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Charting Change: Mapping Social Cohesion in Communities

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 28 May, 2013

Presentation by

Prof. Andrew Markus,

School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies, Monash University

Good morning everybody. It's a great pleasure and an honour to be speaking to you.

Before I do so, I just want to pay my respects to the traditional owners of this land and their elders, past and present.

What I'm going to do today is to try to look at some big picture issues. The first part of the discussion looks at some demographic data and the second part looks at the findings of social research.

The issue with demographic data – to understand what is happening in our society in a demographic sense – is that we have too much information and it's very difficult to distil that information to give a clear and simple understanding, a direct understanding, of major trends.

This is my fourth opportunity to speak to an audience in the last week and I've been going around and asking people their sense of some key issues before I even start.

Like, what's your sense at the present time? Do you think that immigration and population growth in Australia – is it low, medium, high, very high – what would you say?

<audience response>

I'm hearing "low" and a couple of "highs" as well. So that in itself is interesting, isn't it, because on some issues, you know, you'd be right on top of it. Like who's on top of the ladder in the AFL at the moment? So that's something that you'd be pretty much on top of.

All right – let's have a look. The answer to population growth in Australia is actually very high. A very high rate of growth for Australia would be like 2% per annum and currently we're running at 1.7%.

And if you did have a quick look at that graph I'm showing you can see that

there's been three high points over the past 25 years.

We actually reached a high point in 2008 and then it fell, but it's grown again, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, and currently population growth is running at 380,000 per year.

Now, 380,000 – is that a bit scary? Two and a half years and you have another 1,000,000 people. There's not many countries in the world – I am talking now about developed first-world OECD countries – that have got that rate of population growth and that itself produces like major challenges for society.

And then there's various factors that compound the issues with regard to that very high level of population growth. Australia has 26% of its population born overseas. Now, that 26% means we're number one in OECD countries that have got more than 10 million people.

Compare this Canada and it's about 20% there. The US – 13%, England – 11%. So we've got a very diverse, young population in terms of the range of ethnicities. And as you probably know, about another 20% of our population has one or both parents born overseas, so we're getting towards half the population who are either first or second generation.

And then, of course, that's not spread evenly across the population because in many areas there's very little impact of immigration and in other areas there's huge impact.

For example, Melbourne has 33% of its population born overseas. And then at the local government area, when we're talking of aggregation of 150,000 people, such as Greater Dandenong, we're getting about 60% of the population being first generation.

So very diverse and recently arrived populations. We want to map these. In Sydney, there's greater concentrations of the overseas-born, particularly to the western suburbs of Sydney. In Melbourne, there are a number of nodes. To the west, to the north and the south-east.

So in Melbourne it is not as concentrated as in Sydney, but nonetheless there are still major concentrations in Melbourne. Then as we narrow the focus, we can find large areas of a city such as Melbourne where 80% or more of the population speak a language other than English in the home.

For example, in Springvale in Victoria, there are more people who'll say they speak Vietnamese in the home than English.

And we're seeing a demographic shift, which is marked in terms of ethnicity and in terms of the faith groups that we have in our community. For example, the three main non-Christian faith groups used to make up about 3% of the population.

Now about 6% of the population is made up of the three main non-Christian faith groups – Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu. And this is growing very rapidly – 6% of the population, 27% of the immigration intake, are members of these faith groups.

So this is a society that's growing rapidly and is changing quite markedly. For example, the Hindu population in the last five years has increased by 86%.

And we're getting to a situation where in 2001, let's say the Muslim population was under 300,000, by 2016 it'll be two-thirds of a million.

Now, another major change that's occurred in understanding immigration in a demographic context is that we've got to break in the course of Australian history.

For a very long time in Australia, governments sought only to bring people here who would be full members of the Australian community. This is in contrast to what was happening in Europe after the Second World War where guest worker programs began.

I'm sure many of you have heard of "guest worker programs". Say, for

example, Italians and Turkish people who migrated to northern Europe in search of work. And they came not as citizens, but as workers, temporary workers, who wouldn't be given the range of benefits that other people in that society had and who found it very difficult if they wanted to become citizens.

And, of course, that causes all sorts of problems down the track – what happens to their children who are born in those countries, who are raised in those countries, but don't have the full rights to be in those countries?

Now Australia said in the past it was not going down that path. However there's been a change since the 1990s and we're now very rapidly going down that path.

What is happening is that we're getting significant populations in this country who only have temporary residence rights and who do not have the access to the full range of social welfare benefits and other things that other people in society have.

How many of these people are there? 6% in total. But if you look at just the adult population, because they're disproportionately adult, it is probably closer to 10%.

One in ten adults are now temporary – without full rights. Who are they? International students, 457 Visa holders – people coming here to work for, say, four years; working holiday makers initially coming for two years but again may want to become permanently settled at some point; New Zealand nationals.

You know New Zealand is our number one source country for immigration now. Most recently – 30,000 people a year.

An issue with the New Zealanders is since 2001 they have been able to come as immigrants, but they can also come just by presenting their passports. It's like a law of return – Australia's law of return. And we can go and live in New Zealand likewise.

But the problem is that you will get communities, in this case, communities of New Zealanders, established in Australia, who do not have the full rights to the range of benefits. Their children may be born here, but the children can't go to university, for example, without paying full fees and so on.

So that's a major problem.

And the other thing that's happening now is we're getting a significant population of asylum seekers who are also temporary. We used to say: "Well the asylum seeker numbers are small, it's easy, we can deal with it, it's not a problem, don't get upset.

But as we've seen more recently, it is very hard to get accurate statistics. And one of the main ways you get accurate statistics is if someone from a department has to appear before a Parliamentary Committee and answer questions.

That happened yesterday (late May). And we found out the number of asylum seekers who've arrived in the last 12 months, this financial year, is around 25,000.

This compares with the previous peak, say, under the Howard government, of 10,000. Now it's 25,000, and the issue is that the ones who've arrived since the 13th August last year have not been processed.

What's the government going to do with them? They're working on it. They're thinking about it. Because the numbers that have arrived are probably four or five times greater than they had expected.

Imagine you're running a policy, and I'm sure you may have had, I'm not sure, but some of you may have had this experience where there's been a blowout of the magnitude of four or five times what you expected. You expected 50 clients and you've ended up with 250 clients.

These are the sorts of most recent figures on these temporaries and you can see we're getting towards 1.5 million.

This is a very large issue. And what's the solution?

With various categories, there is no solution at the present time on the table. And if there's a change of government, the new government will inherit some of these issues and will have great difficulties in dealing with some of these issues.

Now another long-term change in our society we need to be aware of is what is called "trans-nationalism". It's an issue of identity. Again, like you arrived in Australia in 1960, you were totally "cut off".

How would you communicate with people back home? You write a letter. Very occasionally, you'd save up money and you might talk on the telephone for three or four minutes because it cost a lot of money. And the idea of going back home on a regular basis – well it would just be too costly.

But today, what we have seen develop, and we'll again see develop into even greater force once the economies do recover, whenever that is, is the global labour market, the mobility of the sort of skilled workforce.

But for all people, travel is relatively cheap. Access to telephones is very cheap. Internet, satellite TV, so what you see developing ... (are) people who are physically in Australia, but virtually not in Australia.

They go home and they don't watch Australian television, they watch satellite or cable TV from wherever they choose to watch it from. They don't read the Australian newspapers, they read other newspapers or whatever they choose to do.

So the issue here is the weakening of the centre. Now, we see this not just in the immigration context, we see it in all contexts.

Like what's happened to our mass media, and what is going to happen to our mass media. The atomisation and then the consequences of an atomisation - of people choosing their own pathways, and clearly this is salient in the area of immigration, but it is also salient in many, many other areas.

But the issue here is the weakening of the centre and what does that mean for a society, the functioning of a society and the cohesiveness of a society. What happens when people bond with a virtual reality rather than a physical reality?

So, we have the outcome and the impact of rapid population growth. Increased diversity, increased proportion of the population who don't have full rights – we used to talk about second class citizenship; it is not a term that we use anymore, but it's not inapplicable.

And then the medium term impact of the weakening of the centre through trans-nationalism.

Let me now briefly talk about the Scanlon Foundation surveys. These are surveys of public opinions. We have demographic data, but what about the data with regard to attitudes. What do we know about attitudes?

This is where we come in. If you want to follow this up, we maintain a website – just search for Mapping Australia's population. And we try and update that on a regular basis.

The objective of the Scanlon Foundation surveying is to help us understand how is Australia coping with the impact of immigration, what is happening with regard to social cohesion in our communities, particularly where there's a lot of immigrants who are settling. And the Scanlon Foundation is supporting annual surveys to track opinion.

Until now, we really haven't had much surveying at all. We're miles and miles behind, say, what's done in Canada to track opinion or what's done in the EU or what's done in the United Kingdom.

We're not even at the 10% level of understanding public opinion compared to these countries in terms of the investment and it's because of the investment of the foundation that we've made I think some significant progress.

We've now had five surveys and the sixth one will be taken very soon with large samples – about 2000 people. We've also done three surveys in neighbourhood areas where there's a lot of immigrants.

We've now got a database of more than 15,000 respondents which, in terms of social research, is huge. So it gives us a really good understanding of what's going down and what's not.

When we talk about social cohesion, we've got a model which looks at people's sense of belonging, belonging to their communities, belonging to Australia. Whether they feel accepted. Whether they participate in community life – for example, if they are they involved in voluntary work.

Do they participate in the political process? What are the levels of life satisfaction? Do they feel that Australia is a just society?

We're able to interpret this data in an international context, so we understand where is Australia relative to other countries.

And I just want to pick out four elements:

- People's sense of belonging and social justice.
- Levels of trust in government.
- Views of immigration, and
- The asylum issue.

Belonging and social justice

One of the characteristics of Australians is a very strong sense of belonging.

It's true of third generation, second generation and first generation. People feel this is a good country to be in. And often they're making those judgements not in an absolute sense, but in a relative sense compared to where they have come from.

What's Australia like? What we're finding is that nearly 75% of people say "I've got a great sense of belonging here". And another 20% say that "to a moderate extent".

So that gives us like 95% of the population say "I have a sense of belonging in Australia to a great or moderate extent".

Is this a just society? A question that's often used in surveying is "Is this a land where if you work hard, you get a better life".

Now, in some countries in Europe you'll get like 30% of people saying this is the case. But in Australia you're getting about 80% either strongly agreeing or agreeing. So again there's a strong endorsement of that notion that if you work hard in this society, if you commit yourself, you get on

And interestingly, when we look at recent immigrants, the recent immigrants will say that even more strongly. They believe in the dream.

Trust

Okay, so this is where there's a hole in the bucket and it's a big one.

How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australia people? We've now asked the same question on five occasions.

In 2009, when in the period of the Rudd government, there was a lot of enthusiasm. 48% said you can trust the government almost always or most of the time.

And in the most recent survey, that was down to 26%. Now that's around a 100% change from 48% down to 26% – a collapse in trust in government.

Views of immigration

With regard to immigration and views of the immigration intake, you know, immigration is not an easy sell. Unless you happen to be working in, say, a field of employment where immigration is very important, or where, for example, you're dependent upon a growing market – immigration is a tough sell.

Most people ask – what good is immigration for me? You know, it's causing more congestion, it's harder to get from here to there, the prices are being driven up, I'm a bit concerned that it might have prospects on my employment or the employment of my children.
It's not an easy thing to sell.

And there's only two countries in the world where you're going to get a majority of the population saying in principle "I support immigration". Australia is one, Canada is the other.

Yes, Australia and Canada. Canada even more strongly than Australia. If you asked the question in England at the moment, 80% of the people would say no to immigration, as would much of the EU.

In Australia at the present time, it's held up pretty well – a 60/40 split.
I make the point, however, that 40% is a significant proportion. And within that you've got a core of like about 10% or more who are really het up about immigration, so that's a volatile issue.

But currently, we're still getting that 60/40 split in terms of general questions.

Asylum seekers

However, when we come to asylum issues, you have sharp polarisation.

We ask the question: “What do you think is the best policy for dealing with arrivals by boat?

And we give people four options.

1. Eligible for permanent settlement.
2. Eligible only for temporary settlement
3. Lock the people up and deport them at the first opportunity
4. Don’t even let them land.

And you only have 23% of the population who support permanent residents – compared to 26% who want to actually stop the people landing and another 9% who say send back the boats. The largest number – 38% - say they should be only temporary residents.

Now that finding is consistent across three surveys. Those are the proportions and they haven’t really moved much. It’s polarised and it’s fixed.

Further, and this is very important – it is something that is very closely correlated with the parties people support.

People who support the Liberal party, only 12% favour the right of permanent residence. For ALP supporters, it is 29%. And amongst the Greens, 62%.

So it’s something that divides the community and it’s something that politicians know that if they’re short of votes, they can actually rouse people and divide them.

At the moment I would say – and I don't know if you would agree with me – but it is not being much politicised. In thinking why isn’t it being much politicised, I can only come up with two reasons.

One reason is the Liberals have been so far in front they don’t actually need to sort of do much with this issue at the moment. And secondly, they’re worried that if they actually raise it too much they might raise expectations they can’t deliver on.

But if things get close in the election campaign and the polls shift, then the issue might actually be picked up again because the politicians know that this is an issue that will win them votes if they want to run hard on it.

Areas of high immigrant population

And finally – what's happening in areas where there's a lot of immigrants. What are some of the things that we need to know about areas such as Hume, like Broadmeadows and Dandenong, such as Springvale ?

What we find are that indicators of belonging, sense of economic opportunity, satisfaction with income, they're pretty much like the national data. There isn't much variation.

But when we look at personal trust, participation, experience of discrimination and whether the neighbourhoods are working well or not; we're getting some strong negative findings.

When you look at trust – 55% at the national level say you can trust people, but only 30% in the local areas.

Participation – for example, have you engaged in voluntary work at least once in the last month? And at the national level for non-English speaking background, it's 30% and at the local level it's 17%.

And across a whole range of indicators there's less involvement in the community and less involvement in voluntary work.

When we look at experience of discrimination – have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnicity or religion over the last 12 months?

Nationally, 12% of people say they have. In these localities, it's almost double that – 22%.

And then the outliers are people of the Muslim faith – 34% – or people from the Indian subcontinent – 35%.

Challenges

What are the challenges? What are the take-away points?

Firstly – the growing diversity in Australia in terms of ethnicity, religion, linguistic segmentation it is gradual but the cumulative impact of that over 20 years when you've got high immigration is very substantial.

Another issue is that there is a lot lower level of trust in localities where there are a lot of immigrants and in which the communities are diverse.

One point that I haven't had a chance to discuss, but one which is significant, is that amongst third generation Australians, there's an additional 20% negativity. Whatever question you ask, you're going to get an additional 20% negative.

That's like sort of the Pauline Hanson constituency of people who are disenchanted with what's happened in their neighbourhoods. And that was true in our previous survey in the localities which was three years ago and it was true in 2012 – that 20% factor.

A medium-term issue is the weakening of the centre and whether we should be worried about it, and ultimately how do we best foster communication and a sense of shared national enterprise across communities.