

**MORE 'RELAXED AND COMFORTABLE':
PUBLIC OPINION ON IMMIGRATION UNDER HOWARD**

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In the last two years, polled opinion on immigration has shifted; whereas earlier surveys indicated that most Australians thought the migrant intake too high, surveys taken after the 1998 election and 1999 referendum point to a public which is more evenly divided. This paper sets out the evidence for this shift and defends its validity; it points to possible reasons for the change; and it explores the relationship between policy-making and public opinion on immigration, pursuing the implications for opponents of immigration who seek to base their case for lower population growth on opinion-poll data.

Recent surveys, designed to determine what Australians think about the number of migrants entering the country, suggest that the distribution of opinion on this question has changed. Until a couple of years ago, around two-thirds of those interviewed said that immigration levels were too high; they said this regardless of whether they were responding to an academic survey or a public opinion poll. Academic surveys conducted in 1998 and in 1999, however, suggest that opinion now is more evenly divided: those who think present levels are all right, or too low, appear to be just as numerous as those who believe that the number of arrivals needs to be cut. And the data from academic surveys are supported by complementary data from market researchers. Together, they suggest (as John Howard famously wished) that Australians have become more 'relaxed and comfortable'¹ about immigration under the present government than they were under the last.

This paper sets out the evidence for this shift in attitudes to immigration and defends it against criticisms of the surveys on which it is based; it scrutinises possible explanations for the change, arguing against some while supporting others; and it uses this change to comment on the relationship between policy-making and public opinion and to caution those who have argued that governments are duty-bound to both heed public opinion and to cut immigration.

ESTABLISHING THE SHIFT

In the Australian Election Study conducted by academic social scientists after the 1998 federal election (the 1998 AES) and again in the Australian Constitutional Referendum Study conducted by the same team after the referendum on whether Australia should become a republic (the 1999 ACRS), the majority of respondents agreed that 'the number of migrants allowed into Australia at the present

time' had not gone 'much too far' or even 'too far'; on the contrary, the numbers being allowed in were either 'about right' or had not gone 'far enough'. In the post-election poll, the split was 44: 57 per cent; in the post-referendum survey, 47: 53.

Similar surveys conducted earlier in the 1990s, which employed the same question, produced very different results. In the wake of the 1990 election, the split was 58: 42; after the 1993 election, it was a more lop-sided 70: 30; and not long after Howard's 1996 victory it had come back only marginally to 63: 37 (Table 1).

Arguing that such surveys should be discounted, Katharine Betts, an important academic presence in the immigration debate, observes that the AES is a mail-out survey (as was the ACSR) with response rates in recent times of 60 per cent (1996) and 58 per cent (1998); that the distribution of respondents in the AES is 'biased towards educated people'; and that face-to-face or telephone polls, of the kind conducted by Newspoll (twice) and McNair (once), in 1996 and 1997, 'found the proportion who thought the current intake too high varied between 64 per cent and 71 per cent'.²

Table 1: Views about the number of migrants allowed into Australia, academic surveys, 1990 to 1999

Year	Survey	Gone (much) too far	About right	Not gone (nearly) far enough	n
1990	AES	(29/29) 58	34	(7/2) 8	(1,982)
1993	AES	(40/30) 70	24	(4/2) 6	(3,023)
1995	ISSS	(30/31) 61	28	(9/2) 11	(2,259)
1995-96	NSSS	(26/30) 56	30	(11/2) 13	(2,438)
1996	AES	(34/30) 63	30	(5/2) 7	(1,795)
1998	AES	(20/23) 44	46	(8/2) 11	(1,897)
1999	ACRS	(22/24) 47	42	(9/2) 12	(2,311)*

* weighted by State

Note: (a) Figures in brackets distinguish those who think the number of migrants has gone 'much too far'/'too far' (AES, ACRS) or who think the number of migrants should be reduced 'a lot'/'a little' (ISSS, NSSS), as well as those who think the number of migrants has 'not gone far enough'/'not gone nearly far enough' (AES, ACRS) or who think the number should be increased 'a lot'/'a little' (ISSS, NSSS); differences between the sum of the bracketed figures and the unbracketed figure are due to rounding.

(b) Missing cases have been excluded.

Questions: 'The statements below indicate some of the changes that have been happening in Australia over the years... please say whether you think the change has gone too far, not gone far enough or is it about right? The number of migrants allowed into Australia at the present time: gone much too far, gone too far, about right, not gone far enough, not gone nearly far enough.' (AES, ACRS)

'Do you think the number of immigrants to Australia nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a lot, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, reduced a lot?' (ISSS, NSSS)

Sources:

1990: D. Gow, R. Jones, I. McAllister and E. Papadakis 'Australian Election Survey, 1990: User's Guide for the Machine-Readable Data File', Social Science Data Archives (SSDA), Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, 1990, p.36 plus questionnaire; 1993: R. Jones, I. McAllister, D. Denmark and D. Gow 'Australian Election Study, 1993: User's Guide for the Machine-Readable Data File', SSDA, ANU, Canberra, 1993, pp. 53, 134; 1995: J. Kelley, C.S. Bean, M.D.R. Evans and K. Zagorski 'Australia, 1995: International Social Science Survey, (ISSS). Codebook and Machine Readable Data File (Preliminary), Canberra, Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU, Canberra, 1995.

1995-96: J. Kelley, C. Bean and M.D.R. Evans 'The Australian National University, National Social Science Survey, 1995-96: ISSP National Identity Module and Reshaping Australian Institutes [computer file], SSDA, ANU, 1998; 1996: R. Jones, I. McAllister and D. Gow 'Australian Election Study, 1996: User's Guide for the Machine Readable Data File, SSDA, ANU, Canberra, 1996, pp. 52, 124; 1998: C. Bean, D. Gow and I. McAllister, Australian Election Study 1998: User's Guide to the Machine Readable Data File, SSDA, ANU, Canberra, 1999, pp. 74, 168; 1999: D. Gow, C. Bean and I. McAllister, Australian Constitutional Referendum Study, User's Guide for the Machine-Readable Data File, SSDA, ANU, Canberra, 2000, pp. 42, 105.

Betts' observations are perfectly correct; but they are not largely irrelevant. In *The Great Divide*, a critique of immigration, multiculturalism and Australia's 'new elites', Betts notes that the response rate for the 1996 AES was 'good' for a survey of its type.³ But whether the type itself — a mail-out, self-completion, survey — is any good depends on how it compares with others. Comparisons are difficult because refusal rates in commercial polls, be they face-to-face or telephone, are never published. If they were, however, it's unlikely they would offer critics of self-completion surveys much to cheer about; anecdotal evidence suggests that refusals loom large in commercial polling, wherever face-to-face methods or the telephone is used, and that these rates have increased over the years.

Be this as it may, response rates are of

real concern only if they produce biased results. This brings us to Betts' second point. As she points out, graduates are more likely than non-graduates to participate in AES surveys. In the 1990 AES, the proportion of respondents with a degree or diploma was 21 per cent; in the 1990 census the corresponding figure was just under 13 per cent. In the 1996 AES, the proportion of respondents with a degree or diploma was 28 per cent; in the 1996 Census the corresponding figure was 16.5 per cent. And what is true of the AES holds equally well for other surveys of its type (Table 2).

Does this matter? On the face of it, it does. As Betts has long argued, attitudes to immigration are related to education; more precisely, to tertiary education. So a sample biased in favour of the university-educated will be a sample biased in

Table 2: Post-school qualifications, Census and survey data, 1990 to 1999

Year	Census/ Survey*	Degree per cent	Diploma per cent	Trade per cent	Non-trade per cent	Total per cent
1990	AES	10.7	10.3	29.6	NA	50.6
1991	Census	7.6	5.2	10.3	3.3	26.4
1993	AES	13.1	8.5	22.5	11.5	55.7
1995-96	NSSS	37.1		36.3		73.4
1996	Census	10.4	6.1	10.7	2.9	30.0
1996	AES	28.1		19.7	10.8	58.6
1998	AES	18.4	11.4	22.9	14.0	66.6
1999	ACRS	18.5	10.4	20.6	13.1	61.3

* Age range: 15+ (Census); 18+ (other surveys)

Note: Missing data have been excluded

Response categories:

Degree: bachelor or postgraduate degree; Diploma: undergraduate diploma or associate diploma; Trade: skilled vocation (Census) or trade qualification (surveys); Non-trade: basic vocation (Census) or non-trade qualification (surveys)

Survey questions: Have you obtained a trade qualification, a degree or diploma, or any other qualification since leaving school? What is your highest qualification?; No qualification since leaving school, Higher degree/post-graduate diploma, Degree, Diploma, Professional qualification, Trade certificate (1990); No qualification since leaving school, Higher degree - Master or PhD, Postgraduate Diploma, Bachelor Degree, Undergraduate Diploma, Associate Diploma, Trade qualification, Non-trade qualification (1993); Since leaving school have you completed: an apprenticeship, vocational qualification, or basic certificate (after year 9 or year 10 in school); an undergraduate Diploma (after year 12); a Bachelor Degree at university or CAE; a higher degree (MA, PhD) or post-graduate Diploma (1995-96); No qualification since leaving school, Postgraduate degree or Diploma, ... (1996); No qualifications since leaving school, Postgraduate degree or Postgraduate Diploma, Bachelor Degree (including Honours)... (1998,1999)

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Selected Catalogue no. 2017, p. 60; and as per Table 1: Gow et al., 1990, pp. 65 and questionnaire, p. 20 (for AES 1990); Jones et al., 1993, pp. 93-4, 144 (for AES 1993); Kelley et al., 1998 (for ISSS 1995-96); Jones et al., 1996, pp. 89, 132 (for AES 1996); Bean et al., 1999, pp. 112, 177 (for AES 1998); and Gow et al., 2000, pp. 48-9, 107 (for ACRS).

favour of higher rather than lower immigration. In the 1996 AES, for example, about two-fifths (44 per cent) of those with university degrees or post-secondary diplomas thought the number of migrants allowed into Australia 'at the present time' had gone either 'too far' (26 per cent) or 'much too far' (18 per cent);⁴ but, as Table 3 shows, among respondents with no post-school education, half as many again (68 per cent) thought it had gone 'too far' (30 per cent) or 'much too far' (38 per cent).⁵

True, the pattern is not quite what one would expect if, as Betts argues, there were a 'split' between university-educated people on the one side and 'the majority' on the other; in both 1990 and 1993, those with diplomas appear to have sided with the majority, while in 1998 'the majority' itself was split down the middle. Nor do the figures support her view that the difference between university-educated people and 'the majority' is 'growing'; in 1990, 1993 and 1996, the difference (25 percentage points) between the university-educated and those with no post-school education on the immigration question did not vary at all, while the 1998 and 1999 surveys recorded both a widening and a narrowing of the gap.⁶ But there is no denying that the figures show a clear and sizeable

difference between respondents with a university education and those without.

Had the AES developed a sudden bias towards the tertiary-educated in 1998 (and retained it in the 1999 ACRS), one might have been able to attribute the more relaxed attitude to immigration reported in 1998 and again in 1999 to the bias. But since this bias is evident in all the AES surveys in which the question about migrant numbers has been asked one cannot use it to explain the difference between the figures on one occasion (1996) and the figures on another (1998 or 1999). The differences recorded on these occasions are likely to be real precisely because nothing else in the survey changed: the question, the manner in which respondents were selected or the bias by education among those who responded.

It is conceivable, of course, that what changed between 1996 and 1998 was not the attitudes of all groups — graduates and diplomats, those with trade or non-trade qualifications and those with no post-school qualifications at all — but the attitudes of just some groups: that a massive movement of opinion among graduates and diplomats accounts for the shift in the overall response. For this to have occurred, two other things would have had to have happened as well: the

Table 3: Support for the view that the number of migrants allowed into Australia has gone too far, by post-school education, 1990 to 1999

Year	Survey	Total	Degree	Diploma	Trade	Non-trade	None
1990	AES	(29/29) 58	(13/24) 37	(26/26) 52	(27/29) 57	(36/27) 63	(32/31) 63
1993	AES	(40/30) 70	(16/32) 48	(25/29) 54	(47/32) 79	(44/29) 73	(44/29) 73
1995-96	NSSS	(26/30) 56	(19/25) 44		(33/33) 66		na
1996	AES	(33/30) 63	(18/26) 44		(43/32) 75	(38/31) 69	(38/30) 69
1998	AES	(20/23) 43	(7/19) 27	(14/20) 35	(26/24) 50	(21/30) 50	(25/22) 47
1999	ACRS*	(22/24) 47	(7/15) 22	(13/24) 36	(24/27) 51	(28/24) 52	(26/26) 53

na: not available * weighted by state

Note: (a) Figures in brackets distinguish those who think the number of migrants has gone 'much too far' from those who think it has gone 'too far' (AES, ACRS) and those who think the number of immigrants to Australia should be reduced 'a lot' rather than 'a little' (NSSS); differences between the sum of the bracketed figures and the unbracketed figure are due to rounding; (b) Missing cases have been ignored.

Questions: As for Table 1

Sources: As for Table 1

complete collapse, among graduates and diploma-holders, of any sort of opposition to immigration; and, no change at all in the level of opposition among everyone else. A pattern of this kind, however, is something the data do not show. Certainly, opposition to immigration among university-educated respondents was eroded between the two surveys, but it did not disappear; and opposition to immigration among those without a university education, far from surviving unscathed, was also worn away (Table 3). The out-going tide washed across the board.

Betts' third point is that the AES figures are at odds with those generated by polls produced for the press; and that, given the choice, it's the latter we should heed not the former. But the data furnished by the latest AES (and confirmed by the ACRS) are at odds with the face-to-face and telephone polls generated by commercial organisations only if we ignore the fact that the AES question was asked in 1998 (and repeated in 1999) while the polls with which Betts thinks they should be compared were conducted two or three years earlier, in 1996 and 1997.

If we compare AES surveys with opinion polls conducted in the same year the results are remarkably similar. In 1996, for example, the AES reported that 63 per cent of respondents thought the number of migrants entering the country had gone 'too far' or 'much too far'. In June, AGB: McNair reported that 66 per cent of its respondents felt the expected intake of 100,000 migrants that year was 'too high'; and in September, Newspoll found 71 per cent of its respondents agreeing that 'the total number of migrants coming to Australia each year is too high'. Later in the year, Morgan reported that more than two-thirds of its

respondents backed the view expressed by newly elected MHR, Pauline Hanson, that 'immigration be stopped in the short-term so that Australia's unemployment not be added to'; AGB: McNair also reported that 62 per cent agreed with Hanson that there should be 'a short-term freeze on immigration'.

What is true for 1996 is also true for 1993. In the wake of the election that the Coalition might have won, save for the GST, no fewer than 70 per cent of those who responded to the AES survey (including nearly half of those with university degrees) said that the number of migrants entering the country had gone 'too far' or 'much too far'. A few months later, 73 per cent of those surveyed by AMR: Quantum 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that 'Australia should reduce the number of migrants coming to this country'; eighteen months earlier, 71 per cent had 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. And in a Morgan poll, conducted in between, 71 per cent agreed that the 122,000 people who had come to live permanently in Australia the previous year was 'too many'.

In 1990, the AES survey actually produced a more hostile response than the Morgan poll; while 58 per cent of AES respondents said that the number of migrants entering the country had gone 'too far' or 'much too far', only 47 per cent of those interviewed by Morgan thought the '134,000 people' who had come to live permanently in 1989 were 'too many'. However, other surveys conducted in 1990 estimated the level of opposition to be closer to the AES figure; Irving Saulwick and Associates reported that 65 per cent of respondents wanted the target of 140,000 either reduced or set at zero, while 69 per cent of those polled by Morgan wanted immigration 'significantly reduced' or allowed only in 'spe-

cial cases' (Table 4A).

Why we should prefer the commercial polls to the academic surveys, in the light of these results, is not clear; even if the figures they had thrown up had been quite different, there would have to be a better reason than differences in response rates for preferring one to the other.

Sampling bias might be one reason for preferring the polls. But if we assume, as Betts does, that it is only the AES data and not the polls which are biased towards the better educated (an assumption for which she offers no evidence), and weight the data accordingly, the 'correct' figure in any of the AES surveys would not be very different from the figure the AES actually reports; in 1996, for example, weighting the data in this way raises the level of opposition to immigration from 63 per cent to about 67 per cent. The difference is small because the university-educated, though heavily over-represented, make up a relatively small part of the sample.

Another reason for preferring the newspaper polls might be that they alone record the 'don't knows'; indeed Betts, who regards the 'don't knows' as an important category is critical of the polls for under-reporting them.⁷ In the AES, respondents who fail to mark a question are treated not as 'don't knows' — they may, after all, have simply missed the question — but as 'missing observations' or 'blanks'. Were we to regard these 'missing observations' in the surveys as equivalent to the 'don't knows' in the polls, and recompute the figures accordingly, we would reduce the proportions in all three categories of response — including the proportion said to believe that migrant numbers have gone 'too far' or 'much too far'; in 1996, for example, when just under two per cent of respondents left the immigration question blank,

such a procedure would have reduced the number who thought migrant numbers had gone too far from 63 per cent to 62 per cent.

If neither the inclusion of a weighting factor nor the taking into account of 'missing observations' makes much difference on their own, they make even less difference when considered together; in 1996, for example, to have added four percentage points for the over-representation of the university-educated and subtracted one point for the blanks, would have left a net difference of three percentage points — not significantly different from the normal allowance for sampling error. Had the proportion of 'blanks' been bigger — as it would have been had the questionnaire been administered face-to-face or by phone — the level of opposition would have been correspondingly diminished and the gap made even smaller.

A third reason for preferring the commercial polls might have to do with question wording; certainly, variations in wording can lead to real differences in results. To track changes in opinion, therefore, is to stick to a single question or to questions which are very similar; elsewhere, Betts herself has been quite strict about this.⁸ And it is precisely because different words can produce different responses that we should not choose the published opinion polls to compare with — much less replace — the most recent AES. In the last few years the only newspaper poll to have produced a question that has allowed opinions about migrant numbers to be tracked is Newspan — and then only for the period to 1997. The AES/ACRS series, by contrast, enables one to track the same question across a decade.

TABLE 4A IS AVAILABLE BY EMAILING SUE.DRUMMOND@ARTS.MONASH.EDU.AU

To confirm the validity of the trend suggested by the AES we need to turn not to the newspaper polls but to a series produced by a market research firm. In 1996 and again in 1997, over half (53 per cent and 56 per cent) of those questioned for AustraliaSCAN disagreed with the view that ‘Australia can accommodate a much higher population and we should welcome more immigration’. In 1998 and 1999, however, this proportion dropped to much less than half (39 per cent). The number who felt that ‘Australia’s population is high enough and we should stop any further immigration no matter from where’ also slipped (Table 4B).

The fact that there are two series of surveys which show the same trend — a more accommodating view towards immigration since 1996 or, more likely, 1997 — suggests that the differences are real and not simply an artefact of the surveys.

They suggest a sea-change not in the first but in the second Howard term. But other evidence from the AustraliaSCAN surveys points to a more positive attitude

to immigration from the beginning of the first Howard Government. As early as 1996, Quantum reported a rise in the proportion of respondents for whom immigration had ‘made Australia a much more exciting place’. By the second Howard term the proportion of respondents happy to see immigrants not ‘put their traditions and culture behind them’ in order to ‘adopt our way of life’ had increased as well (Table 5).

EXPLAINING THE SHIFT

Speculating on the reasons for the drop in opposition to immigration among AES respondents (but without conceding that AES respondents might be representative of a wider public), Betts points to ‘a general perception that the migrant intake has fallen’. This, she suggests, derives not from a real fall in the number of migrants entering the country or from ‘any sophisticated understanding’ of changes in the composition of the migrant intake, but from ‘energetic campaigns for an increase [in immigration] from business lobbyist’s.

Table 4B: Views about immigration, AustraliaSCAN, 1996 to 1999

Statement	Year	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	n
Australia can accommodate a much higher population and we should welcome more immigration	1996	13	34	53	(2,017)
	1997	12	32	56	(2,009)
	1998	21	40	39	(2,000)
	1999	18	43	39	(1,900)
Australia’s population is high enough already and we should stop further immigration no matter where from	1996	39	32	29	(2,017)
	1997	36	36	28	(2,009)
	1998	30	35	35	(2,000)
	1999	30	34	36	(1,900)

National surveys, respondents aged 18+

Questions: Respondents were asked to indicate, on a six-point scale, their reaction to each of two statements. The scale ranged from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (6). Our scoring assumes that 1 and 2 indicate disagreement with statement, 5 and 6 indicate agreement, while 3 and 4 represent something in between.

Source: AMR-Quantum Harris ‘AustraliaSCAN 1997’ (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1996), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1998’ (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1997), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1998); and Quantum Australia ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1999).

Table 5: Views about migrants, AustraliaSCAN, 1994 to 1999

Statement	Year	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	n
Immigration has made Australia a much more exciting place to live in	1994/95	48	36	16	(1,204)
	1995/96	46	34	20	(2,037)
	1996	52	34	14	(2,017)
	1997	52	34	14	(2,009)
	1998	56	32	12	(2,000)
	1999	56	31	12	(1,900)
Immigrants to Australia should adopt our way of life, even if they have to put their traditions and culture behind them	1994/95	45	31	24	(1,204)
	1995/96	43	32	25	(2,037)
	1996	41	35	24	(2,017)
	1997	41	35	24	(2,009)
	1998	36	37	27	(2,000)
	1999	36	34	30	(1,900)

National surveys, respondents aged 18+

Questions: Respondents were asked to indicate, on a six-point scale, their reaction to each of two statements. The scale ranged from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (6). Our scoring assumes that 1 and 2 indicate disagreement with statement, 5 and 6 indicate agreement, while 3 and 4 represent something in between.

Source: AMR-Quantum Harris 'AustraliaSCAN 1995' (conducted Dec. 1994 - Feb. 1995), 'AustraliaSCAN 1996' (conducted Dec. 1995 - February 1996), 'AustraliaSCAN 1997' (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1996), 'AustraliaSCAN 1998' (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1997), 'AustraliaSCAN 1999' (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1998); and Quantum Australia 'AustraliaSCAN 1999' (conducted Jul.-Sep. 1999)

A cut in the numbers

To argue that immigration has not declined since the Howard Government came to office is to take a difficult brief. On at least two of the three measures used by Betts, herself — not in her letter to *The Bulletin* but in *The Great Divide*⁹ — the number of migrants entering the country has declined. The number of permanent arrivals, while higher in 1999 than in 1998 and higher in 1998 than in 1997, remains lower than it was in 1996 or 1995; in her book she not only acknowledges the 'decrease in the size of the official program', but offers the judgement that although the cuts are 'not large, the numbers do matter'.¹⁰ Again, net permanent arrivals declined sharply in 1997 and have not picked up since. And net permanent and long-term arrivals, while as high in 1999 as they were in 1996, fell heavily in 1997 and 1998 (Table 6).

Of these three measures, however, it is

surely the measure of permanent (settler) arrivals that corresponds to what most people understand by 'immigration'; the other measures, the 'net' figures, are not measures of immigration but of migration *tout court*, of people coming in minus the number going out. For someone, like Betts, whose interests go to questions of population not just immigration, the use of these 'net' measures may be wholly legitimate; for those whose interests are narrower, they are not.

Whether respondents in the 1998 and 1999 surveys thought the intake had fallen is a moot point. If they did, it doesn't necessarily follow that they were influenced by business. One problem for Betts' thesis is to explain why respondents who may have been influenced by business in the last couple of years were not influenced by business over the preceding decade. Another challenge is to explain why a more relaxed attitude to immigration is evident across all

Table 6: Arrivals and departures, permanent and long-term, 1990 to 1999

Year	Permanent	Net permanent	Net permanent and long-term	Net total
1990	121,560	91,190	96,580	88,200
1991	116,650	86,750	93,520	23,400
1992	94,250	66,110	76,790	36,700
1993	65,680	37,600	57,510	70,800
1994	77,940	50,920	80,240	76,000
1995	96,970	69,100	104,570	105,800
1996	92,500	64,020	103,070	120,600
1997	78,229	47,886	83,654	88,858
1998	81,065	47,632	83,800	88,623
1999	87,137	48,912	103,300	129,444

Sources: K. Betts *The Great Divide* Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, p. 331, and *Australian Demographic Statistics, December Quarter 1999*, ABS, Catalogue no. 3101.0

educational groups when the propaganda itself appears to have been directed mainly at the political parties or at the better educated members of the public.

The best evidence that changes in the numbers themselves are unlikely to have made the difference comes from looking at public opinion from a much longer perspective. Since the 1940s, as the most comprehensive review found, levels of popular support for the immigration program have not been 'directly related to the size of the intake'. From this it follows not only that 'enlarging the program won't, in itself, weaken its support', but that 'reducing numbers won't strengthen it'.¹¹

A change in the composition of the intake

If this is right, and changes in the absolute numbers haven't left a mark, might not changes in the composition of the intake have made an impact? Betts is quick to reject the possibility that changes in the kinds of migrants entering the country might have helped the Howard government build support for its program; but perhaps the idea should not be rejected so precipitously. Changes that

may have boosted support for the program include cuts in the number of family reunions and a boost to the number of migrants with skills. In 1995 to 1996, 56,700 people entered under the family category; by 1998 to 1999, this had dropped by nearly a half to 32,040. In 1995 to 1996, 24,100 settled permanently under the skills category; but by 1998 to 1999, this number had increased by nearly

half to 35,000 (Table 7).

Whatever the Government's motives, each of these moves touched on public concerns. In polls conducted by Irving Saulwick and Associates between 1988 and 1991, respondents put those with 'skills we need' well ahead of those with 'family in Australia' as the immigrants they would 'favour most'; and, in 1996, AGB McNair reported that while 25 per cent of respondents thought Australia should accept fewer migrants who have a 'skilled trade', 61 per cent wanted Australia to accept fewer migrants who have 'relatives in Australia'.¹²

It is no doubt true, as Betts says, that most respondents lack direct information about immigration numbers, be it target numbers (announced at the beginning of the year) or the actual outcomes. But respondents don't need such information in order to accept that there has been significant change; all they need is a sense that the composition of the intake has become much less controversial. If groups organised around opposition to family reunion, for example, cease to attack the government for letting in too many parents who are likely to be dependent on the state, too many phoney

Table 7: Migration program outcomes, 1995-96 to 1998-99

Year	Family	Skill	Special	Total
1995-96	56,700 (69)	24,100 (29)	1,700 (2)	82,600 (100)
1996-97	44,580 (60)	27,550 (37)	1,730 (2)	73,900 (100)
1997-98	31,310 (47)	34,670 (52)	1,110 (2)	67,100 (100)
1998-99	32,040 (47)	35,000 (52)	890 (1)	67,900 (100)

Note: Percentages in brackets; may not add to 100 because of rounding.
Source: Recent migration program numbers, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, <http://www.immi.gov.au/statistics/migrant.htm>

‘fiancees’, or too many distant relatives, the cessation of the conflict is likely to be recognised and taken as a sign that the government’s position has shifted.¹³ It is arguable that under Howard this is precisely what has happened.

A cut in unemployment

A third factor, one not so much dismissed by Betts as ignored by her, is the effect of unemployment. From the beginning of its second year in office the Howard Government has presided over a period of declining unemployment — at least as this is officially measured. In March 1997, unemployment stood at 8.7 per cent. Since then it has declined; in June 2000 it stood at 6.7 per cent.¹⁴

In the 1980s, a sea-change in attitudes to immigration coincided with the growth in unemployment. In the 1960s, when unemployment was relatively low, the program had enjoyed majority support; as unemployment built, support fell. There is nothing mysterious about this. It is reasonable to suppose (whatever economists might say) that, in the minds of most respondents, immigration increases the competition for jobs (rather than helps produce them) in a tough labour market, so that when unemployment is high immigration falls out of favour; conversely, when unemployment falls immigration comes back into favour. A time series analysis, covering the 1970s, confirms what a theory of this kind would lead one to expect: that unemployment

levels correlate strongly with opposition to immigration.¹⁵

There is no reason to suppose that what was true of the 1970s has not been true, broadly speaking, ever since. Unemployment rose from 1990 to 1993; so, to on the AES figures did opposition to immigration. Unemployment fell from 1993 to 1996; so, to did opposition to immigration. Unemployment fell again from 1996 to 1999; so, to did opposition to immigration.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHIFT

Writing in *The Bulletin*, some weeks before Betts, Tim Flannery, the popular environmentalist, celebrated author and one-time Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard, insisted: that ‘poll after poll’ had ‘found that a majority of Australians think that the present level of immigration is too high’; that the polls reflect ‘the will of the people’; and that unless governments are corrupted by special interests (in this case, the housing and construction industries) there shouldn’t be — as, ‘consistently’, there had been — a ‘mismatch between government action and public desire’.¹⁶

These views are by turn mistaken, misleading and misconceived. The polls to which Flannery alluded were at least three years old. Current research does not show that ‘a majority of Australians think that the present level of immigration is too high’. Arguably, it shows that the majority of respondents do not think present numbers are too high; at worst, it shows a more or less even division.

Whether one looks at polls past or present, however, it is misleading to see in their figures anything as clear-cut or commanding as the ‘will of the people’.

First, the terms in which issues are posed by the polls are set by those who commission the polls or conduct the surveys not by 'the people'; what respondents answer is always constrained by what researchers ask as well as by the response options they offer. Second, many of those who register a view may have no real view to register; they answer because they think they are expected to have an opinion not necessarily because they have one. And third, invoking the people's 'will' suggests a level of intensity or strength among the majority of respondents which the polls rarely show; in this sense, the 'will of the people' is rarely more than the will of one minority pitted against another, smaller, minority.

Taken together, data from the newspaper polls, AES surveys and AustraliaSCAN allow us to illustrate each of these points. First, while all the questions from the AES surveys and AustraliaSCAN produce the same trend-line, their absolute values differ markedly; this is partly a result of differences in questioning strategies and partly a result of differences in their response options (a five point scale leaving one 'middle' value compared with a six-point scale leaving two). Second, while any AES respondent who counts has to register an 'opinion', some of them would not have had an opinion to register had they actually been interviewed; in turn, the proportion recorded as 'don't know' in the public opinion polls would have been larger had the question — like that posed by AustraliaSCAN — allowed them more readily to occupy a nondescript 'middle' position. Third, while none of the polls or surveys measure strength of feeling, there is not a single instance in the AES data of the majority endorsing the sort of option ('gone much too far') that Flannery's program for reducing — or even stabilis-

ing — Australia's population would require and only one instance (a 1996 Newspoll) where the majority of respondents thought migrant numbers were 'a lot too high' rather than 'a little too high'.

To claim that there has been a consistent 'mismatch' between what governments do in relation to immigration and what the public wants is misleading as well. Writing at a time when a slow start was about to be made to the winding back of the White Australia policy, James Jupp noted that Australian politicians had been 'extremely sensitive to what they imagine public opinion on immigration to be'.¹⁷ More recently, Ian McAllister has used regression analysis to argue that for the period 1947 to 1990 public opinion (as measured by the polls) had a 'considerable' impact on the immigration targets set by successive governments; indeed, a bigger impact than the rate of unemployment or the proportion of employees belonging to a union.¹⁸ And in cutting back on numbers, altering the migrant mix, restricting access to welfare, and so on, the first Howard Government was clearly aware of what the Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, called the 'all-time low' to which 'community confidence' in the immigration program had sunk; apart from the polls, and a campaign in which the Liberals had promised — pointedly — to govern 'For All Of Us', there was Pauline Hanson to prove it. Without referring to the obvious electoral considerations, Ruddock noted that governments needed to be responsive to public opinion because, 'if you do not have broad community support for the program itself ... it's very difficult to introduce people into that environment and expect they'll settle in'.¹⁹

In so far as there are differences between what governments do and what the public seems to want — and only those

with a particular theory of representation would be surprised by such 'mismatches' — the explanation need not lie in the power of lobbies. Governments may discount public opinion for other reasons; for example, they may take a different view of the national interest, policy may be driven from within the bureaucracy, or ministers may feel they have certain international obligations. Whatever the case, a 'mismatch' of policy and public opinion is likely to occur precisely when public opinion is not strong or the issue not electorally salient.²⁰ The polls to which Flannery refers typically ignore both of these dimensions.

While the interests of the housing industry are no doubt well served by immigration, were industry to be the real driver of government policy we would have problems explaining why, over a fairly short period of time, the number of arrivals had varied so much; for example, from a 1988 high of 151,550 under Hawke to a 1993 low of 65,680 under Keating?²¹ To insist, as Flannery does, that governments of all stripes have 'persisted with high immigration intakes' is to beg this sort of question.

What is most remarkable about Flannery's leap — from accusing the government of defying public opinion to charging it with corruption — is not that he jumps from a dud premise to a dubious conclusion; rather, it is the way he lands on his head. For having endorsed the view that polled opinion represents 'the will of the people' and insisted that the government must follow 'the people', he now has to confront polls which mandate an immigration policy he happens to abhor and (were it not for his political theory) would want the government to ignore.

No doubt he hopes that people continue to buy *The Future Eaters*, that more

of them take on board its message and that Australians in general come to see the country's future in the same terms as he does — a population of 10 million or less. But by making himself hostage to the polls, he now seems committed to the proposition that migrant numbers should — indeed must — be maintained. Only at some future time, when his views are endorsed by the polls (and a lot more environmental damage has been done), would he want the government to start taking them seriously.

CONCLUSION

The shift in polled opinion on immigration in the last two years appears to be real. It shows up in questions on whether immigration numbers have gone too far, on whether we should welcome more migrants and on whether we should stop more migrants from coming. Whether there are other aspects of Australia's immigration policy on which opinion has changed we cannot say.

Not only is the shift real, it is significant. It suggests that changes in policy have gone some way to rebuilding popular support for immigration; while support for a boost in migrant numbers remains quite limited, the level of opposition to the program — including the level of 'extreme' opposition — has declined. But a redesigned immigration policy is unlikely to be the only force at work; a decline in unemployment and strong economic growth are also likely factors.

A less contentious, more popular, immigration policy is unlikely to do the Coalition any harm; while the majority of voters may think too many (or too few) migrants are entering the country, a greater proportion than under Keating or Hawke believe the numbers are 'about right'. Equally, a decline in the level of opposition to immigration reduces the

chances of a resurgence by One Nation. That the shift in opinion on immigration appears to have occurred in the wake of the 1998 election, not the election of 1996, underscores this point.

Finally, the analysis suggests three things of broader, theoretical, significance. First, that legislative and administrative action can shape public opinion — that those who insist that states can only make laws, not change minds, are mistaken. Second, that models of public policy-making which posit a powerful elite deaf or indifferent to mass opinion are inadequate; if policy-makers can change public opinion on immigration

they can also be changed by it — the ‘voice of the people’ need not be an echo.²² And third, that while appeals to direct democracy may seem attractive when ‘the people’ are on the side of the angels, they are problematic when opinion is divided and self-defeating when ‘the people’ side with the devil; direct democracy can never guarantee happy outcomes.

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References

- ¹ Pre-election interview with Kerry O’Brien, cited in P. Williams, *The Victory*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards: NSW, 1997, p. 256
- ² K. Betts ‘Go figure’, *The Bulletin*, 29 February 2000, p. 11. To calculate response rates, Betts divides the number of surveys returned by the number sent out less the number either returned without being opened or returned with a note to indicate that the addressee was ‘incapable, dead, overseas, etc.’ This is a defensible procedure but not a necessary one; for example, it ignores surveys returned but not completed, whether in whole or in part.
- ³ K. Betts, *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, p. 123. Certainly, the response rate was higher than some of the principals anticipated ten years earlier; see, Kelley and Bean, ‘Editor’ Introduction’, in J. Kelley and C. Bean Eds., *Australian Attitudes: Social and Political Analyses from the National Social Science Survey*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, p. xxi.
- ⁴ In an earlier reference to the 1996 AES data, Betts reports the views of those with degrees and those with diplomas separately combines. See, K. Betts ‘Immigration and public opinion in Australia’, *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1996, p. 15; and, for the 1996 response categories. Table 2 below.
- ⁵ The AES also appears to oversample, massively, those with trade and non-trade qualifications (Table 2); but since the attitude to migrant numbers among those with these qualifications varies little from that of respondents with no (post-school) qualifications (Table 3), this oversampling hardly matters.
- ⁶ For Betts’ views, see *The Great Divide*, p. 97
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 115
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 114
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 331
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 315
- ¹¹ M. Goot, ‘Migrant numbers, Asian immigration and multiculturalism: trends in the polls, 1943-1998’, *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness*, Statistical Appendix, National Multicultural Advisory Council, Canberra, 1999, p. 36
- ¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1988, 14 May 1990, 4 November 1991 and 19 June 1996
- ¹³ Compare the curious view that ‘it is public debate between the political parties that serves to guide and educate public opinion’; I. McAllister, ‘Immigration, bi-partisanship and public opinion’, in J. Jupp and M. Kabala Eds., *The Politics of Australian Immigration*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993, p. 170
- ¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia, Preliminary*, Cat. 6202.0 June 2000
- ¹⁵ McAllister, *op. cit.*, p. 172
- ¹⁶ T. Flannery, ‘Policy or Perish’, *The Bulletin*, 18 January 2000, pp. 28-30
- ¹⁷ J. Jupp, *Arrivals and Departures*, Cheshire-Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1996, p. 164
- ¹⁸ *op. cit.*, pp. 172-3

- ¹⁹ Quoted in P. Kelly, *Paradise Divided*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards: NSW, 2000, pp. 264-5. For a summary of the Howard Government's measures, see Betts, 1999, op. cit., pp. 314-6.
- ²⁰ The most sophisticated account of this, though not in the context of immigration policy, is L. R. Jacobs, 'Institutions and culture: health policy and public opinion', *World Politics*, vol. 44, 1992, pp. 179-209; see also *The Health of Nations: Public Opinion and the Making of American and British Health Policy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993.
- ²¹ Betts, op. cit., p.334, for the figures
- ²² Compare V.O. Key's famous dictum: 'The voice of the people is but an echo', an echo of the political parties; *The Responsible Electorate*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Mass., Cambridge, 1966, p. 2