22. Immigration Issues in the 2010 Federal Election

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One of only four stated objectives of the Liberals was to 'stop the boats'. Julia Gillard (a '10-pound migrant') and Tony Abbott (born in London) stressed their migrant origins where appropriate. Abbott's claim was almost ludicrous as he was only born in London because his Australian parents were there at the time. Gillard left Barry in south Wales when she was five, coming free with her Welsh parents. But immigration and population did not play the central roles that seemed likely at the start of campaigning. This followed in a consensual tradition in which such issues did not seriously divide the two major parties.

Public support for the 'White Australia' Policy in the past and for 'sending back the boats' recently has been such that the major parties have normally adopted a bipartisan approach to most immigration issues. Opposition to this now arises from outside the major parties: the Greens, churches and ad-hoc organisations; lawyers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The major claim made by Abbott was that continuing the Howard policy of 'offshore' detention and temporary protection visas would have diminished or ended the flow of boats.

In general elections for nearly 20 years there was agreement not to raise the issue of punitive detention for 'boat people' while also arguing that this and other practices remained within the UN Convention. Throughout the period 1990–2007, about 70 per cent in polls supported the bipartisan policies and kept the issues at a low level of partisan disagreement. Recent polls show that substantial majorities believe the Liberals are better able to cope than Labor, jumping to 44 per cent in April 2010 and staying there until the week of the election, with the ALP stuck at 29 per cent (that is, the majority favours stronger action). Morgan made sure of this majority by referring to 'illegal' migrants! It is therefore a key issue for Liberals, meaning Abbott was bound to use it. The Liberal-Nationals Coalition was also seen as better able to deal with population growth and to manage immigration (by 46 per cent to 28 per cent).

Bipartisanship on some issues was declining by 2001. One of many reasons for the defeat of the Howard Government was his breaking of bipartisanship over multiculturalism from 1998. But the attack on the World Trade Centre reinforced bipartisan agreement about the need to combat terrorism. This flowed over into an increasingly hostile attitude towards asylum-seekers, who were mainly Muslims at this time.

In 2002, ALP leader, Simon Crean, and Julia Gillard developed a more humane policy towards asylum-seekers arriving by boat, though keeping mandatory detention. This reflected growing opposition outside the party system and against the detention centres (*Protecting Australia and Protecting the Australian Way*). This policy was not publicised during the next election, which the ALP lost. It was close to that adopted by Senator Chris Evans after the Labor victory of 2007, but he was pushed aside as soon as it became an ‘issue’. Party leaders and major media determine ‘issues’. They might not seem ‘major’ to others (compare the small number of boat people with large increases in overall immigration—another but arguably less combustible issue). Abbott made it one of four major aims to ‘stop the boats’ because he was on to a winner.

Three Issues

There were three major migration-related ‘issues’ raised by the Liberals to which Labor reacted. Labor had no long-term policies on any of them and adlibbed. Indeed, policy making in either party was very short term and unduly linked to electoral outcomes as predicted by opinion polls or through focus groups. On refugee policy it was widely criticised as ‘the race to the bottom’.

These issues were: the boat people; the size of the migration program; and the future size of the population. Put like that this might seem the order of increasing importance, but in practice the opposite was true, as measured by media responses. ‘Stopping the boats’ is easier than controlling population size.

Boat people have been a potential issue since the first Vietnamese arrivals in 1976. Australian governments then responded within the terms of the UN Convention and 1967 Protocol—that is, that they were refugees, if approved they would get permanent residence leading to citizenship, would be processed through an international agreement (orderly departure), would be assisted and accommodated like other non-English-speaking background (NESB) migrants but with limited additional services to take account of trauma and special needs. This continued under the Fraser and Hawke governments (1975–91) but started to change with the imposition of mandatory detention in 1991.

Policy changed with a large Cambodian intake, leading to mandatory and irrevocable detention with bipartisan agreement. This principle has remained and accounts for most of the administrative problems, including costs. It became even more important with the growth of numbers from Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka, leading to the so-called ‘Pacific solution’ of offshore processing, plus onshore internment in custom-built centres (Woomera, Baxter) administered by private prison companies and leading to temporary protection visas for those not rejected. The Crean/Gillard program wished to move away from this by

reintroducing permanent visas, closing offshore camps (replaced with Christmas Island), limiting processing time, removing women and children from detention and responding to 'inhumane' practices as revealed by several inquiries. This created a clear-cut partisan division, with Abbott advocating a total return to the 'Pacific solution' despite its costs, damage to international reputation and unpopularity with Greens and some 'liberal' Liberals. The Howard Government had abolished several Labor measures such as permanent residence, special assistance for those from wartorn areas and easy access to citizenship.

The Labor program was, however, severely disrupted by a rapid increase of boat arrivals, made more burdensome by the collapse of the Tamil Tigers in the Sri Lankan civil war. Christmas Island became crowded and delays grew, partly due to final approval being left in the hands of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). The Rudd Government took population policy away from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and gave border protection to Home Security. As multiculturalism was dormant and settlement services mainly in State and NGO hands, this left DIAC significantly reduced from its rise under Howard and Phillip Ruddock. Senator Evans was pushed to one side and admitted that the policy had 'failed'. This raised the question of what policy should be—to implement the UN Convention or to stop the boats. This has never been properly debated at the national, partisan level. Liberal politicians frequently use the incorrect term 'illegal' and Labor speakers occasionally lapse into the same usage. That the Convention aims to assist (rather than resist) asylum-seekers was almost completely ignored in the partisan battle.

Immigration

The boat people are a very small part (1.5 per cent) of an immigration program that started to expand rapidly in the last two years of Howard's government and continued under Rudd. When the program began in 1947, and for at least the next 30 years, there was bipartisan agreement to 'populate or perish'. In the mid-1980s, some natural scientists, allied with some Australian Democrats and such inveterate opponents of expanding immigration as Bob Birrell, began to argue for limitation of numbers on grounds of sustainability (see Birrell et al. 1984). There was no major public debate about the ethnic content of the intake until the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in 1996. The election of that year saw John Howard—a critic of high migration and opponent of multiculturalism—become Prime Minister and start to move policy and public debate away from bipartisanship. The increasing concern with Islamic terrorism in Western democracies sparked off a long argument about the role of Muslims in societies such as Australia. While some Labor leaders joined in, the main

thrust came from the Liberal Party and especially in Sydney, with the largest Muslim population in Australia. Labor was seen by many as the party of multiculturalism, and was rewarded by winning a solid block of metropolitan electorates with large ethnic minority populations. The price was anti-Labor voting in electorates such as Lindsay and Macarthur, which were adjoining the 'ethnic west' but which were less 'ethnic' than the metropolitan Australian average.

Eventually, Howard accepted increased immigration, but on the basis of temporary rather than permanent settlement. While no major party advocated a return to White Australia (and One Nation quickly disintegrated), by use of 'dog whistling', the Coalition in the cities began to appeal to working-class voters as defending the Australian way of life and (by implication) the limitation of Muslims and other unassimilable immigrants. This explains the heavy canvassing of western Sydney electorates by Abbott in the 2010 campaign. Howard's 'Aussie battlers' were unhappy for many reasons: congested traffic, poor services, distance from city centres and declining manufacturing. On the outer fringes of Sydney, there were 'borderline' electorates (Lindsay and Macarthur in particular) where there was considerable opposition to the spread of Muslim and non-European settlement. This explains the great emphasis on boat people in the last weeks of the campaign. Boat people did not come up the Parramatta River, but Muslims, Lebanese and Vietnamese were moving into 'white', working-class suburbs.

Opposition to population increase was based on very dubious figures, which the Coalition did little to illuminate. In particular, the projection of 35 million Australians within 30 years assumed the same level of temporary intake of students, 457 visa workers and working holiday makers—and not just the component of permanent residents used to predict numbers in the past. Kevin Rudd inadvertently fed fuel to the fire by saying he wanted a 'big Australia'—which most Australian political leaders had been saying for a century. But opinion polling showed that more than 60 per cent of Australians were content with remaining part of one of the least densely populated societies on Earth.

Sustainability

The reaction against increased population size was strong enough to sweep through both major parties. The Liberals clashed with employers crying out for labour. The ALP deserted its tradition of 'populate or perish' (and its strong immigrant base). Those in the Greens and the environmental and conservation movements could hardly contain their excitement. The Greens' vote had risen

to its highest level in the polls since the party was founded and there was a prospect of holding the Senate balance of power and thus being able to do business with the major parties.

Essentially, this rather unexpected shift was a cry for stability and against rapid change. It also marked the rise of the educated young to a political influence they had previously lacked. Electorates thought susceptible to Greens campaigning included the inner-city seats of Melbourne, Sydney, Grayndler and Batman—all Labor strongholds gentrified by the expanding professional classes. On this dimension, the Greens are a threat to Labor. But their expansion also insulates many voters from turning directly to the Liberals. A Labor government was possible only if Greens' second preferences went to the party, as all indications suggest they did.

The ALP was slow to see what was happening. Many still adhere to Calwell's old adage 'I am Labor because I am Australian and Australian because I am Labor'. In other words, the ALP is the party of the common people and has no need of allies. But the manual working class is smaller than 50 years ago, the unions are less all-embracing, the Catholic Church is firmly based in the middle classes, the number of graduates is vastly greater and the proportion of Australians of British and/or Irish descent is much lower, especially in working-class suburbs. In the end Labor made a formal alliance with another party, the Greens, which has never happened before nationally, but is not unknown in State politics.

The Results

On the evidence available (which is slight), the 'boat people' issue was not decisive in the large swing nationally to the Liberals. In fact, the election could almost be seen as a 'declaration of independence' by Queensland, the State that gave us Joh Bjelke-Petersen and Pauline Hanson. In Western Australia there was only a limited swing and little change of seats, despite the potential impact of the asylum issue and the mining tax. In the south-east, the results in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania were quite different from those elsewhere. In New South Wales only some of the 'western suburbs' turned strongly against Labor and only Bennelong, which is not essentially a western suburb, Greenway and those on the periphery, such as Hughes and Macarthur, conformed to the stereotype of a revolt against Labor by 'Howard's battlers'. In Melbourne similar suburbs did not move towards the Liberals at all.

Once again Labor representation was heavily dependent on two blocs of 'ethnic seats'—defined here as those with more than 25 per cent using a language other than English at home. Of the 72 electorates won by the party, 26 fall into this NESB category; one (Menzies) has never been Labor, Bennelong was not

unexpectedly lost to the Liberals and Melbourne (more surprisingly) was lost to the Greens. One-third of all Labor-held electorates are 'ethnic'. Of Liberal counterparts, only Menzies and Bennelong have one-third or more speaking a language other than English at home. Of Labor seats there are non-English-speaking absolute majorities in Barton, Blaxland, Watson and Fowler—all in Sydney. The results between the two major States were quite different, with large swings against Labor in New South Wales and minor or negative swings against the Liberals in Victoria (see Table 22.2).

Table 22.1 'Ethnic Electorate' Results in the 2010 Election

Electorate	Result	ALP first preferences (%)	Swing to Libs (%)
Banks	ALP no change	43.3	+ 10.2
Barton	ALP no change	49.0	+ 10.2
Batman	ALP no change	53.1	−0.8
Bennelong	Liberal gain	37.0	+ 3.8
Blaxland	ALP no change	51.9	+ 7.2
Bruce	ALP no change	49.7	0.0
Calwell	ALP no change	57.4	−0.4
Chifley	ALP no change	52.4	+ 6.0
Chisholm	ALP no change	45.2	+ 1.0
Fowler	ALP no change	53.8	+ 15.1
Gellibrand	ALP no change	59.6	−0.1
Gorton	ALP no change	60.9	−0.8
Grayndler	ALP no change	46.6	+ 7.3
Greenway	ALP gain	42.6	+ 2.8
Holt	ALP no change	55.5	−3.0
Hotham	ALP no change	55.6	−0.3
Isaacs	ALP no change	50.0	−3.7
Kingsford-Smith	ALP no change	44.4	+ 7.7
Lingiari*	ALP no change	40.1	−0.5
McMahon	ALP no change	51.7	+ 5.5
Maribyrnong	ALP no change	56.2	−0.9
Melbourne	Greens gain	39.5	−3.5
Menzies	Libs no change	32.8	+ 3.0
Parramatta	ALP no change	44.8	+ 6.3
Reid	ALP no change	42.0	+ 7.8
Scullin	ALP no change	63.1	−0.2
Watson	ALP no change	51.3	+ 10.4
Werriwa	ALP no change	49.2	+ 8.2
Wills	ALP no change	53.2	−0.5

* In Lingiari many use Indigenous languages

Note: 'Ethnic electorates' are defined as having more than 25 per cent speaking a language other than English at home.

Source: ABC Elections.

Table 22.2a Selected Results from 'Ethnic Electorate' Polling Booths in Sydney, 2010 (per cent)

Electorate	Sydney	ALP % vote	Change since 2007	ALP 2PP vote since 2007
1	Cabramatta	54.26	-22.60	-23.08
1	Bonnyrigg	60.12	-19.27	-17.78
2*	Ashfield	50.75	-13.07	-9.1
2*	Leichhardt	44.32	-9.05	-4.6
3	Auburn West	52.17	-14.44	-5.63
3	Villawood	58.98	-5.87	-2.14
3	Bankstown Central	56.54	-11.92	-6.50
4	Auburn	56.91	-17.7	-12.73
4	Lidcombe	50.61	-13.77	-8.95
5	Lakemba	65.36	-5.44	-4.83
5	Canterbury	51.74	-16.99	-13.90
6	Blacktown	47.08	-14.63	-8.38
7	Eastwood	41.97	-10.33	-6.32
7	Ermington	43.29	-10.74	-9.11
7	West Ryde	40.22	-12.43	-6.31
8	Belmore North	57.29	-10.62	-10.49
8	Punchbowl	50.43	-9.77	-10.13
9	Rockdale Central	54.77	-11.09	-11.09
9	Arncliffe	52.98	-11.96	-12.72

Note: Electorates: 1 Fowler; 2 Grayndler (* PPV to Greens); 3 Blaxland; 4 Reid; 5 Watson; 6 Chifley; 7 Bennelong; 8 Watson; 9 Barton.

Table 22.2b Selected Results from 'Ethnic Electorate' Polling Booths in Melbourne, 2010 (per cent)

Electorate	Melbourne	ALP % vote	Change since 2007	ALP 2PP vote since 2007
1	Deer Park	63.19	-4.10	+ 1.37
1	St Albans	61.15	-1.76	n.a.
2	Springvale	68.29	-3.22	+ 4.52
3	Thomastown	66.38	-7.59	+ 4.96
4	Northcote	42.54	-7.37	n.a.
5	Broadmeadows	67.95	-4.32	-0.58
5	Craigieburn	63.36	-3.09	+ 2.07
6*	Carlton	46.39	-15.00	-15.31
6*	Richmond North	64.05	-10.82	+ 9.97
7	Brunswick North	51.02	-6.24	+ 0.45
8	Sunshine North	68.68	-1.85	+ 2.57
6*	Flemington	49.74	-9.69	-10.57
9	Clayton	60.10	-2.59	+ 0.58

* Two-party preferred vote with Greens

Note: Electorates: 1 Gorton; 2 Hotham; 3 Scullin; 4 Batman; 5 Calwell; 6 Melbourne; 7 Wills; 8 Maribyrnong; 9 Chisholm.

Federal electorates are now too large for analysis of specific group behaviour. Taking booth results is more fruitful, especially in those limited areas where NESB voters are numerically dominant. Table 22.2 shows clearly that there was a far greater 'revolt' in Sydney than in Melbourne. In general, the two-party preferred total suggests that voters went straight over from Labor to Liberal in Sydney, whereas many in Melbourne went to the Greens and returned their preferences to Labor. Another generalisation might hold that the Greens' vote was higher in former 'ethnic areas' (such as Carlton, Brunswick and Fitzroy) than in outer Melbourne suburbs with predominant NESB populations, such as Deer Park, St Albans, Springvale and Thomastown. A factor that needs also to be taken into account is that the Sydney 'ethnic areas' are much more likely to be populated from Asia and the Middle East, whereas many of the Melbourne districts have been 'ethnic' for much longer and are drawn from southern and Eastern Europe. Even so, it can be remarked that the East Asian districts of North Richmond and Springvale seem more loyal to Labor than their Sydney counterparts such as Cabramatta and Ashfield.

In both New South Wales and Victoria, Labor rarely rewarded its loyal supporters in national elections with 'ethnic' candidates, whereas the Liberals have now adopted a consistent strategy of 'horses for courses'. Nor were their nominees placed only in unwinnable electorates. Greenway, which Labor came

very close to losing with a two-party preferred vote of only 50.9 per cent, has one of the largest Filipino communities in Australia. Both the Liberal Party and the Australian Democrats nominated Filipinos, while the ALP winner, Michelle Rowland, was born and raised locally. Apart from its large Filipino component, Greenway was one-third Catholic and the scene of a battle between a Pentecostal Christian Liberal and a Bosnian Muslim for Labor in 2007 (Jupp 2009). Both these candidates withdrew to neighbouring seats in 2010, where they were duly elected.

Other strong Liberal candidates chosen for their relevant ethnicity included Thomas Dang (of Vietnamese parentage) in Fowler where he gained a 13.2 per cent two-party swing in one of Labor's safest seats; Ken Nam in Watson with a 10.4 per cent swing against Tony Burke; Jamal Elishe, an Assyrian, with a swing of 5.5 per cent in McMahon; John La Mela, of Italian parentage, with a swing of 10.2 per cent in Barton; Fazal Cader, a Sri Lankan Muslim who won one-third of the vote against Simon Crean; John Nguyen, a Vietnamese Catholic, with a negligible swing in Chisholm; Venus Priest, a Filipina with a two-party swing of 7.3 per cent in Chifley; in Werriwa, Sam Eskaros from Egypt had a swing of 7.9 per cent against Laurie Ferguson; Ricardo Balancy, a Mauritian, gained a modest swing in Holt—home to the largest Mauritian community in Australia.

Not all candidates reveal their origins or birthplace but a generalisation is that the Liberals have advanced 'ethnic' candidates in 'ethnic' electorates, whereas Labor has not. This is starting to show results, especially in New South Wales where Labor was generally in retreat. One exception was in Menzies, held by former Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews. Joy Banerji from New Delhi was nominated by Labor, perhaps as a comment on Andrews' role in the botched case against Indian doctor Mohamed Haneef, in which he took a central role. The other important exception was also in Victoria, where Maria Vamvakinou from the Greek island of Lefkada was once again victorious for Labor against Wayne Teng, a Chinese-Vietnamese candidate for the Liberals.

There is obviously a brain at work now in the Liberal Party when it comes to seeking to attract 'ethnic' voters even in the strongest Labor areas. This is most marked in New South Wales, despite a substantial input of immigrants at the State and organisational levels of the ALP (Benson 2010). The Bennelong reversal in a middle-class area with large Chinese and Korean communities suggested that such environments could be very unpredictable for Labor. The contrast between New South Wales with its large swings and significant losses and Victoria, which behaved differently, suggests that 'ethnic' voters are strongly influenced by the local political atmosphere and media. There is no nationwide 'ethnic vote'. But there are very large and growing numbers of 'ethnic voters'. Labor needs to cultivate them more carefully now that the Liberals are coming out of their WASP ghettos and provincial retreats. Sydney results showed very

large swings to the Liberals in areas such as Cabramatta, Strathfield, Eastwood, Hurstville and Campsie—all with large East Asian populations (Stevenson 2010). This was not so marked for similar districts in Melbourne, where losses went to the Greens to a greater extent. A post-election warning note for NSW Labor was sounded by the Lebanese Muslim leadership at a mass rally at Lakemba mosque, celebrating the end of Ramadan. They threatened to run Muslim independents in appropriate seats because Labor had neglected them.

The Future

If the party system becomes more unpredictable and volatile over the next few years, it is reasonable to hypothesise (or even fantasise) about the shape of things to come. The 11 years of the Howard Government certainly had a conservative impact on many Australians and did much to prepare the ground for opposition to increased immigration and multiculturalism. Labor has responded by seeking a centrist role, which lays the basis for a continuing Greens presence in national affairs. This could well modify any tendency to move too far away from the ideal of a reforming, culturally varied society based on liberal values and a well-educated community. But Greens are not likely to be enthusiastic about increasing the present population even more than has already been added in the past 30 years. They could be a modifying influence on hostility to the small minority of asylum-seekers, even if the number of these increases.

A conservative victory would also have been a mixed blessing. Employers, backed by economists, favour growth. They might do so on the basis of temporary employment, but that is a dubious long-term approach. Those who arrive might well wish to remain. If not given this right, they are under no obligation to accept the 'Australian values' that are so important to conservatives. Universities are facing dramatic drops in income as overseas students turn away from a more restrictive visa system (Das 2010). Conservatives will also need to come to grips with the reality of global warming, as many have refused to do until now. But this is also a problem for many industries in which Labor voters and unions have a strong influence. This election—shaped by focus groups and opinion polls—showed little sign of a responsible and serious approach to the major issues of immigration, sustainable population and the impact of global warming. It is much easier to rail at the leaky boats and their desperate passengers.

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