

## ETHNIC ENCLAVES: A TRANSITORY PHENOMENON

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*The early post World War II two migration of Southern Europeans exhibited residential concentrations similar to those of recent South East Asians. Past experience suggests these recent enclaves will dissipate too.*

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The paper by Ernest Healy in this issue is an important contribution to the debate in earlier issues of People and Place between Drs Birrell and Jupp about the nature of ethnic concentrations in Australian cities, and the potential social and political problems associated with them. It brings earlier work up-to-date and shows that the problems they identify have become more, not less, acute with the passage of time.

I do not wish to dispute facts that are obvious, namely that rates of welfare dependency are disturbingly high among some groups, and that they seem to be continuing longer than many expected. There are also striking geographical concentrations of ethnic groups, and of welfare dependents, in Australia's major cities.

The main point that I wish to make is one that Jupp[1] has already made and that Birrell [2] has already conceded: namely, that ethnic residential concentration is not a new phenomenon. The main difference between the situation of the 1990s and, say, the 1960s, is that unemployment is many times worse. That difference is not the fault of immigrants. The best attempts of economists to measure the impact of immigration on unemployment is that it does not increase it.[3] High unemployment in Australia is a failure of demand, not supply, and is a consequence of industry restructuring aimed at making the Australian economy more efficient and more competitive. Persons with low skill, recent migrants, and school-leavers have been the front-line casualties of this policy. The main unknown' in the restructuring equation is whether this deterioration in the labour market will lead to a permanent underclass drawn from currently disadvantaged groups. Different observers will reach different conclusions. My own judgement, based on the historical evidence, is that, provided there is no change in effective equality of opportunity, economic hardship, while greater all round, will tend to be shared across groups and not confined to particular localised (ethnic) groups (although, obviously enough, those with low income will tend to congregate in areas where housing is cheap). The generally strong performance of immigrant children in our schools and universities suggest that Australian cities will not spawn the urban blight characteristic of many American cities. Indeed, it is in my view politically irresponsible to point to the American experience without also noting the major difference that urban services, including educational opportunity, are not so closely linked in Australia to the ability, or inability, of the local community to pay. Australian cities are protected from

the worst outcomes of inferior urban services (including schools) because a wider revenue base (State and Federal taxes rather than local incomes) supports a more equal distribution of both conditions and opportunities. While it is true that the rate of unemployment is much higher now than it was around 1960, it is also true that the welfare net was probably not as effective then as now. Moreover, the high initial rates of unemployment characteristics of immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (and especially refugees) do decline with time spent in Australia. [4]

It is also important to stress that there has been little if any change over time in the preference immigrants to Australia show for settling in areas with relatively high numbers of people from their own culture. In 1967, I published in *Social Forces* a careful study of ethnic concentration in Melbourne, using the detailed results of the 1961 Census. Healy quotes recent figures from Marcuse to the effect that in Sydney the Index of Residential Dissimilarity (ID) for the Vietnamese rose from 60.5 per cent in 1981 to 67.1 per cent ten years later. There is no doubt that these figures are high. But they are not much higher than the situation prevailing in Melbourne thirty years ago. I reported an ID of 57 for the Greeks, 50 for the Italians, and even 46 for the Dutch. [5] Of course, a Dutch concentration of this magnitude would not be as socially visible as a similar concentration of Asians. The important point is that the descendants of these immigrant groups are now widely dispersed throughout the social and geographical structures of Australia.

The conclusion to be drawn is plain. The behaviour of recent immigrants has not changed significantly over the period in question. But the economic context in which immigrants, and other Australians, find themselves has. The causes and consequences of economic disadvantage in any group, immigrant or not, need to be addressed. It is unclear to me from Healy's account precisely how much additional burden ethnic (as distinct from general) disadvantage in Fairfield and similar areas imposes on the welfare infrastructure. Clearly, the issue is important. The main point, however, is that the problem arises from wider social and economic problems and not from immigrant behaviour as such. In terms of choices about where to live, the behaviour of Asian immigrants today does not materially differ from the behaviour of European immigrants thirty or forty years ago.

Provided public policy does not victimise recently-arrived immigrants, and refugees, by denying them access to existing forms of income support, and provided that Australians' norms of fairness and equality of opportunity continue to prevail in schools and labour markets, there is no reason to expect that the Asian immigrants of the 1990s and their children will fare any worse over time than southern European immigrants and their offspring did three decades ago. There is always the chance that things will turn out differently. Ultimately, it is the Australian people, recent immigrants included, and their elected representatives that determine these political and social choices.

## References

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