

## IMMIGRATION: PUBLIC OPINION AND OPINIONS ABOUT OPINION

### ■ Katharine Betts

*As Murray Goot points out in this issue, opposition to current rates of immigration eased between 1996 and 1999. Reasons for the change may include: steady numbers in the official program, the shift to skills, lower unemployment, and a diminution in public rhetoric about multiculturalism. It is, however, surprising that Goot should believe the changes he reports. In the past, when polls and surveys have shown higher levels of opposition to immigration, he has argued that they should be discounted. Goot also continues an assault on Tim Flannery launched earlier this year in *The Bulletin*. Flannery pointed to a conspiracy among politicians in the 1980s and early 1990s to use bipartisanship to bypass the voters' preferences on immigration. Evidence for this manoeuvre is well established. Despite the softening of opposition to immigration there is no electoral support for a larger intake.*

### A CHANGE IN PUBLIC OPINION?

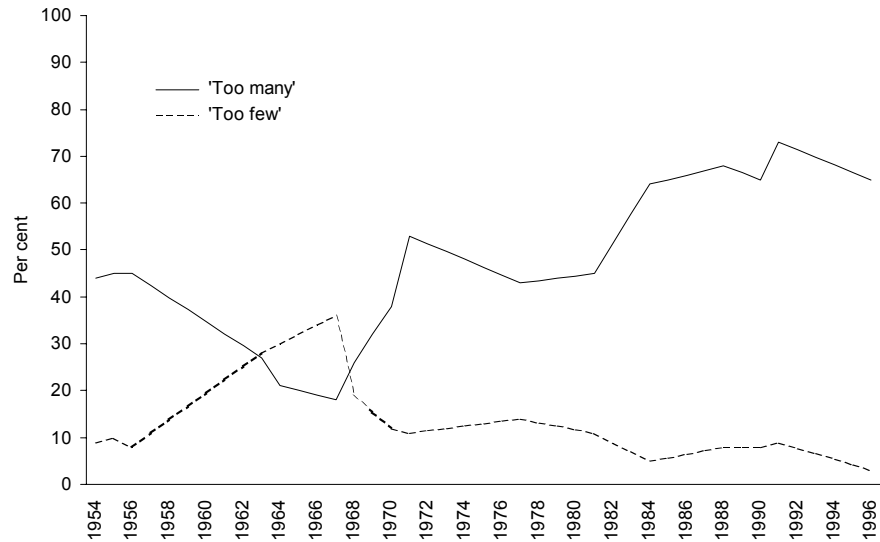
Murray Goot argues in this issue that opposition to immigration in Australia has eased over the last two years and his argument is persuasive. He bases his case on two lengthy academic mail-out questionnaires and on some market- research data. As he makes clear, I myself have been careful to restrict time- series analysis of data on attitudes to immigration to a set of surveys which draw on similar populations (voters) and use similar methods (face-to-face interviewing in the older polls and telephone interviewing in the more recent ones). I have also restricted the analysis to polls which asked the same (or very similar) questions, 17 in number. These follow the pattern of giving the respondent the number of immigrants currently arriving and asking if this number is 'too many, about right, or too few'.

These polls have all been relatively brief commercial polls and are set out in Figure 1. The trends for the two

extremes, too many and too few, are illustrated. The group saying 'too many' are clearly opponents of immigration as it was being practised at the time, and the group saying 'too few' response are enthusiastic supporters; whatever the current numbers are, they want more. I have omitted the group saying the numbers are 'about right' because this group contains some respondents who have no opinion or who don't know but wish to avoid appearing foolish.<sup>1</sup> The about-right group is also politically less interesting and the trends are easier to follow if there are two lines of data in the graph rather than three. (For further details about these polls see *The Great Divide*.)<sup>2</sup>

The polls used in Figure 1 show moderate opposition to immigration in the 1950s, support for it in the 1960s, opposition in the 1970s at a higher level than had been the case in the 1950s, and even stronger opposition in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There has, however, been no poll in this series since 1996.

**Figure 1: Comparable opinion polls on attitudes to immigration, 1954 to 1996**



Source: See note 2

The data from the two mail-out questionnaires analysed by Goot certainly have their merits, but they are, as he acknowledges, gathered by very different methods from those in the commercial polls. Over the course of his career as Australia's leading expert on public opinion and immigration, Goot has, however, used a wide variety of sources. Consequently, he does not hesitate to incorporate these new surveys into his own time series and he does make a good case for his claim that public opinion has softened as the Howard Government's new immigration regime has settled into place.

What are the long-term trends if we adopt Goot's more Catholic approach and disregard the exact wording of questions, the survey methods, and the populations sampled,<sup>3</sup> and simply look at the data as he has assembled it for every poll and survey of any type from 1951 to 1999?<sup>4</sup>

The data used in Figure 2 refer to questions which follow, or can be

rearranged into, the format of: the number of immigrants is too high, about right, or too few. I have omitted the group categorised as about right here for the same reasons as in Figure 1, but especially because they contain too many de facto 'don't knows'. (Or, as Goot puts it in this issue of all respondents, '[Some people] answer because they think they are expected to have an opinion not necessarily because they have one'.)

Figure 2 shows a similar pattern to Figure 1, though there are far more dips and bumps along the way, dips and bumps which probably reflect differing methods rather than shifts in underlying opinion. It also shows rather less opposition in 1998 and 1999 than was the case for most of the years between 1984 and 1996. (Though 1986 and 1988 provide exceptions, exceptions which are discussed below.) The figure does not, however, take us back to the levels of support recorded in the 1960s; it provides

**Figure 2: Murray Goot's data on attitudes to immigration, 1951 to 1999, per cent indicating the numbers are 'too many' and per cent indicating they are 'too few'.**



Source: See note 4

no comfort for those now calling for an *increase* in immigration.<sup>5</sup> The proportion who feel that the current numbers are too small is still a tiny minority.

In 1998 Senator Nick Minchin, Minister of Industry, Science and Resources, told the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry that, 'There is absolutely no political constituency in this country for higher immigration'.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing in the recent academic surveys to cause him to revise this opinion.

#### EXPLAINING THE CHANGE

If we agree with Goot that the change is real how are we to explain it? Goot is unimpressed by the explanation that the program has been reduced and that the public are aware of this and are therefore less concerned about immigration. He implies that if we plot opinion against settler-arrival data there is not much of a case for saying that the actual number of new settlers affects opinion.

But the settler-arrival data add in off-program elements including a

substantial number of New Zealanders. Indeed, if we plot opinion against net total migration — the most valid measure — there is no relationship between public opinion and actual immigration at all. If everyone were well informed about the factors shaping Australia's demography we should plot opinion against the net total figures. But few people, including prominent lobbyists<sup>7</sup> and senior journalists,<sup>8</sup> understand immigration statistics so it would be odd if most members of the general public should do so.

Inasmuch as people have an impression of the numbers coming to the country this impression is most likely to be gained from the official program rather than from the settler arrival data or the net figures. It is the official numbers of visas planned and visas issued that are discussed, announced (and denounced). Conservationists say these numbers are too high and business and refugee advocates say they are too low. When the headlines tell us that immigration is 'rising', 'falling' or being 'slashed' they

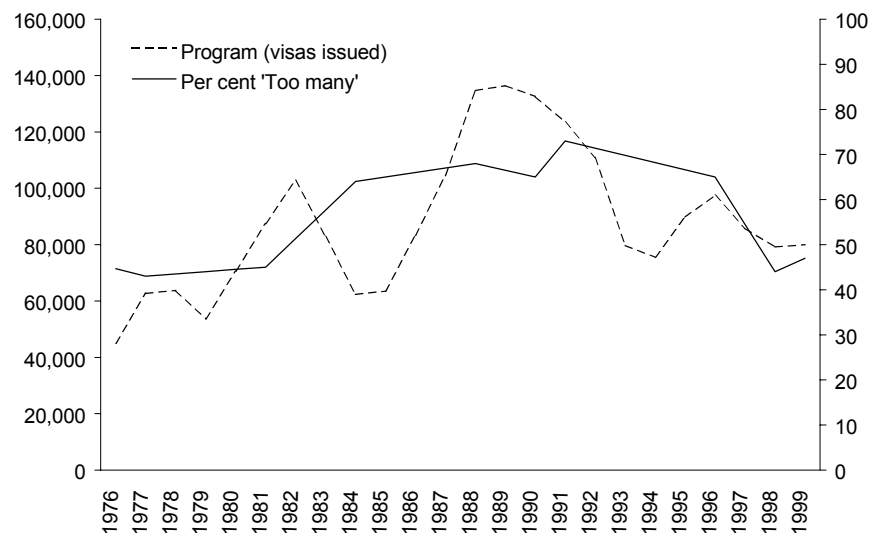
are usually reporting on the program figures. The words *fall*, *cut* and *slash* have been much more prevalent than *rise* or *stabilise* since the election of the Howard Government in 1996. Indeed, business lobbyists have emphasised their perception of a decline in immigration (a perception based on lower program numbers rather than the net figures) quite vigorously.<sup>9</sup> Given the loudness of their complaints many people may well think (mistakenly) that immigration is now very low indeed.

Figure 3 plots the proportions categorised as saying that the numbers are 'too many' against data for the official program. It uses the data from Figure 1 for the opinion data from 1954 to 1996,

because this is the more reliable series. However, for illustrative purposes it includes the non-comparable data from the 1998 and 1999 academic surveys described by Goot in this issue. And Figure 3 does show a rough correspondence between the two. Opposition rises (with a slight lag) after the numbers rise in the early 1980s, and falls after the numbers decline in the 1990s.

The present Government has also reoriented the program away from its former emphasis on family reunion to a greater emphasis on skills. This change has also been discussed in the media and may, as Goot claims, have affected opinion. It is not clear why, in his opinion, this point of detail about the composition

**Figure 3: Attitudes to immigration 1976 to 1996 from Figure 1, plus data for 1998 and 1999 from Figure 2 (per cent indicating the numbers are 'too many'), and the official immigration program (number of visas issued)**



Source: Figures 1 and 2 for opinion data. The program data are for financial years: 1989-90 to 1998-99 are from *Population Flows: Immigration Aspects*, DIMA, January 1999, pp. 13, 17 and December 1999, pp. 14, 22; 1976-79 and 1980-81 to 1988-89 are from the respective Annual Reports of the Immigration Department. The 1979-1980 data are an estimate as the Annual Report for that year only published data for settler arrivals (which include off-program elements)

of the intake should have made its way into the nation's living rooms while the larger point about numbers has not. However, market research in 1997 did show that concern about migrants coming into the country and going straight onto welfare was, of all the issues that worried respondents, the one that they were most concerned about.<sup>10</sup> So a perception that this was no longer happening could have moderated public opposition to the intake. And, of course, lower unemployment figures make us all more relaxed and comfortable.

One point that Goot does not mention which may be important is the present Government's stance on multiculturalism. For the last four and half years we have heard much less about how boring and third-rate we all were before immigration brought us the gift of cultural diversity. Earlier research has shown that much of the opposition to immigration derives from hostility to policies designed to institutionalise multiculturalism,<sup>11</sup> so the easing of this rhetoric may have had an effect.

Opposition to immigration has declined but it has not evaporated and, inasmuch as it has declined, this is probably because many people believe that the major problems with immigration have been fixed; they may think that the numbers are smaller and that fewer welfare cases are being imported. And they may also appreciate the lower volume setting on the multicultural sound machine.

#### **BELIEVING IN THE CHANGE**

Goot wants us to believe the data for 1998 and 1999 and I do believe them, but I wonder why he does. In the past, when levels of opposition to immigration were higher, he has been more sceptical of data such as these. For example, in 1984, he concluded that specific survey questions 'themselves construct public opinion'<sup>12</sup>

and described 'confidence that what the polls show can be taken at face value [as] what philosophers of perception would call a naive realism'.<sup>13</sup> In 1991 he wrote:

Public opinion on the rate of immigration is not only 'soft', it is created in the very attempt to measure it. Under these circumstances there is little point in trying to isolate 'majority opinion' or in attempting to establish which of the polls provides the most accurate reading.<sup>14</sup>

In 1991 he also noted that the 1986 REARK survey conducted for the Department of Immigration and the 1988 AGB:McNair survey undertaken for the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) embedded their immigration questions in a series of other questions. The REARK survey asked about immigration after a long series on population size, the ageing of the population, and concerns that the respondent might have about Australia's lower growth rate and older age structure vis-à-vis neighboring countries. The OMA survey asked its immigration question after an extremely long set of questions including ones on attitudes to using migrants' skills and others on migrant welfare. (The REARK survey found that only 35 per cent thought the numbers too high while the OMA survey found that 43 per cent felt this way. These two projects produce the sharp dips in 1986 and 1988 shown in Figure 2.)

Goot notes that the lower proportions recording opposition to immigration in these surveys can probably be accounted for by the context in which the questions were embedded.<sup>15</sup> He not only notes this, he approves and describes their results as the 'most liberal',<sup>16</sup> arguing that such surveys are more valuable than briefer polls because they allow respondents 'more time to reflect'.<sup>17</sup>

He is entitled to his professional judgement and, as a citizen who finds support for high migration more 'liberal'

than opposition to it, he is also entitled to be more pleased by one set of survey results than another.<sup>18</sup> But is it the case that public opinion is only an artifact of the research process when it is 'illiberal'? He also writes that 'opinion polls -- or referendums, for that matter -- construct opinions even as they record them'.<sup>19</sup> So, we might add, do election campaigns. Are there any valid means by which Goot's fellow citizens may register an opinion which differs from his own?

#### **TAKING COMFORT FROM THE POLLS?**

Goot has used his space in this issue of *People and Place* to continue his attack on views expressed by Tim Flannery in *The Bulletin* earlier this year. Flannery supports demographic stabilisation in Australia with the eventual aim of allowing the country to ease back to a lower, more ecologically sustainable, population. As part of his argument Flannery has pointed out that the opinion polls record high levels of opposition to high migration, and that this shows that Australians do not want the population growth that their Governments have engineered for them.

The polls to which Flannery had access to earlier this year (the comparable polls shown in Figure 1) do indeed show this opposition. But Goot says that if Flannery believed a democratic Government should have reduced the intake in line with public preferences when opposition to immigration was high, he should now respect the public preference for current immigration, as shown by the post-1996 survey data. If a critic uses the polls to support an argument when the poll data are going his way he should, for consistency's sake, change his argument when the polls no longer support him.

This is a strong claim. If a reformer says, 'I am against racism and furthermore

a majority of Australians are against it too', must he change his position if public opinion changes? Must he change it if, for example opposition drops to 47 per cent? Goot's attack on Flannery implies that this is the only honourable course to take. (The case might be different if a person said 'I am against X because most Australians are against it', but this is not Flannery's argument.)

But Goot then qualifies his own position. He reminds us that the poll data which Flannery used are partly an artefact of the research process. Consequently it is a mistake to believe that they represent real currents in public sentiment about immigration. Besides, Goot claims, people didn't feel strongly about the matter and in any case Governments will probably pay attention to them at some time or other. So again we are enjoined not to trust polls which show opposition to immigration.

His new survey data illustrate some of the reasons why should be careful: as one would expect, the proportions showing opposition vary with the nature of the question. But there is at least one aspect in which we can believe them: in no case, Goot tells us, do the data show a majority saying that the numbers have 'gone too much too far'.

Like Goot, I am uneasy with 'trend lines' where different questions and methods are mixed in together; hence my preference for keeping to a set of comparable polls. It is odd that a researcher with his deep anxiety about the way in which research methods can influence results does not to share this preference. But having taken all possible data on board, Goot once again reminds us that, if the polls point to opposition to growth we should be deeply sceptical; if they seem to endorse it we can relax and accept them.

### THE BIPARTISANSHIP CONSPIRACY

There is a further reason why recorded opposition to, and support for, immigration fluctuates: people do not know much about its demographic aspects. And one of the reasons for their confusion is that, until recently, there had been a bipartisan agreement among politicians not to talk about immigration. This manoeuvre has not only fed public ignorance, it has allowed Governments, both Liberal and Labor, to impose an unpopular policy on their constituents.

As an ecologist of high standing Flannery knows the environmental costs that growth exacts and, as a well-read expert, he knows that there is no clear case for immigration-fuelled growth on other dimensions, such as the economy or defence. Consequently, it is reasonable for him to speculate about politicians' motives for using bipartisanship to evade the critics who could otherwise have held them accountable. Why should he not believe in bipartisanship as at least a tacit conspiracy when the history of the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrates that this is so,<sup>20</sup> and when a former Prime Minister,

Bob Hawke, has proudly and publicly declared that this arrangement did in fact exist?<sup>21</sup>

In 1998 Richard McGregor (then the Australian's chief political correspondent) wrote that in the past high migration policies could be 'imposed' on the electorate because these policies were protected from public scrutiny and criticism 'by high-minded, bipartisan stealth'.<sup>22</sup> If a critic such as Flannery does not perceive the results of this manoeuvre to be in the public interest he is entitled to speculate about the motives of the conspirators.

Indeed, even if high immigration were in the public interest but the public were deemed too stupid to understand this, the bipartisan manoeuvre would still be a conspiracy. In a democracy important policies, high-minded or otherwise, should not be imposed by stealth. The electorate should be persuaded not duped, and their values and preferences should count.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> See K. Betts, *Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 58-61.
- <sup>2</sup> See K. Betts, *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999, pp. 114-116, 350-352.
- <sup>3</sup> Goot is careful to list all these details when he publishes his material.
- <sup>4</sup> The 1951 to 1996 data are taken from M. Goot, 'Migrant numbers, Asian immigration and multiculturalism: trends in the polls, 1943-1998', a draft of the document he cites in his note 11 and which he kindly sent to me in 1998. Unfortunately I have been unable to obtain the published version. Where there are two survey for a given year, both are illustrated; where there are more than that two, the two with the highest and lowest percentages categorised in the 'too many' group have been selected. The others have been omitted. The only other poll omitted is a 1961 Morgan Gallup Poll; the original data for this have been lost and there is disagreement about the nature of its findings. I used it in *Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 70, but omitted it in *The Great Divide*. The 1998 and 1999 data are from Goot's article published in this issue of *People and Place*.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Richard Pratt quoted in A. Hodge, 'Plea to populate to 50m or perish', *The Australian*, 25 November 1999, p. 3; Campbell Anderson, President of the Business Council of Australia, 'We need more people, at every level of skill', *The Australian*, 16 November 1999, p. 15; Editorial, 'Economy needs more migrants', *Australian Financial Review*, 21 December 1999, p. 16; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) newsletter quoted in J. Koutsoukis, 'Double our migrants: industry', *The Age*, 8 February 1999; C. Pyne, 'More migrants equals more respect', *The Australian*, 3 March 1998, p. 13; Robert Gerard, President ACCI, quoted in M. Grattan, 'Keeping to a tight Australia policy', *The Australian Financial Review*, 16 November 1998, p. 21. For an overview of the business lobby's push for growth see M. Grattan, 'People power', *The Australian Financial Review*, 3 July 1998, p. 33.

- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in W. Adams, 'Minister talks down migration', *The Australian*, 11 November 1999, p. 2
- <sup>7</sup> The lobbyists for growth cited in note 5 are clearly unaware that the net total migration figures have not declined; these have been higher during the years of the Howard Government (from March 1996) than they were during the years of the Keating Government (December 1991 to March 1996). See Table 6 in Goot, this issue. Mathew Chandler writing in *The Australian Financial Review* in 1999 understood this well enough when he attributed a booming housing market to '[I]ncreased overseas migration' among other factors. See 'Residential market booming', *The Australian Financial Review (Property section)*, 21 June 1999, p. 31.
- <sup>8</sup> See for example G. Sheridan, 'Too many fogeyes, not enough people', *The Australian*, 9-10 May 1998, p. 21.
- <sup>9</sup> See the spokespeople cited in note 5.
- <sup>10</sup> See S. White, S. Cummings and Roy Morgan Research, *The Silent Majority III*, Clemenger/BBDO Ltd, Melbourne, 1997, p. 13.
- <sup>11</sup> See S. FitzGerald, *Immigration: A Commitment to Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988, pp. 10-11, 59.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Goot, 'Constructing Public Opinion: The Polls and the Asian Immigration Debate', Australian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Melbourne, 28 August, 1984, p. 7
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30
- <sup>14</sup> M. Goot, 'Public opinion as paradox: Australian attitudes to the rate of immigration and the rate of Asian immigration, 1984-1990', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1991, p. 277
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 286-287
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 287
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 293
- <sup>18</sup> The anomalous results of these two surveys are just as likely to be due to the social desirability effect--the desire not to shock an interviewer who is administering a schedule that implicitly associates support for high immigration with national security (REARK) or migrant welfare (OMA)--as they are to be due to independent reflection on the part of the respondent. Both interview schedules were long, and both were administered face-to-face. For full details see REARK Research Pty Ltd, *Attitudinal Survey on Population Issues in Australia (A research report prepared for the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs)*, Sydney, 1986, and Office of Multicultural Affairs, *Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988, Frequency Tables*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, Canberra, 1988.
- <sup>19</sup> Goot, 1984, op. cit., p. 30
- <sup>20</sup> See Betts, 1988, op. cit. and 1999 op. cit.
- <sup>21</sup> See R. J. Hawke, 'Address', Politics of Immigration Conference, Brisbane (May 24-25), 1993
- <sup>22</sup> R. McGregor, 'Community the key to immigration debate', *The Australian*, 23 November 1998, p. 13