

Australian Attitudes to Immigration and Multiculturalism

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Overview

This paper begins with a discussion of Australia's immigration context and the extent of ethnic diversity in the country. Following a brief discussion of public opinion surveying in Australia it considers five main issues, based in large part on the findings of the Scanlon Foundation surveys, fifteen of which have been conducted since 2007. These issues are: social cohesion; sense of belonging and social justice; attitudes to immigration and asylum seekers; levels of intolerance; and multiculturalism.

Immigration context

Australia's population is currently 24 million—and increasing at a level close to 325,000 per annum. In recent years close to 60% of this increase has been from immigration, 40% from natural increase, although most recently immigration has declined, so that the most recent data indicates that 53.5% of the increase was from immigration. The increase in population over the last decade has been above the long-term average of 1.4% per annum between 1970 and 2010. The increase in recent years peaked at 2.2% in 2008; it was at 1.8% in 2009, 2012 and 2013. Most recently, in the context of economic concerns and rising unemployment now close to 6% of the workforce, population growth has declined to 1.3%. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016)

Almost half the Australian population is third or earlier generation Australian; third generation is here defined as a person born in Australia with both parents born in Australia; 20% are second generation, born in Australia with at least one overseas-born parent; and 27% are first generation, having been born overseas. In total, 47% of the population comprises first or second generation Australians.

Of OECD nations with populations in excess of 10 million, Australia ranks first in terms of the proportion born overseas. The 27% overseas-born Australian proportion compares with 20% overseas-born in Canada, 13% in Germany, 13% in the United States, and 11% in the United Kingdom.

A relatively high proportion of the overseas-born in Australia live in capital cities: 82% of all overseas born in 2011, compared to 66% of the total population. Within the capital cities the overseas-born are unevenly distributed, with concentrations above 50% in a number of Local Government Areas, particularly in Sydney. Data on language usage provides a fuller understanding of the extent of diversity than country of birth, as it also includes the second generation. In some suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne more than 75% speak a language other than English in the home.

Over the last thirty years, an increasing proportion of Australia's immigrants have been from the Asian region. Among settler arrivals in 2012–13, immigrants from New Zealand

and United Kingdom ranked first and fourth, India and China ranked second and third; of the remaining top ten countries of origin, five were Asian, one was African.

Australian public opinion

Given the significance of immigration for Australia, there has been surprisingly little investment in systematic public opinion research into attitudes to immigration and cultural diversity.

Australia lacks government sponsored surveying on the scale evident in the European Union, England and Canada, particularly prior to the Global Financial Crisis, which led to significant cuts in such research. In Australia the main source of long run data is the relatively underfunded work of researchers at the Australian National University (ANU). ANU researchers conduct the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, which contributes to the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) and the World Values Survey. It is a mailed out, self-administered survey which achieves some 3,000 to 4,000 completions. (For discussion of Australian surveying, see Markus 2012)

Two other important surveys are conducted by ANU researchers. The Australian Election Study (AES) is administered following a federal election, which is held on average every three years. The AES also utilises a mailed, self-administered questionnaire. It achieves a sample of 1,800–2,000 respondents and provides insight into the relative importance of political issues, including immigration. The ANU Poll commenced in 2008 and has been held on 19 occasions. It is telephone based and reaches 1,000 respondents. (McAllister and Pietsch 2011; ANU Poll)

Essential Media Communications publishes the Essential Report, a weekly survey focused on political issues and typically includes ten questions. It utilises an online panel of some 100,000 members and is completed by close to 1000 respondents. (Essential Research)

Tracking shifts in Australian opinion on immigration has, until recent years, been in large part reliant on commercial polling for the print media. There are problems, however, with reliance on such polling. Commercial polls typically include just one to three questions on immigration, in the context of a general survey exploring a range of issues. There is no consistency in question wording and frequency is determined solely by level of public interest. In some years there has been no polling on immigration.

For the first time in Australian social research, since 2007 systematic surveys of attitudes to immigration, cultural diversity and social cohesion have been conducted, funded by the Scanlon Foundation. Eight national surveys have been conducted to date utilising a uniform methodology and a survey instrument of some 70 questions. These surveys have been telephone administered, sampling both landline and mobile numbers, with a sample of 1500 respondents in the most recent surveys. The large sample and accumulated data since 2007 makes possible reliable analysis of sub-groups. In addition, four parallel surveys have been conducted in local areas, most in Sydney and Melbourne in areas of high immigrant concentration. There has been a large degree of consistency in the survey results.

The Scanlon Foundation has also conducted three experimental online surveys: the first was of recent immigrant arrivals, the second of third generation Australians, and the most recent, available in 20 languages and completed by over 10,000 respondents, currently under

analysis. The experimental online surveys have provided evidence of the limitations of interviewer administered surveying—there is indication that on sensitive issues, the extent of negative or hostile feeling is understated in response to an interviewer, an issue that was explored in the 2014 national survey report.

The following discussion focuses on key findings of the Scanlon Foundation surveying, which I have led since the first survey in 2007. Reports on the survey are available on the project's internet site based at Monash University. (Markus 2007–2015)

Defining social cohesion

The Scanlon Foundation surveys were established to provide evidence on social cohesion in Australia, in the context of the country's large scale and increasingly diverse immigration program. The surveys have been developed to answer the question 'Can Australia sustain, in future decades, the migration and social cohesion successes which characterise its immigration programs since the Second World War?'

As a concept, social cohesion has a long tradition in academic enquiry. It is of fundamental importance when discussing the role of consensus and conflict in society. The Scanlon Foundation surveys adopt a broad approach, influenced by the work of social scientists Jane Jenson and Paul Bernard, and incorporate five domains:

- **Belonging:** Shared values, identification with Australia, trust.
- **Social justice and equity:** Perception of government policy.
- **Participation:** Voluntary work, political involvement.
- **Acceptance and rejection, legitimacy:** Experience of discrimination, attitudes towards minorities and newcomers.
- **Worth:** Life satisfaction and happiness, future expectations. (Markus and Kirpitchenko 2007)

Scanlon Monash Index of Social Cohesion (SMI)

The Scanlon Foundation surveys provide a summary indicator of social cohesion at specific points in time. The Scanlon Monash Index of Social Cohesion aggregates data for 18 questions, selected on the basis of factor analysis, and tracks change since the 2007 benchmark survey. The index weights strength of opinion; for example, in calculating agreement in response to a survey item, 'strong' agreement is accorded double the weight of 'moderate' agreement.

The finding of the national surveys that have been conducted to date is that the composite index fell by more than 10 points between 2007 and 2014 (from 100 to 89.5), with a positive movement of 3 points (to 92.5) in 2015. While in four domains the fall has been relatively minor (currently in the range 93–100), the domain which measures rejection of cultural diversity is at 82 in 2015, indicating heightened reported experience of discrimination and a growing minority who are negative towards a diverse immigration intake.

Domains of social cohesion

The Scanlon Foundation surveys—and other polling over the last 30 years—have consistently found that the vast majority of Australians have a high level of identification

with their country, the fundamental prerequisite for any cohesive society.

Almost unanimously, Australians express a sense of belonging (92% in 2015), indicate pride in the Australian way of life (89%) and believe that its maintenance is important (91%). Close to 4 out of 5 respondents (80%) agree with the proposition that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life'.

The 2014 online survey of third generation Australians provides further confirmation of very high levels of identification. It found that just 3% indicate that they do not feel that they belong in Australia; less than 3% disagree with the statement that 'I identify with Australians' and 'I feel I am committed to Australia'; 4% disagree that 'I feel a bond with Australians'; 6% disagree that 'maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important'.

There is substantial evidence to indicate that amongst the developed economies, Australia and Canada rank as the most receptive to immigration. In Australia and Canada a majority of the population regularly supports immigration, unlike a number of European countries. For example, a 2003 ISSP survey found that 68% of Canadian and 61% Australian respondents supported the current level of immigration or favoured an increase, compared with 34% in France, 30% in Germany and 22% in England. (Markus 2012) European surveys in 2014 found that in Italy 64% of respondents disapproved of government handling of immigration, 71% in the United States, and 73% in the United Kingdom. (Transatlantic Trends 2014)

Australians accept that they live in a country of immigration—and that they benefit from immigration. In times of stable economic growth there is consistent majority support for immigration, although opinion can shift rapidly. During the recession of the early 1990s a large majority (over 70%) considered that the immigration intake was too high. As unemployment declined public opinion changed. Of 25 surveys on immigration conducted between 1999 and 2010, with variance in question wording and methodology, the average result was 52% in support, 43% in favour of reduction.

The most recent Scanlon Foundation surveys, conducted in 2014 and 2015, found support for immigration above expectations. Despite increase in unemployment and economic concerns, in both years just 35% of survey respondents indicated that the immigration intake was 'too high' (the lowest proportion of the eight Scanlon Foundation surveys), while 58% indicated that it is 'about right' or 'too low'.

A possible explanation for the low level of concern is the effectiveness of the government measures to stop the arrival of asylum seekers by boat, after close to 25,000 arrived between July 2012 and June 2013. The stopping of boat arrivals has conveyed the message that the government has re-established effective border control and can be trusted to manage immigration. (Phillips 2015)

A finding, consistent across Scanlon Foundation surveys, is that most people view asylum seekers as illegal immigrants. Only a small minority, in the range 20%-25%, agree that those who arrive on Australian territory by small boats and then claim asylum should be able to apply for permanent settlement.

Similar results have been obtained in surveys conducted by other organisations. On several occasions the Essential Report has asked if the Australia government was 'too tough or too soft on asylum seekers or is it taking the right approach'. Only a minority have

agreed with the view that the government was 'too tough'. Thus in April 2015, 22% responded 'too tough', 61% that the government was 'too soft' or was 'taking the right approach'. In March 2015 the ANU Poll asked if 'Australia should take stronger measures to exclude illegal immigrants'. 65% agreed with stronger measures, 32% disagreed. (Essential Report, 14 April 2015; ANU Poll, Report 18, 2015)

Levels of intolerance

An issue which from time to time engages public debate in Australia (and overseas) is the question: 'Is Australia a racist nation?' Discussion at the level of generality of the 'Australian people' and 'the Australian nation' is largely meaningless. All populations are made up of diverse personality types, ranging from the tolerant to the intolerant—from those who celebrate cultural diversity to those who are comfortable only with what they perceive to be Australian culture.

Research undertaken in 2000 by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia indicated that the proportion of the intolerant within the countries of the European Union ranges from a low of 4% to a high of 27%. (Thalhammer 2001)

The intolerant are characterised by unease when in the presence of minority groups, their belief that multiculturalism does not enrich Australia, their demand that immigrants should assimilate to what they see as the Australian way of life (or go back to their countries of origin), and their opposition to policies designed to promote harmony, including understanding of other cultures.

The broad range of questions in the Scanlon Foundation surveys provides a number of perspectives for determining the level of intolerance or racism in Australian society. The result obtained depends, in the first instance, on the question asked, in the second, on the interpretation of the results obtained.

The Scanlon Foundation survey has considered attitudes towards faith groups as a way of obtaining evidence on Australian openness to diversity, and to provide insight into attitudes towards large immigrant groups of non-Christian background. The survey has asked respondents for their attitude to members of the Christian, Buddhist and Muslim faiths. The question engaged respondents, indicated by the very low proportion (1%–3%) of 'refused' and 'don't know' responses. Across the surveys, 5% or fewer respondents indicated that they were 'very negative' or 'negative' towards Christians or Buddhists, but a significantly higher 11%–13% were 'very negative' towards Muslims and a further 11%–14% 'somewhat negative', a combined 22%–25%.

This finding is consistent with a VicHealth survey conducted in 2013, although both the VicHealth and Scanlon foundation national surveys, conducted by telephone, may understate the extent of negative feeling. (VicHealth 2014: 22) The 2014 Scanlon Foundation online survey of third generation Australians found that negative views of Muslims were held by more than 40% of respondents.

The highest proportion with negative views was amongst those aged 65 or over; those with trade level qualifications; those who did not complete their secondary education; and amongst supporters of the Liberal/National Parties, currently the government, and those who indicated that they voted Independent.

While there can be no definitive measure of the level of intolerance in Australian society, on the basis of Scanlon Foundation polling and a number of additional surveys conducted over the last 30 years, there is support for the conclusion that the core level of intolerance in Australia is close to 10% of the population. Using a broader definition (incorporating both the strongest negative and next negative response), levels of intolerance and rejection of cultural diversity are probably in the range 25% to 30% of the population. On a heavily politicised issue such as asylum policy, strong negative sentiment alone can reach close to 40%.

These proportions are an average for the Australian population. Within specific regions and within segments of the population, there are higher levels of intolerance.

Multiculturalism

The three Scanlon Foundation national surveys conducted 2013 and 2015 indicate strong level of support for multiculturalism when questions are framed in general terms: in response to the proposition that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia', 84% to 86% agreed. This high level of support has been found in other surveys. For example, a 2005 survey asked respondents if they supported or opposed 'a policy of multiculturalism in Australia': 80% indicated support. (Markus 2011: 93)

The 2013 Scanlon Foundation survey found that the strongest positive association of multiculturalism was with its contribution to Australia's economic development and its encouragement of immigrants to become part of Australian society.

Australian opinion is divided when issues of integration are considered. The 2015 survey found that 27% of Australians 'strongly agree' with the view that immigrants 'should change their behaviour to be more like Australians' and a further 38% agree, a combined 65%, while 27% 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'.

A large majority of Australians agree that people of different backgrounds get on well, they like getting to know people from other cultures and are positive concerning the value of multiculturalism, but a majority also considers that entrenched cultural and ethnic difference is not good for the country. Views differ, however, amongst recent immigrant arrivals and amongst young adults, with a relatively high proportion in favour of cultural maintenance.

Areas of immigrant concentration

In addition to the national surveys, the Scanlon Foundation has conducted four waves of surveys (2007, 2009, 2012 and 2013) in local areas of immigrant concentration.

The areas of high immigrant concentration present a complex picture. Residents in such areas indicate high levels of identification with Australia, evident in response to questions on sense of belonging, pride in the Australian way of life and endorsement of the view that in Australia 'hard work brings a better life.' But surveys in these areas also find lower levels of trust and sense of safety, lower levels of political participation and involvement in voluntary work, and heightened experience of discrimination.

A second finding relates to analysis of attitudes of third generation Australians who remain residents in areas of immigrant settlement, while many move away to other

suburbs. Amongst such Australians both the 2009 and 2012 local area surveys found a heightened level of negative opinion of immigration. Thus in the 2012 national survey, 62% of third generation Australians agree that immigrants make Australia stronger, in the immigrant areas it is a lower 49%. The largest variation is in response to questions relating to crime and safety, and willingness of neighbours to help each other. In the national survey, 66% of third generation respondents agreed that they felt safe walking alone at night, a much lower 38% of third generation respondents in the areas of immigrant concentration; the relative proportions agreeing that neighbours are willing to help each other are 88% and 57%; in response to a question that asked if 'living in your local area is becoming better or worse', the proportion indicating that it was worse was 17% at the national level, 35% at the local. These findings indicate that amongst third generation Australians, negative responses in areas of immigrant concentration are higher by close to 20%.

Summary

This discussion has focused on the Scanlon Foundation surveys, which have enriched both the understanding of public opinion and of methodological issues facing researchers.

Australia, like all immigrant receiving countries, faces ongoing challenges; this includes the strongly negative attitudes towards cultural and ethnic diversity held by a minority of the population; the relatively high experience of discrimination reported by immigrants; the negative attitudes towards asylum seekers arriving by boat, and towards Muslim Australians; and the heightened negative reaction of a minority of third generation Australians resident in areas of immigrant concentration in the major cities. Life in Australia continues to satisfy a large majority of new arrivals, but there is a perception held by many that the Australians they encounter are not friendly and welcoming.

Another perspective highlights the consistent finding that Australia's large and ethnically diverse immigration program is supported by majority opinion, at a level rivalled only by Canada. The concept of multiculturalism resonates with the Australian public and receives strong endorsement when presented as a policy to facilitate the integration of immigrants.

The richness of the data yield of the Scanlon Foundation surveys consistently indicates that Australia is a cohesive and stable society. A large majority agree that in the long run those who work hard are rewarded—and with very few exceptions Australians have a sense of belonging and identification with their country.

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