

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL VALUES

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This paper identifies different groupings of Australians according to their views about what really matters for being 'truly Australian'. It also characterises these groupings in terms of their attitudes on other issues and their socio-demographic background.

In countries of immigration ethnic differences are sometimes seen as a threat to national unity. Despite a bipartisan convention that supports continuing immigration and endorses a policy of multiculturalism, concern about both the level and the composition of recent immigration has periodically exercised social and political commentators. As it happens, the most recent outbreak of racist bigotry in Australia was sparked not so much by ethnic diversity due to immigration but by the allegedly favoured treatment of Aboriginal Australians, whose ancestors predate European and Asian immigrants alike. Despite being stripped of her endorsement as a Liberal Party candidate in Queensland because of inflammatory and insensitive remarks about Aboriginal Australians, Pauline Hanson was later elected to the Australian parliament as an Independent largely on the strength of racist views widely shared (in her estimation) by mainstream Australians. According to Hanson, Aboriginal Australians today unfairly receive favoured treatment by the State, which in turn practises a form of reverse racism against mainstream Australians. However, her hostility is not confined to Aboriginal Australians. She also targeted the level of Asian immigration. In her maiden parliamentary speech, she had this to say:

I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate. A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united.^[2]

There are of course local critics other than Pauline Hanson who also see cultural diversity as a threat to the civic culture. According to the historian, Geoffrey Blainey, 'The big flaw in multicultural or multiracial nations is obvious: they often fall apart'.^[3] But, as the political scientist James Jupp retorted in a critical response to Blainey's opinion, it is not clear whether nations fall apart because they are multicultural or because they are poor.^[4] In my opinion, an even more plausible explanation is that nations fall apart because they fail to develop unified political elites. It seems to be an historical law that consensually unified national elites, once established, have successfully perpetuated themselves, and that nations with unified elites do not regress into disunity, that is to say, fall apart.^[5] Since Federation the Australian political elite has been consensually unified, and a central element of the postwar consensus has been a principled refusal to stoke the flames of ethnic and racial

prejudice in search of an electoral advantage. Periodically, political mavericks, like Pauline Hanson, Graeme Campbell, and even, in 1984, a Liberal shadow minister for Immigration, Michael Hodgman,[6] have challenged this bipartisan agreement, forcing the political elite to reaffirm its commitment to immigration and multiculturalism, and to disavow explicitly the politics of ethnic, religious, and racial intolerance. Of course, elites depend ultimately on mass support for their political survival. So any disjunction between elite support for immigration and the contrary views of ordinary Australians cannot be allowed to get too wide.[7] It is, therefore, critical to examine the sources and extent of popular opposition to immigration, and to monitor the extent to which elite consensus penetrates the grass-roots level, creating a shared civic culture that unites rather than divides a culturally diverse population. It is to such empirical matters that I now turn.

CITIZEN BELIEFS ABOUT NATIONAL IDENTITY

Data reported in this paper come from the 1995 round of the National Social Science Survey and its modules on National Identity and the Reshaping Australian Institutions Project.^[8] Figure 1 shows the cumulative distributions of responses for items in the first set of scales, which respondents rated from 'not important at all' to 'very important'.

Cumulative distributions allow the reader to determine visually where the majority view lies. As an example, take the line for last item, 'feeling Australian'. It crosses the halfway line (0.5 or 50 per cent) between the response categories 'fairly important' and 'very important'. So a majority of respondents believe that 'feeling Australian' is very important for being 'truly Australian'. At the other extreme, 'being a Christian' is not seen as so important: a majority see this attribute either as 'not important at all' or as 'not very important'. Other items lie between these two extremes. Note that 'being born in Australia' and 'having lived in Australia most of one's life' follow the same general response pattern and are not seen as being so important as, for example, 'being able to speak English'. Even so, a majority of the population viewed Australian birth and residence as 'fairly' or 'very' important.

Of course, the fact that responses for different items display the same aggregate pattern does not mean that they are closely related at the individual level. It is possible that people who rate one item as important rate other items as unimportant. Some of these items are actually negatively correlated (being born in Australia or having lived for a long time in Australia, and respect for Australia's political institutions and laws). The reason for these negative correlations is that those who discount the importance of birth and long residence (that is, rate them as 'not very important') tend to compensate by rating respect for Australia's institutions and law as 'very important'. Otherwise, most of the correlations are positive but weak. The one exception is the strong correlation between birth and residence, a result that is hardly surprising. Being born in Australia implies long-term residence for all except the few who have spent some years living overseas before returning to Australia.

Scaling and factor analyses suggests that these items cluster into two main dimensions. The first consists of Items 1, 3 and 5 (birth, long residence, and Christianity), and represents what can be described as an ascribed form of identity associated with Australian Nativism. The

second scale revolves around the last two items (respect for Australia's laws and institutions, and feeling Australian), or an affective dimension of Civic Culture. Basically, it embodies a view that what is important for Australian identity is not how long people may have lived here, let alone where they were born, but whether or not they feel Australian and respect Australian institutions. The two remaining behavioural indicators (citizenship and English-language competence) load more or less equally on both dimensions. So I treat these separately as a behavioural bridge between the other two forms of national identity. Obviously, the first view of Australian identity, being largely ascriptive in nature, is a more restrictive one than the second, which, being affective, is accessible to Australians of all origins. Australian Nativism looks backward to a vision of Australia that is fading. Affective Civic Culture, a more abstract and open concept, looks forward to a future already in the making. Even so, we need to bear in mind that these dimensions emphasise different aspects of contemporary Australian identity, and are not totally opposed to each other. The two scales are positively, albeit weakly, correlated (+0.15). The more behavioural aspects of identity, like citizenship and language, are not located unequivocally with either scale. I use them to form a third scale, Instrumental Civic Culture.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURAL BASES OF AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

To the extent that reliable social indicators of constructs like Australian identity can be found, we would expect them to vary in strength across different sub-groups of the population. It would be reasonable to expect, for example, that immigrants would be less likely to endorse a view of Australian identity that required Australian birth or long Australian residence (Australian Nativism), and that they might be more inclined to opt for a more open concept like Affective Civic Culture. Table 1 presents results from a series of multiple regression analyses exploring the structural foundations of the attitude scales described above.

Australian Nativism emphasises the importance of being born in Australia, having lived most of one's life in Australia, Australia, and being a Christian. A majority (56 per cent) of respondents thought Australian birth was fairly or very important (see Figure 1); an even larger proportion (62 per cent) thought the same about extended Australian residence; but only a minority (31 per cent) thought being a Christian was at least fairly important. A positive co-efficient in the first column of Table 1 (the r-squared) shows that the group of respondents in question are more likely to stress the importance of this group of items, whereas a negative coefficient indicates that respondents are more likely to de-emphasise them. The r-squared is a measure of the overall predictability of responses in terms of the list of social attributes listed in the table. Part of the reason this statistic is larger for nativism than other aspects of Australian identity is that responses to this set of questions show greater variability than, say, the two items on affective civic culture, which command almost universal support.

People who see nativism as an important element of national identity tend to be older (over 64), second- and third-generation churchgoing Christians with minimal levels of education. The occupational effects imply that, relative to those outside the labour market (the retired,

those remaining at home), non-manual workers are less likely to endorse nativism than others. The gender effect suggests that nativism is stronger among men than women, but this difference is not reliably different from zero. On examining the distribution of scale scores, we find that about a quarter of the population is strongly committed to the nativist view of national identity; another half are moderately committed to it; while the remaining one-quarter do not see it as especially important at all.

The Affective Civic Culture view of national identity is strongly endorsed by contemporary Australians: more than half (54 per cent) are strongly committed to it; more than a quarter (27 per cent) are moderately committed to it; and the remainder (19 per cent) do not see it as very important. Partly because this view is so strongly endorsed, it is hard to locate any specific social patterning to it. According to the results in Table 1, people under fifty are less committed to this view than those over this age; immigrants are less committed to it than the native-born; whereas persons with more than basic education (over 14 years when they left school) are more likely to endorse it. There are no significant gender, regional or occupational differences and, of the religion variables, only members of the major Protestant denominations are significantly more likely than those with no religion to subscribe to this Civic Culture view of national identity.

The third scale analysed in

Table 1

[\[Table 1\]](#) is Instrumental Civic Culture, which consists of items about the importance of Australian citizenship and English-language competence. A large minority (48 per cent) of the population strongly endorses this aspect of national identity. A smaller but still large group (38 per cent) gives it moderate support. The remaining one in seven sees it as relatively unimportant. It is a view of Australian identity that is more strongly held by those over fifty. Not surprisingly, immigrants, especially those of non-English-speaking (NES) background, rate it as unimportant. On the other hand, Christians from all denominations strongly support it. There are no other statistically significant effects, although the unemployed, like immigrants from NES countries, are not favourably disposed.

The analysis to this point has addressed the issue of how attitudes about Australian identity hang together, and how support for them varies across the population. In the next step, I develop a typology by grouping responses on the first two, relatively independent scales of Australian identity (Nativism and Affective Civic Culture) into three categories: strong, moderate, and weak supporters. The results are shown in Table 2. The modal grouping in this broad typology consists of persons with a moderate commitment to Australian Nativism and a strong commitment to Affective Civic Culture (just over one quarter of the population). Four other groups are of roughly equal size, ranging from 11 to 16 per cent of the population. One of these groups consists of persons who strongly endorse both aspects of Australian identity, and in the analysis that follows, I label members of this group as Dogmatic Nativists, because they base Australian identity not merely on nativistic sentiments but require a commitment to affective civic culture as well. The Civic Nationalists group

consists of persons who also have a strong commitment to both 'feeling Australian' and 'respect for Australian institutions', but have a weaker commitment to Australian Nativism (39 per cent of the population). The Literal Nativist group is quite small (only 8 per cent), and consists of those who combine a strong commitment to Australian Nativism with only a weak or moderate commitment to Affective Civic Culture. Members of the top-left quadrant I describe as Moderate Pluralists because they express only a weak or moderate commitment to either aspect of Australian identity (38 per cent of the total). The labels in Table 2

[[Table 2](#)] are not intended to describe real social groupings but simply identify broad clusters of like-minded Australians.

We are now in a position to provide an overview of what differentiates the four main groups of Australians identified above: dogmatic nativists, literal nativists, civic nationalists, and moderate pluralists. Table 3 lists their responses to a series of other attitudes about contemporary social issues. Six out of every ten Australians report that they feel 'very close' to Australia. This figure is highest among the 'dogmatic nativists' and lowest among the 'moderate pluralists'. The weaker attachment to Australia evinced among members of this latter group is echoed in their readiness to move to another country to improve their life. One in four would be prepared to move, compared with only one in eleven of the nativists. On the basis of these two items, the nativists show the strongest attachment to Australia, then the civic nationalists, and then the moderate pluralists.

The next two items deal with aspects of multiculturalism, the second in a more direct fashion than the first. A large minority of the population believes becoming Australian requires a commitment to Australian customs and traditions (whatever they might be). But opinion on this topic is divided, with about as many disagreeing with this proposition (one in six could not decide either way). The nativist groups, however, are more likely to agree with this sentiment, whereas moderate pluralists are more likely to disagree. There is only minority support for any version of multiculturalism that involves government support for minorities to maintain separate cultural traditions, and support does not vary too markedly across groups (the range of difference is only seven percentage points).

As for the effects immigrants have on Australian society, about one in three Australians believes they increase crime Tab 2 rates. Although research shows this belief is largely unfounded,^[9] significant minorities of civic nationalists and moderate pluralists believe the claim to be true, and it is believed by small majorities of the nativists. A similar belief pattern characterises responses to the item about whether or not immigrants take jobs away from the native-born. Empirical research shows this belief is untrue as well. In fact, unemployment rates are higher among immigrants than the native-born. New immigrants, if anything, create a demand for services that improves the job prospects for those already in Australia.^[10] Nonetheless, there is a popular perception that migrants take jobs away from other Australians, even though two out of three agree, somewhat inconsistently, that migrants are good for the economy. There is an even greater acceptance of the idea that migration has opened Australia up to new ideas.

All things considered, about three in every ten Australians agree that the number of immigrants to Australia should be reduced 'a lot'. It is important to juxtapose this figure against Hanson's claim in her first parliamentary speech that 'most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed'. Not even a majority of nativists (Hanson's 'mainstream'?) believe immigration should be radically reviewed (reduced 'a lot'). In fact, the dominant, or mainstream, position held by 59 per cent of Australians is that immigration should either remain the same or be reduced a little. Another 11 per cent even believe that immigration should be increased.^[11]

Hanson also exaggerates the backlash against Aboriginal Australians, as the next item shows. Two out of every five Australians (and even one out of every three nativists) believe we should spend more to improve conditions for Aborigines. This proportion exceeds by a small margin the number who disagree with the same proposition. About one quarter is undecided.

The remaining attitudinal items fill out our mental picture of the sorts of Australians who make up these four broad identity groupings. Nativists are more likely to stress the importance of citizenship and ability to speak English for Australian identity than civic nationalists or moderate pluralists. Even so, the reader should bear in mind that even the latter think these matters are important, just not so important as the nativists. Nativists also tend to be more chauvinistic, more xenophobic, and more attached to the British monarchy than other Australians. Many of my findings parallel those of Phillips,^[12] even though he approached these issues from a different angle.

The second panel of statistics in Table 3 describe the socio-demographic composition of the four identity groupings. Nativists tend to be older. Partly because they are older, they left school at younger ages and are less likely to have a tertiary qualification. They are more likely to live in country areas, less likely to be immigrants, and more likely both to adhere to a major Christian faith and to be a regular churchgoer. They are less likely to have voted Labour in the last (1993) election.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While it would be unreasonable to stress unduly the relative sizes of the national identity groupings I have identified (if only because a different set of similar questions would inevitably produce a somewhat different classification), it is clear enough that only the two nativist groups display the constellation of attitudes and beliefs that a Pauline Hanson associates with her 'mainstream' Australia. Yet together these groups constitute only a minority (around a quarter) of the Australian population. That does not mean, of course, that their views can, or should, be ignored. But it does mean that their views cannot, and should not, be accepted as representative of 'mainstream' Australia. Rather, their views reflect a traditional, and by now a minority, view of Australian identity. It is, moreover, a view that is being superseded by a more open, and more inclusive, sense of national identity. National identity is not a fixed property assigned at birth. It is an emergent and constantly evolving sense of what it means to be Australian, including a commitment to basic social institutions such as parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and equality before the law, freedom of the

individual, freedom of speech, religious and other forms of tolerance (for example, a 'fair go'), and equality of opportunity.

Popular support for values like tolerance and equality of opportunity is easier to garner when economic times are good than when they are bad. In recent years, the progressive dismantling of Australia's protective walls has effectively transferred thousands of jobs off-shore. The gap between rich and poor has widened dramatically, and unemployment, especially youth unemployment, remains at levels that were totally unacceptable to the electorate thirty years ago. While there is probably no way back to the protectionist policies that delivered Australians one of the highest living standards in the world for over a century, it is far from clear what advantage, if any, a small economy like Australia has earned by opening up its economy faster than its main trading partners.¹³ For too many Australians, the immediate outcome has been unemployment, job uncertainty and poverty.

In the search for scapegoats, minority groups like Aboriginal Australians and Asian immigrants are easy targets. But they, too, are victims, not causes, of harsh economic times. Back in 1984, when the historian, Geoffrey Blainey, sparked a similar debate about the dangers of Asian immigration to Australia, there were more experienced politicians than Pauline Hanson who toyed with the idea of playing the race card in the run-up to the next election. The Liberal shadow minister for immigration at the time (Michael Hodgman) predicted then that the Hawke government would be overthrown in an electoral backlash against its immigration policies likely to cost it twelve seats.¹⁴ The Liberal leader at the time (Andrew Peacock) vacillated over this issue, and it fell to his Deputy to lance it in a parliamentary speech denouncing racism. His performance, later described by one political commentator as 'brilliant',¹⁵ earned him tremendous media support and contributed to his accession to the Liberal leadership.¹⁶ However, when the same issue resurfaced four years later, following the release of the Fitzgerald report,¹⁷ Howard, as Leader of the Opposition, vacillated by openly canvassing the possibility of a cut in Asian immigration. According to the political journalist, Paul Kelly, 'this saga of disastrous events originating with Howard's personal interpretation of the new immigration policy divided the Liberal Party, created new tensions within the coalition and undermined Howard's leadership. Within the Asia/Pacific his standing as shadow prime minister was distinctly compromised'.¹⁸

This history of political ambivalence over Asian immigration seems to have contributed to Prime Minister Howard's tardiness in condemning Pauline Hanson's current exploitation of the race issue. As the authors of the Fitzgerald report observed in 1988,¹⁹ the potential for racial bigotry sleeps within many Australians. It is the responsibility of opinion leaders in politics, in the media, and in schools, colleges, and universities to make sure its sleep is long and undisturbed by constantly asserting the primacy of racial tolerance over racial bigotry. Not before time, on 30 October 1996, the Prime Minister moved a motion in the Australian Parliament denouncing racial intolerance. The same motion reaffirmed a non-discriminatory immigration policy and a commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the rectification of the profound social and economic disadvantage they suffer as a group. The rest of us now wait to see how his government will

translate such lofty commitments into social and economic reality.

References

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- 6 P. Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of The 1980s*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 128-129, 134
- 7 For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Ian McAllister, 'Immigration, Bipartisanship and Public Opinion', in J. Jupp and M. Kabala (Eds), *The Politics of Immigration*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1993, pp. 161-178.
- 8 Jonathan Kelley, Clive S. Bean, M.D.R. Evans and Krysztos Zagorski, *Australia, 1995: National Social Science Survey. Codebook and Machine Readable Data File (Preliminary)*, Canberra, Social Science Data Archives, Research School of Social Science, Australian National University, 1995
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- 10 For a comprehensive review of these issues, see Lynne Williams, *Understanding the Economics of Immigration*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), 1995; Mark Wooden, Robert Holton, Graeme Hugo and Judith Sloan, *Australian Immigration: A Survey of the Issues (2nd edition)*, Canberra, AGPS, 1994
- 11 These figures are not very different from those reported in Katharine Betts, 'Immigration and Public Opinion in Australia', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1996, pp. 9-20, where according to her Table 7 opinion is about evenly divided among three response categories. The categories she reports equate as follows: 'gone much too far' equals 'reduced a lot'; 'gone too far' equals 'reduced a little'; and 'about right' equals 'remain the same'. My interpretation, however, puts as much weight on the last two categories as the first. Throughout the postwar

period, there has been popular opposition to large-scale immigration, especially from non-traditional sources. Survey responses vary depending on the form of the question used. For useful reviews of such data, and their interpretation, also see Murray Goot, 'Public Opinion as Paradox: Australian Attitudes to the Rate of Immigration and the Rate of Asian Immigration', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1991, pp. 277-294, and McAllister, op.cit.

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15 Colin Rubenstein, 1993, 'Immigration and the Liberal party of Australia', p. 151 in J. Jupp and M. Kabala, op. cit.

16 Kelly, op. cit. pp. 133-134

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18 Kelly, op. cit., p. 428

19 Australia, 1988, op. cit., p.7

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