

ETHNIC CONCENTRATIONS: A REPLY TO BOB BIRRELL

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In the last issue of *People and Place*, Bob Birrell¹ criticises the monograph *Metropolitan Ghettoes and Ethnic Concentrations* which I co-authored with Barry York and Andrea McRobbie for the office of Multicultural Affairs in 1990. This is quite gratifying, as this monograph has not had the attention which I would have wished, even if the then Minister thought it sufficiently controversial to delay its publication until after the general election! Birrell also criticises more recent work by Nancy Viviani and James Coughlan, who draw on our monograph. I am sure they can speak for themselves.

Birrell usefully adds 1991 Census data which was not available to us. As Vietnam-born residents increased by 45,000 between 1986 and 1991, it is not surprising that their numbers in areas of concentration have also increased. This does not invalidate my prediction that some dispersal would ultimately occur. The concentration is still being built through family reunion, as Birrell notes. Previous concentrations of southern Europeans dispersed to a major degree after the immigration wave had ended. I note that Birrell does not dispute our claim that other 'Asians' (including Chinese) are already dispersed. He does, however, practise some sleight of hand by throwing in the China-born to the Fairfield totals. Birrell also usefully draws attention to concentration within postal codes rather than local authorities. The use of LGAs does

underline our case that Indochinese have concentrated within areas which have previously experienced other immigrant concentration. The use of postal codes underlines his case that there is heavy and, in some respects, growing, Indochinese concentration in Cabramatta. However, his Table 1 does not bear out his claim that the same process is happening in Melbourne or elsewhere in Sydney. In fact, new areas of settlement such as Bankstown (NSW) and Sunshine (Vic) have opened up.

Nothing in our monograph denies Indochinese concentration in Cabramatta and you would have to be very eccentric to do so. But Birrell's analysis goes further. He charges that 'ghetto' conditions as defined by us are present or rapidly developing. His evidence for this is slight and based largely on a single article in *Migration Action* and surmises about economic activity in the area. Our researches on the ground suggested that, far from being a deprived area, the commercial rents and purchase prices in Cabramatta were so high that many new arrivals cannot enter the booming commercial sector. Fairfield city council enjoys a strong rate base resulting from the development of John Street from a once sleazy and nondescript shopping strip to a major regional shopping centre.

This argument that there is high unemployment and low educational achievement in Cabramatta may well be true. But Birrell does not make valid comparisons. Many non-Indochinese areas of western Sydney

and Melbourne, such as Green Valley, Campbelltown, Mount Druitt, Broadmeadows or St Albans evidence comparable or even worse social situations, often affecting native-born Anglo-Australians. Thus the important factor is not Indochinese concentration but the crisis of the former 'green field' industrial regions of the major cities. Nor does Birrell mention our fieldwork finding that the only conditions approximating ghetto life in North America or western Europe are in the small Aboriginal settlement in Redfern.

Birrell argues that we subscribe to the 'impossibility' of ghetto conditions arising in areas like Cabramatta or Springvale and that we are being 'defensive' against charges by Blainey about ghetto formation. These arguments are based on page references (56-57) which are either incorrect or very badly misinterpreted. In fact, we spend some time detailing the possibility of ghetto conditions arising, especially in areas settled by refugees in public housing (pp.76-78). Birrell accepts that there is no evidence of ghetto conditions and tensions in

Springvale, as well he might following a local survey from his own neighbouring Monash University. On our analysis such conditions are more likely to arise in public housing concentrations such as North Richmond (Vic).

Birrell has never liked mass immigration or ethnic concentration and it is hardly surprising that he criticises analyses which question his basic beliefs. But the experience of such concentrations in Australia is qualitatively different from that elsewhere and this should be acknowledged. That there are serious social issues in these and similar areas is not denied by our monograph and is hardly surprising in the light of current unemployment figures. We would be happy to join Bob Birrell in campaigning against failed economic policies which threaten social harmony, provided he acknowledges that the ethnic composition of disadvantaged communities is not the central issue.

References

Birrell, B. 'Ethnic concentrations: the Vietnamese experience', *People and Place*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1993, pp. 26-31

