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AUSTRALIA'S MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

by

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Australians are the world's newest people. This arises from the fact that the median age in Australia is 25 and 40% of all Australians are the product of post-war migration.

Some idea of the dramatic population changes of the past 25 years can be gathered from the fact that those who were living in Australia at the time of World War II are now in a minority.

The greatest single factor in bringing about this change was the post-war migration program which brought 3.5 million people to Australia from 140 different countries and locations around the world. This gives Australia a cosmopolitan flavour, reflected in the fact that 26% of all Australian workers were born outside the country, the largest foreign born work force in the world outside of Israel.

Most Australians have long thought of New York City as perhaps the most cosmopolitan place on earth, yet today only 19% of New Yorkers were born outside the United States.

So it could be said in looking at the spread of birth places of our people that Australia has a greater international flavour than New York.

Another measure of Australia's pace of change as compared with other countries is the fact that Australia's migration program viewed on a per capita basis resulted in 50 times the number of people coming to Australia in the last 25 years as went to the United States of America.

The ethnic character of the Australian population is irrevocably changed. More than 13% of all Australians have a blood link with Italy. About 12% of all Australians have a connection with Germany. One million Australians are of Italian birth or origin; Australians of Greek birth or origin number 600,000; of Maltese birth or descent 400,000 which is more than there are people in the entire Republic of Malta. • There are one-quarter million people of Yugoslav birth or descent; more than 150,000 whose first language is Arabic, together with large groups exceeding 100,000 drawn from Holland, East Europe and Spanish speaking countries. That does not exhaust the list by any means. These are indications of the change at the national level.

Following through these changes into the community we find Melbourne emerging today as the third largest Greek speaking city in the world with only Athens and Thessaloniki reaching higher.

At the suburban level, taking an area like Marrickville, Sydney, we can trace the pattern of change in Australia's settlement. Marrickville originally comprised a grant of land given to a Yorkshireman whose home town was Marrick, in the English county of Yorkshire. He gave the area an Australian accent by calling it Marrickville.

He later subdivided the area into potato farms which were settled by Irish migrants.

The Irish at Marrickville comprised the bulk of the population for most of its history but they began to disperse, particularly after World War II. Today the Irish content of the population of Marrickville would be probably 5% and the largest groups now would be Greek and Italian settlers.

In terms of basic facilities these changes have created new needs and new pressures. The old colonial school curricula fails dismally to meet the needs of a class in which 80% of the children may have been born outside the country and whose mother tongue is not English.

The services of Local, State and Federal Governments have proved inadequate because they have not been able to communicate with the people they are supposed to serve.

Change is now beginning to take place in the provision of multi-lingual public services but it has been slow in coming and is still a long way from adequate even though the problems have been growing for a quarter of a century.

One of the great Australian myths is that we have been a homogenous society. This has been the biggest single obstacle to building a united family of the Australian nation because it has tended to divide the community between 'them' and 'us'.

A demographic examination of Australia from the earliest times indicates that it has never been a homogenous society and Australians — that is those constituting the residents of Australia — have never been homogenous in the sense of the term which is used today to indicate a society predominantly of one ethnic background.

To those who feel the largest group should be the only ones to qualify for recognition as Australians it is interesting to recall that in the early 1840's the Irish were in a majority in many places in Australia. If they had won the Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1804 perhaps Irish, not English, would have been the national language.

Part of the myth of homogeneity was the official form of statistics from colonial times which enabled statements to be made that 98% of the Australian people were 'British'. Sometimes this figure was varied and permitted to drop as low as 95% but in fact, even at the start of the post-war migration program 15% were of European, American or Asian birth or origin, 25% were of Irish birth or origin and the Aborigines were of course not taken into account at all.

How was this myth of 'Britishness' cooked up?

By simply taking everyone born in Australia, all naturalised citizens and everyone who came from the 33 countries of the then British Commonwealth of Nations and putting the sum total together to produce an image of a homogeneous society.

In fact Australia's diversity began with the First Fleet, which recent research has indicated included people of a dozen nationalities drawn from every continent (no one could accuse the British judges and press gangs of the time of being racist).

It is important to identify a factor which makes Australia quite unique in the world. In contrast to older countries Australia has not produced the migrant ghettos.

The Australian population has always been mobile and this mobility continues today. For example, while Leichhardt is considered an 'Italian' suburb we find in fact between the last two census takings that the Italian born or origin population has been dispersing rapidly. We find today the process of dispersing continuing apace and in fact Italian origin people in the suburb of Leichhardt are in a minority. A similar pattern emerges in Carlton in Melbourne.

A recent survey in the South Sydney area again illustrated the great mobility of the population and indicated that the largest single growth among the ethnic groups was registered by those that came from Eastern Europe.

In South Australia at Elizabeth, which was established as a city especially for English migrants, the English content of the population has halved since its foundation in post-war years as the migrants have moved from Elizabeth to other parts of the State and the continent.

Australian mobility is probably greater than in any other comparable country in the world. A measure of this can be found in kindergarten classes. In one Sydney suburban class the year began with 38 children and by the middle of the third term only two of the originals were left. The turnover in inner city schools is often 50%.

Another unique feature of the Australian scene compared with the rest of the world is that despite its great diversity — the seeds of tolerance have been well sown.

A measure of this is the fact that one third of all the marriages in Australia in the past 20 years have been between people born in Australia marrying people born outside Australia. This represents probably the highest inter-marriage rate in any diverse community in the world.

Despite the successes of tolerance in our cosmopolitan community, during the five years that the Federal *Racial Discrimination Act 19 75* has been in force, the Office of the Commissioner for Community Relations has had 3,200 cases lodged for conciliation.

But what of the future? Has the nation with 13 million people reached its final form and final size?

The Australian National Population Inquiry attempted to come to grips with this question. In the public hearings which I personally authorised as Minister for Immigration there were advocates of zero population growth, yet it has also been indicated that the country could support more than 100 million people at the present standard of living, based on adequate exploitation of our soil and water resources. So there is a tremendous range of options open.

The decisions must be made in this decade to determine the growth and composition of Australia in the new century.

We can look to the past as we seek to find our way ahead.

If we had not had the migration program of the last 25 years the Australian population would only have reached 8 million by 1980 and then fallen into a steady decline. Australian fertility has been declining dramatically since 1890 with the net reproduction rate falling from 1.88% to 0.9% in this century.

80% of the growth of the workforce in the 50's and 60's was due to migration. Without migration we would have been older, smaller, duller and poorer.

The Australian fertility or lack of it dropped below replacement rate in several years, the lowest being 1934 when it was 0.939%.

The Borne Report indicates that we have just about achieved zero population growth and that as far as the Australian birth rate is concerned there is no evidence that it will rise.

Australia's drop in birthrate is in line with the rest of the developed world. North American countries, Japan, countries in both East and West Europe all report quite dramatic drops in birthrates. For the first time in 130 years more Germans died in the past three years than were born. Some midwives are being retrained. The largest single part of the human race located in China has also stabilised its population.

The irrelevance of zero population growth to the Australian scene can be gathered by the fact that our present population of 13 million is a little less than 0.3% of the world's estimated population. Indeed, our population is less than the probable margin of error in world population estimates. Our net natural increase represents 1.2% of that 0.3% which means that we contribute to the increase of the total world population by 0.00367% annually.

Indications of the National Population Inquiry are that if Australia closes its doors and puts up some kind of kangaroo curtain then we will go into the new century with a middle-aged population which will head once again into slow but steady decline.

Is it possible, feasible or desirable for Australia to plan negatively for the new century?

I would reject the proposition that we can close Australia's doors because the seeds of population growth through family reunion are here now. About 11/2 million people around the world comprise the family connections

of Australians and in the right economic conditions they have a right to come.

At the same time Australia's skills are inadequate to sustain within the present level of services. Closed doors would mean communities without doctors, dentists, optometrists. It would mean continuing unemployment because although there is no excuse for it we still have a significant proportion of the population which is totally unskilled and to enable them to have work there is a need for skilled people.

The ratio of employment for unskilled to skilled is 4 to 1.

It should be remembered that between 1966 and 1971 doctors and dentists who were born outside of Australia rose from 29.4% to 30.5% and more than half of all the new doctors and dentists in Australia came from overseas. Scientists in the same period rose from 33.5% to 36.1% and equally important precision instrument makers and related workers increased from 31% in 1966 to nearly 35% in 1971.

Looking at Australia's place in the world I have the conviction that it is not possible for a nation of only 13 million who command resources greater than those of many other larger nations to do nothing with them. Our own enlightened self interest, even if we were callously indifferent to the problems of others, demands that we be guided by the Parable of the Talents.

The xenophobe school of economists pretends we can live in isolation from the world.

I believe the challenge is for our own nation to show the world's oldest civilisations the way to unity and amity on which true progress for all people will depend.

We have already chosen our road, we have rejected melting pot uniformity on the one hand and a league of nations or ethnic isolation on the other.

We have chosen instead the family of the nation.

The Australian in the year 2000 can belong to a nation whose resources can equal those of West Germany or Britain, geared to serve not only the people of Australia but of our region and the world.

