
Hungary	32 900	0.8
Austria	31 800	0.7
South Africa (a)	30 700	0.7
Spain	30 000	0.7
Turkey	29 700	0.7
India (a)	29 300	0.7
Canada (a)	25 700	0.6
France	25 300	0.6
Malta (a)	24 100	0.6
The Philippines	24 000	0.6
Portugal	23 000	0.5
Czechoslovakia	22 300	0.5
Malaysia (a)	20 300	0.5
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics	19 400	0.5
Sri Lanka	18 700	0.4
Finland	17 500	0.4
Cyprus (d)	17 000	0.4
Switzerland	16 900	0.4
Denmark	15 700	0.4
Total all countries	**4 267 200**	**100.0**

(a) British citizenship was not sub-divided between constituent Commonwealth countries before 1959. Hence the figure for Britain and Ireland is an over-estimate which is balanced by under-estimates for other Commonwealth countries.
(b) Includes all British Commonwealth countries from October 1945 to December 1958.
(c) Comprises the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic and Germany so stated.
(d) From 1962. Included with Britain and colonies for earlier periods.
(e) All figures have been rounded to the nearest 100.
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics
NOTE: Settler arrivals were not separately identified before 1959. The estimates provided are based on permanent and long term arrivals from 1945 to 1958 and settler arrivals thereafter

118 700 in 1981–82. The planned balance between the categories in that year was fairly even: refugees, 22 per cent; general ability, 26 per cent; family reunion, 28 per cent; and New Zealanders, 24 per cent. This contrasted with the pattern in the mid-1970s, when the refugee and New Zealand intakes were low and the general eligibility category was between one-third and one-half of total intake.

The 1981–82 peak was well below that of 1969–71, when in an atmosphere of prosperity few doubted that an increasing population was essential for economic growth. But now the renewed upward trend began to worry some people, and in the early 1980s immigration and the general question of population became subjects of lively debate. In September 1981 the Academy of the Social Sciences and the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs jointly organised a two-day conference to discuss changes in Australia's demographic trends and what these implied for 'structural and growth patterns' over the rest of the century. At the final session a demographer, P.F. McDonald, humorously noted how the debate that was now developing on immigration 'brings out our emotional reactions. Supporters of migration are labelled as lackeys of the government and despoilers of Australia's heritage while those opposed to high migration are accused of anti-humanitarianism and racism'.

As if to prove McDonald's point, two Melbourne scholars, Robert and Tanya Birrell, produced in the same year *An issue of people*, a book which argued in detail the case for a low level of immigration. The Birrells attributed the persistence of the 'population building' ideal that had once inspired Calwell to the influence of bureaucrats in the old Department of Immigration and its successor, Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. To them the ideal seemed outdated, even dangerous. High unemployment, they argued, when added to the damage which an ever-increasing population must do to the environment, required that immigration be cut to the bone. And although, for the present, racial and cultural prejudice was held in check through the influence of senior politicians and community leaders, refugees could easily become a 'focus of hostility'.

When the Hawke Labor government came to office in 1983 it declared support for 'the cultural, social and economic implications of a multicultural Australia'. 'Ethnic groups', said the new immigration minister, Stewart West, 'must be free to express their ethnic identity if they wish to do so, subject to Australian laws, without sacrificing their rights of equal access to the community's resources'. The government scaled down the 1983–84 immigrant target to 70 000 and also announced that that would be its preferred level for the foreseeable future. Though not a return to the lean Whitlam years, this was a notable reduction, moving well towards the position advocated by the Birrells. ('I am not arguing for zero immigration', Robert Birrell said in December 1982. 'I am in favour of a humane immigration policy which would allow us to take in, say, 25 000 refugees and about 25 000 under a family reunion scheme.')

The government indeed assumed that refugees would remain an important part of the immigrant intake and negotiated with the Vietnamese government for schemes of 'orderly departure' which could remove the suffering people experienced if forced to escape as refugees. Already, on 26 November 1982, the first emigrants granted exit visas by the Vietnamese government to join close relatives in Australia had been greeted at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport by a crowd of Vietnamese–Australian men, women and children. 'Pure happiness has come at last', said one man, there to meet his wife and six-year-old daughter whom he had last seen on a Vietnamese beach four years before. By 1984 such happiness was multiplying as improved arrangements for orderly departure increased the proportion of Indo-Chinese people admitted under the family reunion scheme.

The increase led to growing unease among some Australians 'confronted', as the Melbourne social worker David Cox put it, 'by Asians in public transport, in shops and on the streets'. It was inevitable, and natural, that the refugees should tend to settle together, often in places near the hostels where they had first been looked after when they arrived in Australia. So, for example, in Fairfield in Sydney and Richmond in Melbourne (known for a time as 'Little Saigon') refugees were visible enough for locals, when asked to guess their numbers, to exaggerate wildly. Noting this, Nancy Viviani, in a fine pioneering study of Vietnamese migration to Australia, warned in 1984 that the attitudes that had 'underpinned the walls of White Australia are still in good order'. She appeared to be right, when, just as her book appeared, the respected historian, Geoffrey Blainey, stirred a hornets' nest by telling a meeting of Rotarians in the Victorian town of Warrnambool that the pace of 'Asian' migration was ahead of public opinion. That, he said, was dangerous at a time when unemployment was a problem for Australia, and was bound to stir latent racism and thus endanger the fragile tolerance towards newcomers which more than 30 years of successful immigration had fostered.

A largely media-created furore followed, in which Blainey when pressed talked a trifle extravagantly of the Hawke government being biased against British migrants and treating Asians as a 'favoured minority'. The argument Blainey started had a perhaps unintended educational effect, less from his own sayings and writings than from the work of people who felt themselves driven to examine his arguments critically. As James Jupp, an expert on ethnic Australia, wrote: 'immigration was not a public issue until Professor Blainey and the media made it one ... While lavatory walls and railway cuttings already had their "Asians out" signs, informed opinion had never bothered about this expression of public discontent.' More than 500 substantial items on Asian immigration appeared in the Australian press between March and September 1984. They ranged from polls, surveys and interviews to editorials, articles and a variety of moralistic exhortations, and overlapped with a monographic literature and lectures which the debate also stimulated. While some scholars examined and queried the meanings that were being given to the term 'Asians', others exposed the ways in which polls were working to create as well as to test opinion, or looked back to earlier controversies to put the present argument into historical perspective.

There were others who wanted clear answers to questions about the future. The most notable was J.A.C. Mackie, an original member of a reform group which in the late 1950s had mounted a major campaign against the old immigration restrictions. In 1985 Mackie remarked on the predictions that demographers were making about the future shape and size of Australian population. Charles Price, for example, had calculated after the 1976 census that by 2008, if annual migration averaged about 70 000 people a year and remained similar in composition to that of recent years, 8 per cent of the Australian population of 20 million would be of Asian ancestry. Mackie thought this estimate a little low, given that Price made his calculations before the main influx of Indo-Chinese refugees took place. Other calculations, he pointed out, made it seem more realistic to imagine that by 2020 about 10 per cent of Australians would be of Asian origin or descent. This outcome—which was hardly 'Asianisation' of Australia which some talked of—could be changed only by making so drastic a cut in the intake of Asian migrants as to fly in the face of the most basic humanitarian considerations. As the decade progressed and the Blainey debate died away, it seemed that only the graffiti scribblers wished to make such a change.
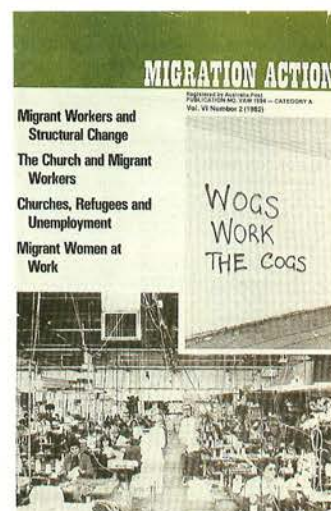
Migrant action, *the organ of Melbourne's Ecumenical Migration Centre, notes graffiti that reflects the prejudice it abhors.* Migrant action *6/2, 1982.*

Sydney's changing cityscape. Lloyd Rees's oil painting,
The harbour from McMahon's Point, *which won him
the Wynne Prize in 1950, shows areas of open
country beyond the southern foreshores of the harbour still
awaiting the high-rise developers.*
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES