

BOOK REVIEW

Xavier Pons, *Le multiculturalisme en Australie: Au delà de Babel*,¹
review by Sheila Newman

This is a long and detailed history (in French) of settlement policy in Australia since 1788 by a strong supporter of multiculturalism, Australian-style. Its purpose appears to be to promote multiculturalism to the rest of the world and especially to Pons' home, France, where he would like to see it replace France's 'integrationist' policy.

Pons describes the Australian and Canadian forms of multiculturalism he endorses as a 'strategy for the social incorporation of minorities so that no-one might be victim of exclusion because of their ethnic origins' (p. 4). This is a different kind of multiculturalism from the European model which Pons identifies as 'stressing ethnic separatism to make it practically the opposite of integration' or the United States' model, which 'consists in redefining the culture and history of the country in order to give the forgotten minorities their rightful place' (p. 3).

He sees Australian multiculturalism as imperative in the face of 'the inescapable ethno-cultural pluralism with which our societies are confronted...' (p. 4). Later, he adds that '...due to [their] evolution ... and ... technology. ... The world of tomorrow is the world of both biological and cultural crossbreeding' (p. 96). He takes no account of the role over-population plays in this scenario and sometimes romanticises immigration to the exclusion of objective examination of contentious issues like chain migration. 'Thus Juliette will be able to love Romeo and they will have many children together,' (p. 348) he declares on the question of imported spouses. He does not however wish to abolish national distinctions: 'To express your identity is to affirm both your resemblance with others — through a shared astrological sign or a shared birthplace — and your difference' (pp. 383-4).

Unfortunately, the book suffers from distortions of time and distance. It reads like material inserted in a time capsule by the former Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, and his 'party machine' on the eve of the March 1996 elections. Possibly the most recent reference in the book is a quote from Senator Bolkus (the former Minister for Immigration): 'In the final count, if everything else goes badly, we will be carried in by the migrant vote. On this issue there is no doubt'.² Throughout, there is an idyllic lack of suspicion that the pie and sauce are about to hit the fan in the antipodes with John Howard's election win and Pauline Hanson's maiden speech.

The reason for Pons' lack of prescience probably lies in the fact that he has relied almost entirely on sources sympathetic to the former Bureau of Immigration, Multiculturalism and Population Research for his data, and on newspaper sources for most of his interpretations of popular opinion. These were also the sources Keating's government relied on.

His approach also suffers from a failure to include any of the many recent scientific and political sources on population policy and the environment in his bibliography or his arguments. The most glaring lacuna is the absence of the Barry Jones' enquiry into Australia's 'carrying capacity' Report (1994).³

Thus the author is unable to deal objectively with any criticism of the 'official line' of the time. For example, he misinterprets Katharine Betts' use of the word 'cosmopolitan' to describe groups of Australian intellectuals, taking it as fascist code for 'Jew'. While this usage has some currency in French, it has none in Australian English. Despite this he writes: 'We all know what use fascist ideologues made of this term' (p. 129). And NSW Premier Carr is accused of blaming overpopulation in Sydney on migrants (p.120).

On the other hand, as far as I know, Pons' book is the first work on multiculturalism in Australia to make the logical criticism that:

...it is understandable that Aborigines consider the annual flow of immigrants pouring into Australia as purely and simply the continuation of that invasion. Once the sole owners of the continent, dispossessed by violence, they still don't have their say on the matter of access by foreigners to their country (p. 373).

It is probable that his sensitivity to the Aboriginal question is influenced by a fairly substantial French body of popular journalistic as well as historical and socio-anthropological work decrying Australia's abuse of its indigenous peoples.

Pons, however, does not mention the lack of coverage in the Australian English-language press of Aboriginal resentment of immigration and multiculturalism, nor does he give references for his statements, which would have furthered the Aborigines' cause.⁵

The solution he offers is the 'careful and generous' pursuit of the allocation of land rights. However, he is blind to the way in which continuing high immigration, and the growth economy he takes for granted, increase the difficulty of this, by exacerbating competition for land and raising its value and by increasing the impact and the area of our ecological footprint.

If he acknowledges that Aborigines see multiculturalism as synonymous with a continuing invasion, what does he have to say about resentments in the wider community?

Some even saw [multiculturalism] as the product of intellectual shanghaiing: with the help of a few pressure groups, a handful of left leaning academics ... had, in the absence of true democratic debate, imposed a dangerous political line, in itself just as excessive as the White Australia Policy had been in its time, and which held the country prisoner in a vicious circle. Having brought in far too many immigrants in the 1950s, the powers that be had given rise to a virtual industry of multiculturalism which, because this facilitated its own influence, continued to require more and more immigrants in an Australia that had no need of them and where their presence actually went counter to social, economic, strategic and ecological interests. (p. 128)

Pons rejects this theory, saying that it 'reduces multiculturalism to the level of a received idea exploited by a few dishonest intellectuals'. He concludes that this school of criticism 'greatly overestimates the political influence of Australian intellectuals, and distorts the nature of their battle for multiculturalism' (p. 128).

It is ironic that the theory which he dismisses seems to have been objectively validated since the March 1996 election in terms difficult to argue with⁶ and which bring into clearer focus a persistent confusion about, and distrust of, multiculturalism and high immigration among the general public.

Hindsight compounds the irony where Pons interprets tables drawn up by sociologist, Murray Goot, based on figures provided by the Office of Multicultural Affairs from a survey in 1988-89 as showing that more Labor voters prefer multiculturalism (pp. 152-153).

But Pons' voice is like so many emanating from a purely metropolitan perspective — and, dare I say it — from the classic position described as 'new class'. Like those in charge of the Labor Party right at the end, he fails to recognise or to take seriously the groups feeling the squeeze. His blithe pronouncement that the recession ended in 1994 takes no account of the fact that the general trend of unemployment has remained consistently high and that the economic cake has mostly been distributed to those already well above the breadline. Compared to the 1970s when Australians were generally better disposed to multiculturalism (and to other indicators accompanying high migration), there has been a decline in quality of life, and in standards of living and equality. Whereas Australians are in the main (leaving aside rural Aborigines) better off than people in Third World countries, many are less well off than they used to be and they are understandably sensitive to this.

Pauline Hanson was a force yet to be unleashed at the time that this book was written, but for the dedicated cultural researcher, one of the outstanding characteristics of Australian society must be the growing divide between rural and metropolitan Australia. (Rural-metropolitan divide is a world wide trend.) Most of our recent migrants come from urban situations and join most 'old' Australians in cities along our coast. To the rural poor or even the embattled rural rich (whose fortunes are also declining), nearly all the decisions affecting the nation come from the perspective of coastal city dwellers, arrogantly ignorant of the rural industries which support the manufacturing and export economy.

Agriculturalists, Aborigines, mining concerns, tourism and other rural industries and, finally, property developers are all increasingly pitted against each other in rural Australia for a shrinking quantity of fresh water and either arable land or territory for hunting, fishing and gathering.

Pons does attempt to clarify the difference between multiculturalism and high immigration in chapter five (see for example p. 140), but never comes to grips with the issue of the ultimate population size of Australia. He is unable to answer — indeed, appears not to have taken in — the environmental arguments in those books he cites as bibliographical sources.⁷

Therefore he provides no ecological or environmental context for his readers in France. Presumably they will imagine that Australia, like France, has glacier-produced topsoils nine feet deep and abundant fast flowing permanent river systems. Nowhere in this book is it mentioned that the majority of Australians live on the edge of a desert in competition with other species and that our rainfall depends more on ten year cyclic climatic variations than on annual seasonal renewal. No doubt, like many immigrants and geographically under-educated, young, metropolitan-born-and-bred Australians, most of Pons' readers in France will wonder what's stopping us from having a population the size of Indonesia's. With the absence of relevant material provided by Pons, who could blame them?

In conclusion, although Pons briefly acknowledges that many Australians do not see the difference between multiculturalism and high migration (p. 153), he fails to give this finding due importance in his analysis. He cannot substantiate his claim that multiculturalism Australian-style is the way for the rest of the world to go, because he has failed to factor in the social and ecological significance of its relationship with high migration. From his arguments that migration brings long-term economic benefits in a growth economy, it is clear that Pons is convinced that high migration is not a problem (p. 185). This is a minority view.

References 1 (*Multiculturalism in Australia: Beyond Babel*) L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996 (ISBN 27384-4333-8, price 220FF) This work is in French. Copies can be obtained through CPEDERF, 10 Avenue Felix Faure, 75015 Paris, fax (33 1) 40 60 96 90.

2 Reviewer's translation, Pons, p. 148, note 18 (Vikki Kyriakopoulos, 'Chasing the multicultural rainbow', *The Bulletin*, 17 October 1995, p. 14)

3 *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': One Nation — Two Ecologies*, Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies (the Jones report) Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1994, Cat. no. 9429067. Pons also appears ignorant of the much earlier Withers Report, *Population Issues and Australia's Future*, AGPS, Canberra, 1991.

5 Two documents he might have referred to were the submissions to *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity'*, op. cit.: the report from Ray Jackson for the NSW Black Deaths in Custody Watch Commission, Submission no. 174, vol. 3., and from Lois O'Donahue for ATSIC, Submission no. 260, vol. 5.

6 See ALP, *Report by the National Consultation Review Committee to the ALP National Executive*, August 1996, mimeo, 1996, p. 4

7 Such as R. Birrell and T. Birrell, *An Issue of People*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1987 and K. Betts, *Ideology and Immigration*, MUP, Melbourne, 1988

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