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## ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION AND POPULATION GROWTH IN AUSTRALIA 1954 TO 2010: AN OVERVIEW

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*Australia has a long series of polls on attitudes to the number of migrants coming to the country but, because of general ignorance about demography, these cannot be used as reliable indicators of attitudes to population growth. However recent, very rapid, growth has sparked a new and wide-ranging debate about population growth, and the role that immigration plays in forcing the pace. In future voters should be able to draw more accurate conclusions about this role. There is now a groundswell of community concern; for example, in April 2010, 87 per cent wanted Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to either stay the same size or have a smaller population. While some commentators see the pro-stability position as racist, or as the product of political manipulation, the evidence shows that it is based on concern about local training and the stress that growth imposes on both the man-made and natural environment.*

### POPULATION GROWTH

Since 2006 Australia's population has grown rapidly. Growth in Australia is nothing new—numbers have been increasing constantly since WWII. But these numbers were not as large as in recent years and, for most of the post-war period, the wisdom of growth was not questioned.<sup>1</sup> From time to time aspects of the immigration intake were criticised and heated debates ensued,<sup>2</sup> and asylum seekers have, in later years, been a point of bitter controversy,<sup>3</sup> but population growth itself has not inspired the same degree of public interest. Today the situation is different. For the first time population growth has been a theme in a national election and widely debated in the mainstream media.

Growing numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat have drawn many voters' attention to immigration and border control, but a key reason for the increased focus on growth is the magnitude of the recent increase in legal immigration.<sup>4</sup> For most of the preceding decades people were aware of growth, as suburbs expanded on the urban fringe and faces and accents diversified in the inner cities, but these changes were relatively gradual. One could be for them or against them but, for most people, they had little immediate impact on their daily

lives. After 2006, as Figure 1 shows, the rate of growth increased sharply and, by 2008 and 2009, it was directly evident to most city dwellers. House prices (and rents) were rocketing out of reach,<sup>5</sup> roads in the major cities were much more congested,<sup>6</sup> and public transport became a peak-hour nightmare.<sup>7</sup> Commuters no longer hoped to get a seat; they struggled to find a secure handhold.

Some commentators are keen to interpret the public's growing concern about growth as yet another manifestation of prejudice, claiming that the population debate 'perpetuate[s] racism' and concerns about infrastructure are being 'purposely blurred to fan xenophobia towards migrants'.<sup>8</sup> They tell us that 'population debates cannot be allowed to be proxies for racist prejudices and social marginalisation',<sup>9</sup> and worry that 'Green Australia' might be the new 'White Australia'.<sup>10</sup> Others, such as Andrew Markus, acknowledge that growth itself might affect attitudes but attribute much of the new concern to 'the politicisation of immigration issues'.<sup>11</sup> The implication is that if Australians were not prejudiced, and if politicians would only refrain from talking about immigration-fuelled growth, public opinion would remain undisturbed. From this perspective growth imposes no

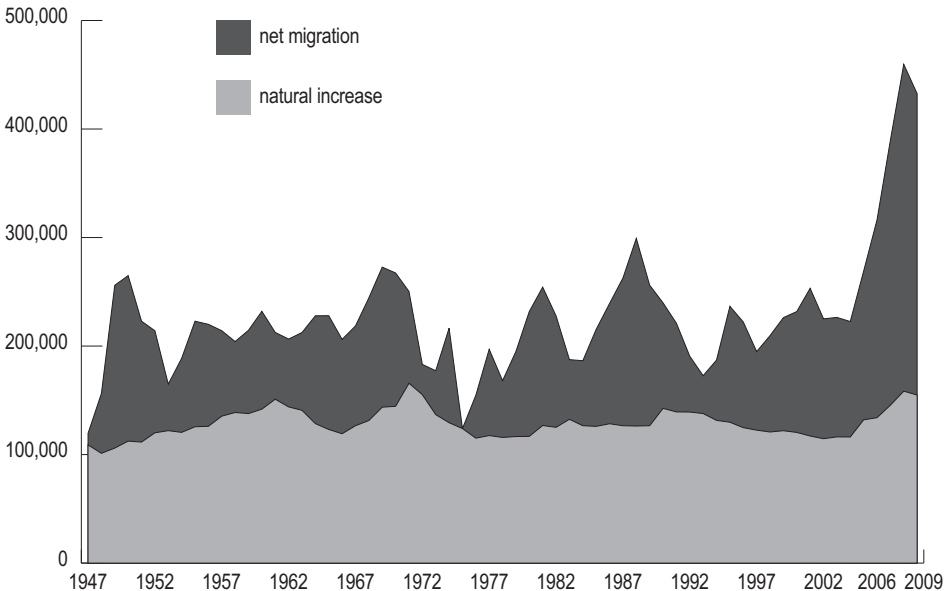
real pressures on people; public concern is simply a product of racism and political opportunism.

In 1999 the then minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, said that there was no need for a population policy as the nation was on course to reach 23 million ‘by the middle of next century. At this point it would stabilise in both its size and age profile’.<sup>12</sup> In 2007 Treasury’s Second Intergenerational Report increased this figure to 28.5 million by 2047.<sup>13</sup> But in September 2009 Treasury announced a new projection for 2050: 36 million.<sup>14</sup> And in October 2009 the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, told an astonished electorate that this growth had his blessing; he believed in a big Australia. From then on population growth became political; opinion leaders discussed it, polls were taken, television programs were

devoted to it, Rudd was deposed and, in the August 2010 election, leaders of both major parties came out against the idea of a big Australia.

Rapid growth and the clumsy politics that framed it sparked the population debate, but the national conversation which followed was not always well informed. The baby bonus (introduced in 2004), which may have had a minor effect on fertility, and asylum seekers, who have had almost no effect on the numbers, have jostled for air space, while the unchecked entry of New Zealanders, which added 36,000 to the population in 2007–08, went almost unmentioned.<sup>15</sup> And advocacy based on demographic nonsense was commonplace. For example, calls to increase the migrant intake in order to offset the ageing of the population have been frequent. Despite

**Figure 1: Natural increase and net migration, 1947 to 2009**



Sources: Demography 1954, Bulletin No. 72, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics; J. Shu et al., *Australia’s Population Trends and Prospects 1993*, BIR, AGPS, 1994; Australian Demographic Statistics, ABS, Catalogue no. 30101.0 (various issues)

Note: From 1947 to 1981 net migration is net total migration; from 1982 to 2009 it is net overseas migration (NOM). The two concepts roughly measure the same phenomenon but NOM was only introduced in 1982. (See note 4.) Net migration in 1975 was -8,125. This has been set at zero for Figure 1.

numerous studies showing that immigration has a minimal effect on the average age,<sup>16</sup> growth advocates still cling to this false argument.<sup>17</sup> But given the long silence on demographic fundamentals, punctuated by alarmist misinformation, it would have been surprising if the new debate had been well informed.

This silence does not happen by accident; some well-placed people and groups, including parliamentarians, prefer us not to talk about population growth. For example, in August 2010, Dick Smith asked Senator Bob Brown, Leader of the Greens, why he had not raised the question, saying: ‘Why don’t you kick up a fuss as the Greens, we hardly hear you about it?’ Brown replied:

Well, I’ll take responsibility for that because I can tell you that the single most common question I get in public forums out of the blue is about population. I bring it into this place [federal parliament] and you run straight into a wall of putty. ...

Why is the media so frightened to take up the issue of population? We’ve really got to get out of that mindset.<sup>18</sup>

How can the general public know what the real situation is if it is not discussed in a disinterested fashion, and how can they know whom to believe if there is no steady and accessible source of reliable information?

### **DEMOGRAPHIC IGNORANCE**

A handful of surveys over the last 40 years point to widespread ignorance about the size of the population, as well as of the size of the migrant intake, and thus of the difference that numbers in the present might mean for numbers in the future.<sup>19</sup> In 1971 demographers at the Australian National University (ANU) surveyed married women in Melbourne about their use of birth control. But they added what seemed to them to be some simple demographic questions, including one on the population of Australia. Only half could make even a

rough guess, and 20 per cent did not even try. This ignorance was not a neutral matter. Respondents were ‘visibly upset’ by their inability to answer; the population question caused more distress than any of the intimate questions about family planning and the researchers were obliged to move it to the end of the schedule.<sup>20</sup>

One cause of this ignorance is that demography is not widely taught; another is the difficulty that citizens have in discovering reliable information for themselves.<sup>21</sup> The American scholar, Gary Freeman, has developed a powerful theory explaining why immigration in liberal democracies often runs at higher levels than the electorate prefers. His main theme is client politics; immigration produces concentrated benefits (such as new customers for housing developers, more customers for retailers, and cheaper labour for employers) together with diffused costs (increased housing costs and congestion for existing citizens, together with lower wages and less environmental amenity). The concentrated benefits mean that it is in the interests of those who profit from growth to lobby governments hard to keep the migrants coming, while the diffused costs mean that it is not necessarily in the interests of any one citizen to put time and effort into lobbying to slow the intake. He also says that citizens are ‘rationally ignorant’ about immigration, both because the personal costs of obtaining information are high and because debate on the topic is constrained.<sup>22</sup>

Most people active in policy debates about economics have knowledge and understanding as far as economics is concerned; they know how unemployment rates and the GDP figures are calculated and how to interpret changes in these indicators. But they can flounder if the conversation turns to demography. While he was still Prime Minister, Rudd, for example got tangled during a recent radio interview because he was not clear about the distinction

between net overseas migration (NOM) and the formal immigration program.<sup>23</sup>

Such difficulties have their origin in the paucity of debate, the absence of a serious public dialogue about population policy.<sup>24</sup> And silence has other consequences. Major newspapers, for example, employ economics editors; they do not employ serious journalists who specialise in demography.<sup>25</sup> Another consequence is this: until recently, surveys on attitudes to population growth have been extremely rare. In contrast, though polls and surveys on attitudes to immigration have not been frequent, they are much less rare. Ignorance and silence go hand-in-hand.

But the situation is changing. The new debate means that people are getting more information, and city dwellers can put their own experience of diminishing quality of life into a broader perspective.<sup>26</sup> While few people will have even approximate numbers to the forefront of their minds, the wall of putty is shifting. More voters are aware not just of their immediate constraints but that growth is occurring at a national level and that the recent acceleration in the migrant intake is the most important cause.

## **SURVEYS OF ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION**

Even before the post-war mass migration program was launched pollsters and social scientists were in the field checking up on how voters felt about it.<sup>27</sup> Consequently we have a good record of changing attitudes over more than 50 years. Questions varied. Many, for example, probed attitudes to the ethnic composition of the intake. But Figure 2 shows data from a range of polls taken from 1954 to July 2010 which asked a similar question, and one that focussed on the size of the intake, not its make up. This usually read something as follows: 'Last year [X number] of migrants came to Australia. In your opinion is [X number] too many, about right, or too few?'

The data in Figure 2 point to a sharp increase in opposition to immigration in 2009 and 2010. This increase was picked up in the Australian Election Study (AES) but in late 2007 rather than 2009. The AES (a large mailout survey of voters) was held after the federal election in November 2007. It found that 46 per cent of voters thought the number of immigrants allowed into Australia should be reduced a little or reduced a lot (as opposed to increased a lot, increased a little, or remain about the same). This question has been asked by the AES since the 1996 election and has also appeared on two Australian Surveys of Social Attitudes (2003 and 2005). The data from these studies are not included in Figure 2 as the question is different, but they show a similar pattern, with opposition high in the mid 1990s, but falling during the Howard years.<sup>28</sup> The main difference is in the data for 2007. Here Figure 2 draws on the first Scanlon survey, taken in June to August 2007. This was based on telephone interviews and found a smaller proportion saying the intake was too many: 36 per cent. The second Scanlon survey also shows a relatively low figure for 'too many' in 2009 (37 per cent).<sup>29</sup> Because of this the increase in dissatisfaction picked up by the AES in 2007 does not appear in Figure 2 until late 2009.

While most of the polls shown<sup>30</sup> mention an actual number in the prompt; this is less common after the mid-1990s. Readers will find some differences in the 2009 to 2010 data in Figure 2 above and Figure 12 in the recently published third Scanlon report. This also presents the 'too many' response, from 1974 to 2010. The difference occurs because the Scanlon report does not show two recent Age/Nielsen polls (November 2009 and April 2010), and misses the July Iyengar and Jackman study (published in August 2010).<sup>31</sup>

Figure 2 shows only the 'too many' and 'too few' responses. This is for clarity and

because there is evidence that people who have no clear opinion, or are simply confused by the question, are likely to pick the 'about right' response. This is demonstrated by the data in Table 1; two polls on attitudes to immigration were conducted in mid 1971

by different firms with different questions but within a few weeks of each other.

The MGP poll asked respondents to express their attitudes to immigration in terms of their preferred number of migrants. While two numbers were mentioned in the

**Figure 2: Attitudes to immigration, July 1954 to July 2010**



Sources: Morgan Gallup Poll (MGP), 1022–1035 (No. 105) July 1954; MGP, 1103–1115 (No. 112) July 1955; MGP, 1171–1182 (No. 118) May 1956; MGP, 1698–1710 (No. 164) August 1963 (polls for 1954 to 1963 are from Goot, 1999, cited in endnote 27); MGP, 1776–1788 (No. 171) August 1964; MGP, 2921–2039 (No. 195), December 1967; MGP (No. 200) 19 October 1968; MGP (No. 212) August 1970; Age Poll, 12 July 1971; McNair Anderson, March 1977; ANOP, National Times, 13–19 September 1981; MGP (No. 589) May, and then June, 1984; Saulwick/Age Poll, 9 February 1988; Saulwick/Age Poll, 14 May 1990; Saulwick/Age Poll, 4 November 1991; AGB McNair poll, 14–16 June 1996; Newspan, The Australian, 3 May 1997, 2001; AC Nielsen poll, The Age, 4 September 2001; 2002 is an Irving Saulwick poll commissioned by Job Futures; the sample is restricted to people in the workforce; 2007 is the first Scanlon survey (data as published in A. Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, Summary Report*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Melbourne, 2010, p. 21); the first 2009 poll is June/July from the second Scanlon survey (Markus 2010, op. cit.); the second 2009 poll is an AC Nielsen poll, 5–7 November 2009; the first 2010 poll is an AC Nielsen poll, 15–17 April 2010; the second, taken in June is the third Scanlon survey (Markus 2010 op. cit.), and the third taken in July is an internet-based poll by S. Iyengar and S. Jackman, 'Australian and American attitudes to illegal immigration', The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Sydney, 2010, 14–22 July, published online August 2010 at <<http://ussc.edu.au/s/media/docs/publications/1008IllegalImmigrantsSurvey.pdf>>.

Notes: From 1984 to June 1996 the data refer to voters only; the other polls are based on all adults (except for Iyengar and Jackman in 2010, which is voters only). Up to 1973 'adult' normally meant aged 21 plus; from 1974 on it means aged 18 plus. Where respondents had the option of choosing 'far too many' or 'somewhat too many' or 'somewhat too few' or 'far too few' these responses have been collapsed into 'too many' and 'too few'. The 'about right' response category is not shown; neither is 'don't know'.

prompt, the question was open ended, and more than one third were unable to answer. This is common with questions asking people to express their opinions in terms of numbers;<sup>32</sup> many people do not know enough and some may be panicked by the appearance of examination question rather than an offer to provide an opinion. *The Age* poll followed the conventional wording of the polls shown in Figure 1 and found that only two per cent did not answer. However the proportion who said ‘about right’ is almost exactly the same as the proportion recorded as ‘can’t say’ in the MGP poll.

Apart from this, the two polls provide similar findings; in the MGP 54.3 per cent nominated a number smaller than the current intake while 53 per cent in *The Age* poll said the current intake was too many; conversely in the MGP 11.3 per cent wanted either the current number or a higher one, while 11 per cent in *The Age* poll said the current number was too few. This suggests that the ‘about right’ response harbours many respondents with no clear opinion; consequently we are more likely to get a

valid picture of real trends in opinion if we focus on those with definite views.<sup>33</sup>

Figure 2 shows high levels of discontent with immigration in the late 1980s and early 1990s; there is logic to this as the numbers then were high relative to 1983, 1984 and 1985, but opposition continued at a high level during the recession of the early 1990s even though the migrant intake fell. But the interesting change comes with the drop in opposition to immigration in the late 1990s after the election of the Howard Government in 1996.<sup>34</sup> There are a number of explanations for this. The new government made several well-publicised reforms. These included: an initial, relatively minor, cut to the intake which was nonetheless vigorously opposed by the growth lobby, meaning that many voters were likely to hear about it; restrictions on new migrants’ capacity to access social welfare; and restrictions on family reunion with an increased emphasis on skilled migration. The government also stopped talking about multiculturalism. In addition there was a gradual fall in unemployment and, after

**Table 1: Two polls in mid 1971—The ‘can’t say’ and ‘about right’ responses (per cent)**

Questions: Morgan Gallup Poll (MGP) ‘Next, about immigration—last year 170,000 people came to Australia to live here permanently, and next year the planned intake is 140,000. How many migrants a year do you favour in future?’

Age poll: (Exact wording not published) Respondents were told that over the past four years Australia’s intake of migrants had averaged about 160,000 per year and that the target for the next financial year was 140,000. They were asked if this was: far too many; somewhat too many; about right; somewhat too few; far too few.

| MGP, 10 July 1971                          | per cent | Age poll, 12 July 1971   | per cent |
|--|----------|--------------------------|----------|
| Subtotal giving a number less than 170,000 | 54.3     | Subtotal saying too many | 53.0     |
| Subtotal saying 170,000 or a higher number | 11.3     | Subtotal saying too few  | 11.0     |
| Can’t say                                  | 34.5     | About right              | 34.0     |
| —  | —        | Not stated               | 2.0      |
| Total                                      | 100.0    | Total                    | 100.0    |
| Total N (aged 18+)                         | 2251     | Total N (aged 21+)       | 1000     |

Notes: MGP (no. 221), asked 10 July 1971; Age poll published 12 July 1971. *The Age* poll was restricted to people living in Melbourne and Sydney; it is not clear if this was true of the MGP.



2001, an increasingly tough border-control regime. By 2001 only 41 per cent thought the numbers were 'too many' and, from 2001 on, the immigration program began to rise again. But public opinion did not turn against it.<sup>35</sup> Respondents grew even more comfortable with the situation. Why? It is highly probable that most Australians did not know that any change was underway. No powerful lobby decried it, the government kept a low profile, and journalists ignored it.<sup>36</sup> In 2002 Paul Kelly wrote:

Howard operates a program below the speed limit because he fears a backlash against more migrants. Howard and Ruddock are relieved that the recent announcement of an expanded program won little negative publicity. They describe their approach as managed gradualism. ... As a result of the higher program, Ruddock revised upwards Australia's likely population projection by 2050 to 27 million. This figure has crept up in recent years as the intake has lifted.<sup>37</sup>

If many people did not know what was happening, if they believed that the John Howard who had reformed the program and stopped the boats was also continuing to keep the intake low, it is understandable that they did not register discomfort with the new status quo. Ignorance of demography includes ignorance of growth, and keeping quiet about growth suits those who profit from it.

The immigration polls are valuable because there is such a long series asking similar questions. They can help us gain a picture of changing attitudes to immigration but it is difficult to use them as proxies for polls on attitudes to population growth. If people do not know that the intake is rising we cannot take approval of current levels as endorsements of growth. Indeed over 30 years ago research found that those who underestimated the size of the intake were more likely to be positive about immigration.<sup>38</sup> Public figures are also on

record as saying that low fertility means that Australia's population would be 'actually shrinking' without immigration.<sup>39</sup> Respondents who believed this furphy would be more likely to support immigration than those who knew the population was still growing.

Many people do not know enough to express their attitudes to growth through the medium of questions about immigration. Besides, such questions tap a range of other values: fear of job competition; opposition to, or support for, cultural diversity; attitudes to asylum seekers; as well as attachment to national identity versus enthusiasm for internationalism. Immigration is the key driver of growth but polls about immigration are a poor indicator of attitudes to that growth. For example in September 2001 a Saulwick *Age* poll found that 58 per cent of voters wanted Australia to 'maintain' its population and seven per cent wanted it to 'reduce' its population, giving a total of 65 per cent who did not want growth.<sup>40</sup> In the same month an AC Nielsen poll of adults aged 18 plus found that 44 per cent thought the migrant intake was 'about right' and 10 per cent that it was 'too few'; only 41 per cent said the intake was 'too many'.<sup>41</sup>

If we want to know what Australians have thought about population growth we need to look at questions that asked them directly. The new openness in debate should mean that future polls on immigration will provide a fairer reflection of attitudes to population growth, but this cannot be said of polls conducted in the past.

## ATTITUDES TO POPULATION GROWTH

There is very little survey research on attitudes to population growth itself, prior to the new debate. But in 1977 Irving Saulwick and associates conducted a national poll of 2000 voters asking: 'Do you think that over the next few years we should: not be con-



cerned if growth slows down: encourage couples to have larger families; encourage more migrants to come; encourage both migrants and larger families?' Fifty per cent said we should not be concerned, 22 per cent wanted to encourage larger families, ten per cent wanted to encourage more migrants, and 17 per cent wanted both larger families and migrants.<sup>42</sup>

In 1979 the Victorian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs commissioned research on attitudes to immigration, though unfortunately the sample was limited to Australia-born people of Australia-born parents who were living in Melbourne. Among the many questions on attitudes to migrants and immigration were two on attitudes to population growth. One invited agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Australia needs to boost its population'; the other asked about preferred means of increasing the population. These found that pro- and anti-growth positions had almost equal support but that, if the population were to grow, rather more than half preferred natural increase to immigration (see Table 2).

The Saulwick poll found that 50 per cent would not be concerned if growth slowed down; the Melbourne poll found that 45 per cent thought that further growth was unnecessary. In 1986 Rearch Research produced a significant report for the Immigration Department on attitudes to population growth, based on a large national sample.<sup>43</sup> They began by asking respondents to estimate the size of the population, reassuring them

that 'many people are unsure' of this: they found that 48 per cent could give an answer judged correct (between 15 and 16 million), a similar result to that found by ANU in 1971. Rearch then asked if there was such a thing as an ideal population size for Australia: 43 per cent said there was, 41 per cent that there wasn't and 16 per cent didn't know or didn't answer.

Rearch asked the first group what that ideal size was and, though 13 per cent didn't know, of those who provided an answer the median was 19.6 million. Rearch also asked respondents if they understood what was meant by the term 'ageing of the population'; 76 per cent said that they did. If they did not they were told this: 'Because people are living longer and at the same time are having less children, the average age of the Australian population has been increasing over many years. This ageing process is taking place in much of the developed world'. Table 3 sets out answers to further questions on the current size and age structure of the population from this survey.

These findings show that, in 1986, 50 per cent of people aged 15 plus thought the

**Table 2: Attitudes to population growth, Melbourne, third-generation plus Australians, 1979 (per cent)**

| Response | <i>'Australia needs to boost its population'</i> | <i>'We should increase our population by encouraging Australians to have more children, rather than taking in more migrants'</i> |
|----------|--|--|
| Agree    | 42   | 54   |
| Neutral  | 14   | 19   |
| Disagree | 45   | 27   |
| Total    | 100  | 100  |
| Total N  | 1000   | 1000   |

Source: T. Birrell, 'The study of attitudes of Victorians to migrants: another look', unpublished paper presented to the Victorian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, May 1980

Notes: The sample was 1000 Australia-born people of Australia-born parents, aged 16 plus, living in Melbourne, interviewed in 1979. Non-responses have been excluded from the analysis.

current size of the population was either about right or too many, and that 43 per cent thought that double the population (then 16 million, so doubling to 32 million) would mean a lower standard of living. Taken together with the Saulwick and Melbourne studies these findings present a fairly solid picture of about half of the population not wanting further growth back in the late 1970s and mid 1980s. Overall if there is to be growth, most respondents prefer natural increase to immigration.

It is interesting that, despite a decade of below replacement fertility and considerable agitation about the ageing of the

population, only 39 per cent of the respondents to the Reark survey thought an older age structure would be a disadvantage. Creating a sense of alarm takes time but, by 2005, the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes found that 22.5 per cent of voters believed that the ageing of the population was one of the two most important problems facing Australia (and those who said it was the most important issue were much less likely to want a reduction in immigration than were voters as whole).<sup>44</sup> This suggests that concern about demographic ageing, and support for immigration as a cure, grew over the intervening decades.

**Table 3: Attitudes to population size, growth and age structure, Australia 1986 (per cent)**

|  |              |                |            |       |       |
|--|--------------|----------------|------------|-------|-------|
|  | Too many     | About right    | Too few    | NS/DK | Total |
| Overall, do you think Australia has too many people, about the right number or too few people?   | 10           | 40             | 45         | 5     | 100   |
|  | Immigration  | Family growth  | Both       | NS/DK | Total |
| If Australia wanted faster population growth for their country which would you prefer to see: the Government increasing immigration or the Government encouraging family growth?   | 16           | 58             | 23         | 3     | 100   |
|  | Higher       | Similar        | Lower      | NS/DK | Total |
| If Australia grows to twice its present population, what do you think it will mean for the standard of living of the average Australian? Do you think there will be a higher standard of living, a similar standard of living or a lower standard of living? | 19           | 31             | 43         | 7     | 100   |
|  | Disadvantage | Little concern | Beneficial | NS/DK | Total |
| [Is having an ageing population] a disadvantage overall, something of little concern or generally beneficial (a good thing)?   | 39           | 27             | 24         | 9     | 100   |

Source: REARK Research Pty Ltd, *Attitudinal Survey on Population Issues in Australia (A research report prepared for the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs)*, Sydney, 1986, random sample of 2512 people living in Australia and aged 15 plus, interviewed face-to-face.

Note: The questions were not necessarily asked in the order presented here.

After the Reark survey there is little information on attitudes to population except for three AES surveys in 1990, 1993 and 1996. The AES asked voters if overpopulation was an urgent environmental concern in this country; this was more specific than the general questions about growth set out above but, by 1996, 53 per cent said overpopulation was an urgent concern (from fairly urgent to very urgent). See Table 4.

In 1986 the Reark survey had asked whether respondents thought that population growth meant ‘more severe environmental problems’ or whether ‘with proper management, a bigger population need not harm the environment’. Most of the respondents (67 per cent) endorsed the second statement: it need not harm the environment.<sup>45</sup> Table 4 suggests that by 1996 people were less sanguine; in 1996 only 45 per cent said that overpopulation was not an urgent environmental problem. While the data are patchy the picture that they suggest is that by the mid 1990s rather more than half the electorate preferred stability to growth.

In September 2001 Irving Saulwick and Associates asked 1000 voters if ‘Australia should increase, maintain or reduce its population’: 58 per cent said ‘maintain’, seven per cent ‘reduce’ and 36 per cent ‘increase’, giving 65 per cent who did not want growth.<sup>46</sup> The preference for stability had grown.

Late in 2009 the first poll about population growth that post-dated the new debate was published (by AC Nielsen) with a follow-up question in April 2010, and in

February 2010 the online polling company, Essential Media, asked a similar question, as did the third Scanlon survey in June 2010 (see Table 5).

All four polls suggest that by late 2009 and mid 2010 there was a solid core of Australians (40 to 51 per cent) who did not just prefer stability; they were opposed to growth—or at least to growth on the scale of 36 million by 2050.

The proportions saying ‘about right’ and ‘no opinion’ are high in both of the Nielsen polls, and in the Scanlon poll. While it can be difficult to ask questions about population size without mentioning numbers, it may be that the use of numbers in the question confused some respondents, or it may be that they did indeed think the projected growth ‘about right’. The Essential Media poll did not provide a ‘no opinion’ option, but has a higher proportion prepared to endorse growth, as well as 23 per cent taking a neutral position.

How can we ask a question about numbers when many people, who may know

**Table 4: Overpopulation as an urgent environmental concern in Australia, on a scale of 1 to 5 (per cent)**

|                                       | 1990 | 1993 | 1996 |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Not urgent (1 and 2)                  | 51   | 43   | 45   |
| Fairly urgent to very urgent (3 to 5) | 43   | 53   | 53   |
| Missing                               | 6    | 4    | 2    |
| Total                                 | 100  | 100  | 100  |
| Total N                               | 2037 | 3023 | 1797 |

Sources: Australian Election Studies, 1990 to 1996: I. McAllister et al., 1990; R. Jones et al. 1993; R. Jones et al. 1996 [computer files], Social Science Data Archives, ANU, Canberra. The authors of these files are not responsible for the use made of them here.

Notes: The question was: ‘In your opinion how urgent are each of the following environmental concerns in this country?’ This was followed by a list of concerns, which include ‘overpopulation’. Respondents were asked to grade each concern on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 marked ‘not urgent’, 3 marked ‘fairly urgent’ and 5 marked ‘very urgent’. The samples are voters only and the data come from mailout questionnaires.

what they think about growth, do not know how to express their opinions in terms of numbers, and may be too frightened to try? (Is 36 million an absurdly big number, or a trivially small number, and how stupid will I look if I say ‘don’t know’?) The questions in Table 5 are a fair attempt at a difficult task. But there is a further group of three polls asking people to express their opinion in terms of their preferred number of future Australians which are problematic. Respondents were given a range of five different numbers to choose from as possible target populations for the next 30 or 40 years. As Figure 3 shows, answers clustered around

the central response category, while tailing off towards the extremes. This echoes the shape of a normal curve, which would be a most unlikely set of findings if the questions really were tapping people’s attitudes rather than confused answers to a question that had little meaning them. One would not expect to find this pattern in answers to questions that actually measured attitudes rather than attitudes plus demographic ignorance and anxiety.<sup>47</sup>

The Lowy poll in particular received a lot of media coverage but its findings cannot be relied on; as is clear from the pattern of results in Figure 3, many people do not

**Table 5: Attitudes to growing to 35/36 million in 2049/2050, per cent**

| 35/36m is:  | November 2009 | April 2010 | 36m good or bad for Australia? | February 2010 | Would a population of 36m by 2050 be: | June 2010 |
|-------------|---------------|------------|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Too many    | 40            | 51         | Bad or very bad                | 48            | Too large or much too large           | 51        |
| Too few     | 2             | 2          | Good or very good              | 24            | Too small or much too small           | 4         |
| About right | 30            | 27         | Neither good nor bad           | 23            | About right                           | 37        |
| No opinion  | 26            | 19         |                                |               | (Refused)                             | *         |
| Don’t know  | 1             | 2          | Don’t know                     | 5             | Don’t know                            | 7         |
| Total       | 100           | 100        | Total                          | 100           | Total                                 | 100       |
| Total N     | 1400          | 1400       | Total N                        | 1830          | Total N                               | 2021      |

Sources: November 2009 and April 2010: Nielsen, National Report, 8 November 2009, telephone interviews 5-7 November, and National Report, 18 April 2010, telephone interviews 15-17 April, both samples are of adults aged 18 plus, interviewed by telephone. February 2010: Essential Media Report No. 100215, 15 February 2010, internet panel interviews, adults aged 18 plus (see discussion below). June 2010: A. Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, Summary Report*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Melbourne, 2010, p. 26 (sampling details are unclear but appear to be 2,021 people aged 18 plus: see pp. 32, 42)

Notes: The Nielsen question in November 2009 was ‘Recent population projections suggest that the Australian population will grow from 22 million people now to 35 million people in 2049. Do you think 35 million people in 2049 is too many people, too few people, about right or is this something you don’t have an opinion about?’ In April 2010 this wording was repeated except that the wording about the projection was changed to ‘36 million in 2050’. The Essential Media question for February 2010 was: ‘It has been estimated that Australia will have a population of 36 million by 2050. Do you think this will be good or bad for Australia?’ (5% very good, 19% good, 23% neither good nor bad, 30% bad, 18% very bad). The Scanlon question for June 2010 was: ‘In your view, would an Australian population of 36 million by 2050 be too large, about right or too small?’ (20.6% much too large, 30.8% too large, 37.1% about right, 3.7% too small, 0.7% much too small, refused 0.2%)

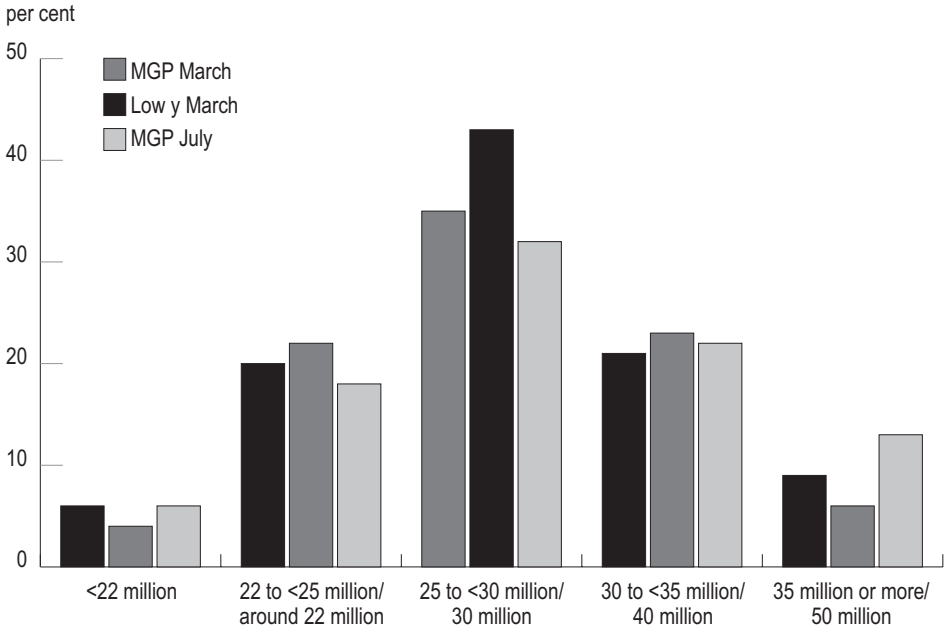
know enough about demography to express their opinions about population growth in terms of numbers.

The last two issues of this journal published data from questions about population growth which the Centre for Population and Urban Research put on the most recent Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a large mail-out survey of a random sample of 3,243 voters which was in the field from December 2009 to February 2010.<sup>48</sup> The questionnaire covered many topics. The population questions were introduced as follows: ‘The next few questions are about population growth. In 2008–09

immigration to Australia was higher than in any other year’. The key question came next: ‘Do you think Australia needs more people?’ The response categories were ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The results were 28 per cent ‘yes’ and 72 per cent ‘no’ (51 respondents—1.6 per cent of the sample—skipped the question and are not included in these figures).

The questions then asked those who thought more people were needed about their preferred means of achieving growth and found that 26 per cent of this sub-set wanted to encourage people to have more children, 18 per cent wanted to encourage more migrants to come, and 54 per cent

**Figure 3: Polls on attitudes to population growth that required numerical responses**



Sources: MGP (No 4482) Field work 16-17 March 2010, 670 people aged 14 plus (data illustrated are restricted to voters but the size of this subset is not provided); Lowy Institute, media release, 7 April 2010, field work 20-21 March, sample 1001 adults; MGP (No. 4536) Field work 20-21 July, sample 719 voters

Questions: Lowy: ‘Now about the size of Australia’s population in the next 40 years or so. Which one of the following do you personally think would be the best target population for Australia in the next 40 years?: Less than the current size of 22 million people; Around the current size of 22 million people; 30 million people; 40 million people; 50 million people; None of these’ [None of these, < 0.5%; don’t know, 1%]  
MGP (both polls): ‘Australia’s population has increased by 5 million from 17 million to 22 million over the last 20 years. What population do you think we should aim to have in Australia in 30 years — that is, by 2040? Under 22 million; 22—under 25 million; 25—under 30 million; 30—under 35 million; 35 million or more?’ [Can’t say, 9% in both MGP polls]

wanted both strategies. People were then asked for their reasons for thinking more people were, or were not, needed; these data have already been reported in this journal. They show that the minority who wanted growth largely did so for economic reasons; the majority who did not want growth emphasised a need to train our own people, and to avoid environmental pressures. Contrary to claims about prejudice in the debate, very few of this sub-set (10 per cent) mentioned concerns about cultural diversity.

The question ‘Do you think Australia needs more people?’ allows respondents to express their opinions without having to think in numbers. It was chosen both because it avoids numbers and because its mild wording is congruent with the Saulwick questions asked in 1977 and 2001, thus providing a sketchy timeline. Just as the Saulwick questions did, it allows respondents to express their attitudes towards growth, without having to draw on, or assume, knowledge of demography.

Apart from Iyengar and Jackman<sup>49</sup> in Figure 2, and Essential Media in Table 5, the surveys and polls described above rely on the well established methods of either face-to-face interviewing (used in the earlier polls), or telephone interviews, used in the later polls, or mailout questionnaires, as in the 2007 AES study discussed with reference to Figure 2, Table 4 and the 2009–2010 AuSSA question. But a new method of gauging public attitudes is now increasingly used: the online panel survey. This method has also produced some useful results which could help us interpret the data gathered by more conventional methods. But how reliable is it?

### **INTERNET POLLS BASED ON VOLUNTEER PANELS**

Internet-panel polls have become prevalent since around 2000; in Britain the YouGov series is well established and widely published. The method is based on the polling

company gaining access to a large panel of internet-using volunteers and drawing a random sample from this panel. (Essential Media draws on a panel of over 100,000 people aged 18 plus recruited by Your Source.) Data are weighted in an attempt to ensure that the samples represent the population.

Critics argue that this method is unscientific in that the population which the sample is held to represent is ill-defined, and of course biased towards internet users.<sup>50</sup> Defenders argue that telephone polls are now increasingly unreliable; many households no longer have landlines, and those that do often use screening devices to ignore calls from strangers or, if reached, refuse to respond to pollsters. Response rates to telephone polls can now be as low as 17 per cent.<sup>51</sup> There is also the problem of social desirability; when respondents answer questions put to them by a human interviewer they may be reluctant to reveal behaviours or attitudes that they sense the interviewer might disapprove of and this may colour their responses.

For example, the Scanlon surveys are based on telephone interviews and find surprisingly high proportions agreeing that ethnic minorities should be given government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions (over 30 per cent).<sup>52</sup> The two comparative surveys presented from 1995 and 2003 show much lower proportions (around 16 per cent). Unfortunately these comparative surveys are not referenced but, if they were based on mailout surveys rather than telephone interviews, the difference might be explained by the social desirability factor. This may also explain the difference between the findings on attitudes to immigration between the 2007 AES and the 2007 Scanlon survey.

In contrast, like respondents to mailout questionnaires, people drawn from internet panels may feel more comfortable providing socially undesirable answers to questions

posed to them by an anonymous computer screen. They can also answer in their own time and at their own pace, and thus may give more accurate and thoughtful answers. With phone interviews both interviewer and respondent are under pressure to complete the schedule quickly; time for reflection is limited.

Critics say that samples drawn from online panels lack theoretical credibility; proponents say that some, in any event, have proved themselves in practice.<sup>53</sup> YouGov has a good track record in predicting British elections,<sup>54</sup> and Essential Media in Australia predicted the primary vote in the 2010 election more accurately than any other poll.<sup>55</sup>

Online panel surveys are also cheaper than telephone polls and thus can be conducted more often, with people questioned on a range of issues relevant to public policy, apart from the repetitive questions about voting intentions which are the basic fare of established polls such as Newspoll. There are, then, grounds for taking the findings of established online polling companies seriously, especially those that have put themselves to the test of predicting election results.

Two online surveys have already been mentioned; the careful work of Iyengar and Jackman in Figure 2, and some of Essential Media’s work presented in Table 5. Further work from this company is set out below.

Table 6 shows active opposition to population growth in the large capitals; 87 per cent wanted either a smaller population or no growth at all in these cities. This is a stronger result than that provided by the 2009–2010 AuSSA survey. Respondents to the Essential Media survey were happier to imagine growth for other regions but they were not necessarily the people who lived in those regions; people who actually lived in South Australia, Western Australia, or Tasmania were less sanguine about growth in their capitals. (In this sub-group only 22 per cent want a larger population for their capitals while 61 per cent wanted the same population or smaller.) In fact 49 per cent of the growth Australia has experienced between 2001 and 2009 occurred in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane (excluding the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast), or 59 per cent if Perth is included.<sup>56</sup> A high proportion of immigrants settle in

**Table 6: Are there regions which need a larger or smaller population? (per cent)**

Question: ‘Do you think Australia needs a larger population, a smaller population or about the same population in the following areas?’

|   | Larger population | Smaller population | Same population | Total smaller or same | Don’t know | Total |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------|-------|
| Large capital cities—<br>Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane    | 7                 | 36                 | 51              | <b>87</b>             | 6          | 100   |
| Other capital cities like<br>Adelaide, Perth and Hobart | 36                | 12                 | 44              | <b>56</b>             | 7          | 100   |
| Major regional centres                                  | 56                | 8                  | 28              | <b>36</b>             | 8          | 100   |
| Smaller regional towns                                  | 64                | 6                  | 22              | <b>28</b>             | 7          | 100   |

Source: Essential Report No. 100416, 19 April 2010, sample 1,988 adults aged 18 plus

Note: People were being asked about regions in general, not the regions where they themselves lived. The researchers say: ‘Opinions about the populations of the major capitals were similar across states, but respondents from SA/WA/Tasmania were less likely to want larger populations in their capital cities’.



**Table 7: Reasons for and against population growth, Australia, March 2010 (per cent)**

Question: 'Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Australia's population growth?'

|   | Strongly agree | Agree | Total agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total disagree | Don't know | Total |
|---|----------------|-------|-------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|------------|-------|
| We just don't have the infrastructure and services to manage more population growth | 36             | 39    | <b>75</b>   | 14       | 5                 | <b>19</b>      | 6          | 100   |
| Immigration should be slowed as it causes too much change to our society            | 32             | 32    | <b>64</b>   | 20       | 9                 | <b>29</b>      | 7          | 100   |
| Australia has a fragile environment that cannot cope with a much larger population  | 24             | 37    | <b>61</b>   | 24       | 6                 | <b>30</b>      | 8          | 100   |
| Having a larger population will help our economy                                    | 7              | 31    | <b>38</b>   | 34       | 18                | <b>52</b>      | 10         | 100   |
| Australia has the space and resources to cope with a much larger population         | 8              | 27    | <b>35</b>   | 31       | 27                | <b>58</b>      | 7          | 100   |

Source: Essential Media report, No. 100301, 1 March 2010, sample 1,816 adults aged 18 plus

Melbourne and Sydney so continuing immigration-fuelled population growth will further inflate these cities: plans to persuade new immigrants to settle in more sparsely populated regional areas seem unlikely to have much impact.<sup>57</sup>

Table 7 shows that three quarters of respondents thought Australia lacked the infrastructure and services to manage more growth. Furthermore, around three fifths thought that the environment could not support more growth and that we did not have the space and resources to cope with a bigger Australia. Other research has shown that respondents who do want growth point to economic advantages as a reason for this support<sup>58</sup> but, as Table 7 shows, among people as a whole, this argument carries less weight; 52 per cent disagreed with the proposition that a larger population would help the economy while only 38 per cent agreed.

The overall picture presented by this analysis is of growing disquiet about population growth in Australia, irrespective of feelings about immigration. In 1977 50 per cent would not be concerned if growth slowed down, in 1996 53 per cent thought that overpopulation was a serious environmental problem, and by 2001 65 per cent wanted the size of the population to either remain the same or be reduced. In 2009–2010 72 per cent thought Australia did not need more people and in April 2010 87 per cent thought that the three main capital cities should either stay the same size or shrink. None of these questions mentioned specific numbers; consequently answers to them are not distorted by any confusion or anxiety induced by demographic ignorance. The last two results are also unlikely to be contaminated by the social desirability effect. Questions that do mention numbers show a core of 50 per cent by mid 2010 who definitely do not want a population growing to 36 million.

## THE END OF IGNORANCE AND THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF GROWTH?

The population debate has led to a new openness, many new voices have been heard, and the possibility for more people to gain a deeper understanding of the role of growth in their lives has deepened. City dwellers have not been able to avoid exposure to its effects but the wider conversation about growth has made it likely that many of them can now put this experience into a wider context. They may now see, not just clogged highways, but a broader pattern with worrying implications for their way of life. They may also be able to make sensible connections between the migrant intake and population growth; for example Figure 2 shows rising opposition to the current intake, despite stable or falling unemployment. The old story that reservations about immigration are just manifestations of fear of job competition and lingering racism is losing its explanatory power.

In the past many respondents to social surveys were not in a position to make connections between immigration policy and population growth; they had little information, were confused about the meaning of the phrase 'below replacement fertility', and scared of demographic ageing. In the wake of a more open debate these confusions may be dissipating. Some may also

be becoming aware of lobbyists, especially property developers, who would rather work behind the scenes and keep them in the dark. The use of the racist smear to keep critics quiet could influence respondents to telephone polls, who fear the prejudices of their interviewer, should they express their real attitudes to immigration-fuelled growth.<sup>59</sup> But as a damper on public debate, it is losing its effectiveness. The effects of growth on Australians' quality of life are too real to be smothered by the old shibboleths.

After WWII there was widespread support for population growth; today the situation is different. As well as the stressed commuters, and parents despairing of their children's chances in the housing market, local environmental groups are campaigning about the adverse effects of growth in their own neighbourhoods. A growing understanding of the fundamental causes of the pressure on the way of life they love are becoming clearer to more and more voters. The new population debate is not about race, and it is not an artefact of political manipulation. As countless letters to editors, comments on internet sites, and the growth of the new Stable Population Party of Australia attest, it is a grassroots phenomenon, and this is reflected in the survey data.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> For example in 1965 the Vernon Report began by saying: 'Having in mind that the objectives of the Government's economic policy are a high rate of economic and population growth...', *Report of the Committee of Economic Enquiry*, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 1965, p. i. By the late 1960s some questions were being asked. See 'A herd of sacred cows', *Nation*, 18 October 1969 and some of the chapters in J. Wilkes (Ed.), *How Many Australians? Immigration and Growth* (Australian Institute of Political Science: Proceedings of the 37th Summer School), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971. For a reminiscence of this period see B. Cohen, 'Dangers in growth for growth's sake', *The Australian*, 6 August 2007, p. 16. But the climate of scepticism passed and by the late 1970s the Fraser Government was committed to higher immigration. By the mid-1990s questions were asked again. See for example B. Jones, *Australia's Population "Carrying Capacity": One Nation—Two Ecologies*, Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994; T. F. Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, Reed, Sydney, 1994; D. Cocks, *People Policy*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1996. Sustainable Population Australia (formerly Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population) has been active since the mid 1980s. See <[www.population.org.au](http://www.population.org.au)>.

- <sup>2</sup> See for example the Blainey debate of 1984, the John Howard affair of 1988, and the furore that greeted Pauline Hanson in the late 1990s. But all of these debates centred on immigration. They did not focus on its contribution to population growth but on the propriety or otherwise of discussing its racial composition.
- <sup>3</sup> See for example D. Marr and M. Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, and P. Sheehan, *The Electronic Whorehouse*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2003 (Chapters 5 and 6 on the detention of asylum seekers arriving by boat and the children overboard affair).
- <sup>4</sup> The official permanent immigration program grew from 94,353 in 2000–2001 to 171,644 in 2007–08, 184,450 in 2008–09 and 182,450 in 2009–10. See *Population Flows: Immigration Aspects*, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Canberra, various issues. But this program excludes New Zealanders and long-term temporary arrivals and does not subtract for departures. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) produces the official migration figures used by government to determine the estimated resident population (and thus electoral boundaries, the apportionment of the GST and so on). The measure used is net overseas migration (NOM), which includes net permanent movement together with net long-term movement (stays in Australia or aboard of 12 months or more). Variants of this measure have been in use since 1959 when it was called net permanent and long-term migration. In 1982 it was refined to account for category jumping and became net overseas migration (NOM). In 2006 further refinements were made; now a long-term mover is someone who stays in (or out) of Australia for at least 12 months in a 16-month period. This change inflated the recorded numbers by around 20,000. The numbers recorded for NOM are shown in Figure 1 for 1982 to 2009. The net total figures shown for 1947 to 1981 are simply all arrivals minus all departures irrespective of length of stay.
- <sup>5</sup> G. Thom, ‘Homes to hit \$1m in decade’, *The Herald-Sun*, 20 January 2010, p. 11; G. Megalogenis, ‘Housing shortfall locking out thousands’, *The Australian*, 28 April 2010, p. 5; N. Berkovic, ‘Report warns of low-income home crisis’, *The Australian*, 28 April 2010, p. 5
- <sup>6</sup> S. Lunn, ‘The daily commute keeps getting longer’, *The Australian*, 4 June 2009, p. 3; J. Gordon and R. Sexton, ‘National road chaos looms’, *The Age*, 8 March 2009, p. 1
- <sup>7</sup> C. Lucas, ‘Train system completely off the rails’, *The Age*, 31 January 2009, p. 4; J. Dowling, ‘Spike in public transport use’, *The Age*, 4 June 2009, p. 2
- <sup>8</sup> Pino Migliorino, chairman of the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia, quoted in T. Reilly and Y. Narushima, ‘Human rights boss lashes “race to bottom”’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 2010, p. 4
- <sup>9</sup> A. Jakubowicz, ‘What Gillard’s Government can do on cultural diversity’, *Online Opinion*, 15 September 2010 <[www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=10979&page=0](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=10979&page=0)> accessed 17 September 2010
- <sup>10</sup> A. Fisher, ‘Is Green Australia the new White Australia?’, *Catholic Diocese of Parramatta*, 18 August 2010 <[www.parra.catholic.org.au/news---events/latest-news/latest-news.aspx/is-green-australia-the-new-white-australia-.asp](http://www.parra.catholic.org.au/news---events/latest-news/latest-news.aspx/is-green-australia-the-new-white-australia-.asp)> accessed 26 August 2010. See also B. Delaney, ‘Murky agenda behind this green debate’, *The Age*, 27 January 2009, p. 11; S. Perera, ‘Population debate hides an ugly racism’, *The Age*, 30 July 2010, p. 17; B. Keane, ‘The population debate just got a little bit worse’, *Crikey*, 22 July 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, Summary Report*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Melbourne, 2010, p. 20
- <sup>12</sup> From an edited version of his address to the Business Council of Australia published as: P. Ruddock, ‘Coalition Government views on population policy’, *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, p. 8
- <sup>13</sup> *Intergenerational Report 2007 (Second Intergenerational Report)*, Department of Treasury, Canberra, 2007, p. 15
- <sup>14</sup> *Australia to 2050: Future Challenges (Third Intergenerational Report)*, Department of Treasury, Canberra, 2010, pp. viii, 10
- <sup>15</sup> Data from B. Birrell and E. Healy, ‘Net overseas migration: why is it so high?’, *People and Place*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, p. 59. Kelvin Thomson, MHR for Wills, is one of the few public figures who have questioned the wisdom of this. See <[www.kelvinthomson.com.au/Editor/assets/pop\\_debate/091111\\_population\\_reform\\_paper.pdf](http://www.kelvinthomson.com.au/Editor/assets/pop_debate/091111_population_reform_paper.pdf)>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Productivity Commission, *Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia: Productivity Commission Research Report*, 24 March, Productivity Commission, Melbourne, 2005, pp. xii, xxxix; *Projections of the Populations of Australia, States and Territories: 1999–2101*, Catalogue no. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra, 2000, p. 2; C. Young and L. Day, ‘Australia’s demographic future: determinants of our population’, *Population 2040: Australia’s Choice*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1994; P. Zweifel, S. Felder and A. Werblow, ‘Population Ageing and health care expenditure: new evidence on the “red herring”’, *The Geneva Papers on Risk and Insurance*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2004, pp. 652–666; K. Betts, ‘Population ageing in Australia: policy implications of recent projections’, *People and Place*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2008, pp. 43–51. Demographic ageing is a product of two factors; lower fertility and increasing life expectancy. (Immigration makes very little difference.) Unless a population keeps growing

from natural increase forever its age profile inevitably rises. The only way to maintain a youthful age structure without perpetual growth is to have large families and for most of us to die young. This is the demographic pattern our ancestors escaped from. An older age structure is the outcome of progress not of failure and has little impact on health costs: see sources quoted in L. Dayton, 'Ageing population won't burden system', *The Australian: Health section*, 11 September 2010, p. 12. Up until the age of 75 net transfers of money and help flow from the old to the young. See J. Healy, *The Benefits of an Ageing Population: Discussion Paper Number 63*, The Australia Institute, Canberra, 2004, p. 19.

- <sup>17</sup> See Macroplan's Brian Haratsis at a Property Council conference saying that a population of 36–40 million by 2050 inevitable, because of demographic ageing (quoted in C. Carter, 'Coping with a population rise is vital', *The Canberra Times*, 19 September 2010, p. 37). See also Haratsis quoted in B. Hoffman, 'To grow or slow—that is the crucial question', *Sunshine Coast Daily*, 31 July 2010, p. 36. A report from the Committee of Melbourne says that with Australia's ageing population, 'the need for continued migration is widely recognised' (see J. Dowling, 'Make plans for population to double within 50 years', *The Age*, 5 August 2010, p. 3). Jessica Brown from the Centre for Independent Studies also cites ageing as a reason for immigration: 'A bigger country is inevitable, let's make it liveable', *The Australian*, 4 August 2010, p. 14. Alan Kohler writes 'There is almost no downside to a high level of immigration: it reduces skill shortages at the same time as creating employment and helps offset the ageing of the population because new arrivals tend to be young', see 'Turning people into gold', *Business Spectator*, 26 March 2010. See also P. Goers, 'C'mon Aussie, the more the merrier', *Sunday Mail*, 9 May 2010, p. 34.
- <sup>18</sup> Transcript of Dick Smith's Population Puzzle, broadcast ABC TV1, transcript at <[www.abc.net.au/tv/populationpuzzle/resources.html](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/populationpuzzle/resources.html)> accessed 28 August 2010
- <sup>19</sup> See data discussed in K. Betts, *Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 53–65.
- <sup>20</sup> J. C. Caldwell, C. Young, H. Ware, D. Lavis and A.-T. Davis, 'Australia: knowledge attitudes and practice of family planning in Melbourne, 1971', *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1973, pp. 49–59
- <sup>21</sup> The ABS runs an excellent website <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)> but my experience as a teacher shows that inexperienced users need a lot of help with it to find answers to their questions.
- <sup>22</sup> G. Freeman, 'Modes of immigration politics in liberal democratic states', *International Migration Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1995, pp. 881–901
- <sup>23</sup> See N. Mitchell, 'Transcript of Australian Prime Minister Rudd interview with Neil Mitchell', *3AW*, 26 March 2010 (from Reuters Factiva data base). Note 4 above discusses the distinction.
- <sup>24</sup> And this absence can itself be explained by the vested interest that that the growth lobby has in keeping the topic off the agenda. The term growth lobby includes the business interests that enjoy Freeman's concentrated benefits from immigration-fuelled population growth. In Australia they include property developers, large retail chains selling to the domestic market, and some employers keen to pay lower wages or avoid contributing to the costs of training Australians, as well as the commercial media who also profit from a larger domestic market. See K. Betts and M. Gilding, 'The growth lobby and Australia's immigration policy', *People and Place*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2006, pp. 40–52. Private sector interests have allies in the public sector. Treasury, for example, also supports population growth, probably because it boosts GDP and increases the tax base (which is not the same as increasing GDP per capita). State governments appear to support it for similar reasons, even though they bear the infrastructure costs, and of course they too have close relations with the growth lobby. There is also the concern of some *bien-pensant* intellectuals that any discussion of demography will quickly deteriorate into racist denunciations of migrants and immigration. See Betts, 1988, op. cit., pp. 47–52, 101–113, 136–140, 119, 160–168, 172.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Australian* runs a regular column in its property supplement by Bernard Salt, a partner in the multinational consulting firm KPMG, whom they describe as a demographer. Salt regularly deals with demographic topics, but more as an advocate for growth than as a disinterested analyst. See B. Salt, 'Size does matter when it comes to city services', *The Australian*, 15 July 2010, p. 33; B. Salt, 'How to keep our consumerist society ticking', *The Australian*, 22 May 2008, p. 24.
- <sup>26</sup> Markus finds that 58.5 per cent of his respondents in June 2010 had heard of the population debate. (He considers the fact that 40.3 per cent said they had not heard of it to be significant.) See Markus, 2010, op. cit., p. 26.
- <sup>27</sup> See for example S. B. Hammond, 'Attitudes to immigration', O. A. Oeser and S. B. Hammond (Eds), *Social Structure and personality in a City*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1954 (the field work was done in 1948 and 1949). For a thorough overview see M. Goot, 'Migrant numbers, Asian immigration and multiculturalism: trends in the polls, 1943–1998: Statistical Appendix', *Australian Multiculturalism in a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness*, National Multicultural Advisory Council, Canberra, 1999. This is online at <[www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/nmac/statistics.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/nmac/statistics.pdf)>.

- <sup>28</sup> See K. Betts, 'Dissatisfaction with immigration grows', *People and Place*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2008, pp. 19–34.
- <sup>29</sup> The actual response categories were 'too few', 'about right', and 'too low'. See Markus, 2010, op. cit., p. 21.
- <sup>30</sup> Data from two Morgan polls in 2010, March (MGP 4482) and July (MGP 4537), are not shown in Figure 2: the March figures (voters only, N=<670 but actual number not provided) were: 41% too many, 9% too few, 45% about right); the July figures were: 40% too many, 11% too few, 47% about right). The polls are not included because they carried the invalid population question shown in Figure 3 and therefore would have confused respondents. They also had an incorrect figure for current immigration in the prompt 'Over the last year (2008/09) about 170,000 immigrants came to Australia...' (The actual figure for NOM was 298,900), and drew on rather small samples: 670 people aged 14 plus in MGP 4482, and 719 voters in MGP 4537.
- <sup>31</sup> See Markus, 2010, op. cit., p. 21. Unfortunately his Figure 12 is quite undocumented; however the Age/Nielsen polls found that 43% said the numbers were too many in November 2009 and 54% said the same in April 2010. For the 2007 to 2010 period the graph appears to be restricted to the Scanlon data. Markus is aware of the two Age/Nielsen polls, as is clear from Table 1 in A. Markus, 'Public opinion divided on population, immigration and asylum', *Policy*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2010, p. 9. He also has a note in the 2010 Scanlon report in which he says that he has averaged the data on the proportions saying 'too many' from 'five polls conducted by polling agencies in the period March–July 2010' and found that the average saying 'too many' (46%) is almost identical to his finding (of 47%). One of these polls does not appear to exist: Age/Nielsen 31 July 2010—there was no Nielsen poll on that data which asked about attitudes to immigration; their most recent poll on this question, as of September 2010, was the April 2010 poll (information provided by the Nielsen company). One of the other five is the April Nielsen poll, but another is an Essential Media poll, 5 July 2010, but this was on attitudes to population growth, not immigration (see Table 5 above). The other two are the Morgan polls referred to in note 30.
- Markus's research is funded by the Scanlon Foundation which has as its mission 'to support the creation of a larger cohesive Australian society'. See <<http://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au/missionandfocus.html>> accessed 30 September 2010. The founder, Peter Scanlon, has extensive property interests which benefit from population growth and believes that the government is not doing enough to sell the benefits of a bigger population. J. Masanauskas, 'Scanlon backs population growth', *Herald-Sun*, 4 December 2009, p. 74
- <sup>32</sup> See also MGP no. 235, 21–28 October 1972, and MGP no. 26, 30 March to 6 April 1974 which adopted a similar question to the one shown in Table 1. See also the MGP polls from December 1977 to March 1979 on attitudes to refugees. Respondents had the option of saying that a limited number of refugees should be allowed to stay but, when asked to specify how many, most could not hazard a number. Data are in Betts, 1988, op. cit., pp. 58, 61.
- <sup>33</sup> If the 'about right' category is combined with the 'too few' category to indicate general support for current levels of immigration the picture presented may be misleadingly rosy for those who prefer growth. Researchers who themselves favour high levels of immigration may prefer to present the data in this way. But if they do not also provide a breakdown of the two components they are restricting the usefulness of their results for the wider community.
- <sup>34</sup> See M. Goot, 'More "relaxed and comfortable": public opinion on immigration under Howard', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, pp. 46–60.
- <sup>35</sup> K. Betts, 'Immigration and public opinion: understanding the shift', *People and Place*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2002, pp. 24–37
- <sup>36</sup> The intake for 2001–02 was increased to 105,440 from 94,353 in 2000–01. This was announced in the May budget in 2001. A search on Factiva for the terms 'Howard government' and 'immigration' and 'increase' from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2001 produced 146 hits, but none that were actually about the increase. Some lamented the lack of an increase, but most of the articles that directly discussed immigration focused on asylum seekers.
- <sup>37</sup> P. Kelly, 'Restocking the nation', *The Weekend Australian*, 3 August 2002, p. 28. See also S. Carney, 'Closer to Asia than you think', *The Age*, 2 November 2002, p. 7.
- <sup>38</sup> M. E. Buchanan, *Attitudes Towards Immigration in Australia* (Research report for the National Population Inquiry No. 3), AGPS, Canberra, 1976, p. 8
- <sup>39</sup> The phrase is Andrew Theophanous's, MP, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives*, 31 March 1981, p. 1115. In 2006 Peter Costello, reinforced this view saying: 'Our parents' and grandparents' generations had more children but, nowadays, most parents are content with two or even one. That is why our national fertility rate (1.75 babies a couple) is less than replacement level. Only immigration is making our country grow'. P. Costello, 'Have one for Australia', *The Sydney Morning Herald: Supplement*, 26 January 2006, p. 2
- <sup>40</sup> Published in a supplement to *The Age*, 8 October 2001, sample size 1000 voters.
- <sup>41</sup> Survey dates: 31 August to 2 September 2001, sample size 1200 adults aged 18 plus; published in *The Age*, 4 September 2001, pp. 1, 4.



- <sup>42</sup> Age poll by Irving Saulwick and Associates, conducted 24 to 25th September, summary published in *The Age*, 9 November 1977. Data available from the Australian Social Science Data Archives (ASSDA) at the Australian National University.
- <sup>43</sup> Reark Research Pty Ltd, *Attitudinal Survey on Population Issues in Australia (A research report prepared for the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs)*, Sydney, 1986, p. 5
- <sup>44</sup> K. Betts, 'The ageing of the population and attitudes to immigration', *People and Place*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2006, pp. 26–38
- <sup>45</sup> The full question was: 'Some people believe that Australia will have more severe environmental problems such as air and water pollution, soil degradation and erosion and the destruction of forests and wildlife if it has a larger population. Others believe that with proper management, a bigger population need not harm the environment. Do you agree with the first or second of these views?' The report says that 67% endorsed the second view but does not give the exact proportion endorsing the first view. Reark, 1986, op. cit., p. 48
- <sup>46</sup> Published as a supplement to *The Age*, 8 October 2001; original data available from ASSDA.
- <sup>47</sup> This point was made re the Lowy survey in K. Betts, 'Population growth and public opinion', paper delivered at the Population Reform Forum, Melbourne 7 May 2010. It is also made re all three polls in A. Markus, 'Public opinion divided on population, immigration and asylum', *Policy*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2010, pp. 7–13.
- <sup>48</sup> See K. Betts, 'Population growth: what do Australian voters want?' *People and Place*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 49–64 (this analysed the pre-release data); K. Betts, 'A bigger Australia: opinions for and against', *People and Place*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 25–38 (this analysed the final data).
- <sup>49</sup> For details for their sampling method see S. Iyengar and S. Jackman, *Australian and American attitudes to illegal immigration*, The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Sydney, 2010 (August 16) <<http://ussc.edu.au/s/media/docs/publications/1008IllegalImmigrantsSurvey.pdf>>.
- <sup>50</sup> American Association of Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR), *AAPOR Report on Online Panels*, USA, 2010 <[http://www.aapor.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=AAPOR\\_Committee\\_and\\_Task\\_Force\\_Reports&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=2223](http://www.aapor.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=AAPOR_Committee_and_Task_Force_Reports&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=2223)> accessed 29 August 2010; N. Sparrow and J. Curtice, 'Measuring the attitudes of the general public via internet polls: an evaluation', *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2004, pp. 23–44
- <sup>51</sup> P. Kellner, 'Can online polls produce accurate findings?', *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2004, p. 19
- <sup>52</sup> A. Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, Summary Report*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Melbourne, 2010, p. 17
- <sup>53</sup> Kellner, 2004, op. cit.; H. Taylor, 'The case for publishing (some) online polls', *PollingReport.com*, 15 January 2007 <[http://www.pollingreport.com/ht\\_online.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/ht_online.htm)> accessed 31 August 2010
- <sup>54</sup> Kellner, 2004, op. cit.
- <sup>55</sup> 'Election Poll wrap—Essential wins bragging rights' <<http://www.essentialmedia.com.au/election-poll-wrap-%E2%80%93-essential-wins-bragging-rights/>> accessed 28 September 2010
- <sup>56</sup> Data calculated from Table 1 in Birrell and Healy, this issue.
- <sup>57</sup> See K. Christian, 'FED:\$10b not enough for people to go bush', *Australian Associated Press Financial News Wire*, 10 September 2010; L. Pryor, 'Politics aside, the real sea change is migration to the big smoke', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 2010, p. 7; D. Jopson and D. Snow, 'Buybacks drain life from towns', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2010, p. 4.
- <sup>58</sup> See Betts, 'Population growth: what do Australian voters want?', 2010, op. cit., p. 58; Markus, Third Scanlon Report, 2010, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>59</sup> In the 2009 Scanlon survey the questions on immigration were preceded by one on voluntary work. The interviewer said: 'By this I mean any unpaid help you give to the community in which you live, or to an organisation or group to which you belong. It could be to a school, a sporting club, the elderly, a religious group or people who have recently arrived to settle in Australia. Have you done any unpaid voluntary work of this kind in the last 12 months?' (from a copy of the schedule provided by Andrew Markus in December 2009). This question clearly sets the moral tone; good people help others, including recently-arrived migrants. This could well make it harder for some respondents to express scepticism about further immigration in the questions that followed.

## ERRATUM

The article by Katharine Betts ‘Attitudes to immigration and population growth in Australia 1954 to 2010: an overview’, *People and Place*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2010, contains an error. In note 31 (p. 50) she comments on a 2010 report by Andrew Markus on research he had conducted for the Scanlon Foundation in June 2010 (see A. Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys—summary report*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Melbourne, 2010). On p. 20 he reports that 47% of his respondents agreed with the view that immigration was too high, a finding which was ‘almost identical with the 46% average result from five polls conducted by polling agencies in the period March-July 2010’. Betts found four of these five polls but was unable to locate the Age (Nielsen) poll dated 31 July 2010. She searched the Reuters Factiva database and contacted the polling company directly. They had no record of it. Consequently, in note 31 Betts wrote: ‘One of these polls [Age (Nielsen) 31 July] does not appear to exist’. Professor Markus has recently pointed out that the poll does exist and can be found at:

<<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics/2010/08/01/nielsen-poll-the-other-stuff/>>.

Katharine Betts apologises to Professor Markus for her mistake.