

Our sort of culture

John Hyde

If the columnists involved in *The Australian's* week-long immigration debate agreed about nothing else, they agreed that Australia does not have a purposeful immigration/refugee policy.

If we were to design a policy, we might start by noting that the people who come to Australia come voluntarily, often to enjoy vastly better lifestyles than they could in their country of origin. Then, we might note the widespread belief that the good lifestyle would not long endure if we were to throw our doors open. It is not our physical but our social environment, the rules and practices that sustain liberal-democratic capitalism, which people most fear to lose.

The fears are probably well-founded. In any case, we have rules for entry which, in a woolly way, try to preserve our culture while pretending that nothing is further from our minds. We might start to give purpose to our immigration policies by stating just what aspects of our culture we wish to preserve and why. Then we should state an intention to allow as many people as possible to escape political and economic circumstances far inferior to our own as is consistent with our own interests. (I would go a little further, but I doubt there would be support for much generosity in this matter.) An immigration/refugee policy that allowed as many people as possible to come here, without making existing Australians less wealthy or risking our liberal-democratic-capitalist culture, would be a simple and appropriate policy goal.

Why preserve aspects of our culture? Which aspects? Obviously a refugee who travels to Australia in an inadequate little boat does not think much of the culture he left behind. He prefers to live in one that discourages the army from shooting dissidents, that allows freedom of worship, that respects tradable property rights (and thereby produces a relative abundance of goods and services), that does not discriminate against disfavoured racial groups, etc. These and similar aspects of our culture are worth preserving.

However, not everybody who wishes to come here places the same high value on a liberal social culture. It, therefore,

pays us, somehow, to choose only people who do. This is difficult to do, and is made more so by our reluctance to admit that we are discriminating on cultural grounds. It is ultimately in the interests of migrants themselves that we should identify and choose those who are self-reliant and tolerant and who respect the civil rights of others, because these are the people who will maintain the sort of Australia to which future migrants will wish to come. There is not, however, much point in asking potential migrants if they possess these virtues. Something more objective is needed.

An applicant's self-reliance, along with his need to find a better society can be tested, albeit imperfectly, by noting the costs he will voluntarily incur to come here. The boat people are an extreme example. They demonstrate their resolve and their refugee *bona fides* by the risk and privation they endure.

Willingness to pay a fee to the government is similarly a test of resolve. This idea is not a radical one: the current Business Migration program, in effect, sells some places to intending migrants. New Zealand is considering selling a large proportion of its migrant places. Indeed, our whole migrant intake could be regulated, without the present temptation to practice favouritism and corruption, by auctioning the immigration places.

If there were not dispensation for refugees, however, such an auction might deny places to the people most in need of help. Finance houses might lend refugees their fees, but the risk of default would be high and, in the near-lawless culture of a refugee camp, those who have the most money might not be the best citizens.

Instead of paying a fee to the Government, refugees might be denied access to social security and/or Medicare payments for, say, five years following arrival. Of course, they could insure privately and run their own charitable organisations. Ethnically-based welfare arrangements would, however, probably become the nuclei of communities which, instead of melting with, and influencing, a broader Australian culture, become cultural enclaves. I would regard that as unfortunate, but members of the multi-cultural industry would, no doubt, be delighted.

By reducing the cost of maintaining new settlers and by encouraging them to contribute to overall production, such a policy would maximise the economic benefits to existing Australians. I see the hands raised in horror. But we should remember that no refugee would be forced to take up our offer of residence, and that from the refugees' points of view worse possible outcomes might be lives in refugee camps, or worse still in so-called 're-education camps'.

Selecting migrants who are tolerant and who respect civil liberties is more difficult than identifying those who need our help and have the initiative to seek it. We have made some mistakes in this regard in the past---admitting Sikhs who

can't stand Hindus, Croats who can't stand Serbs, Muslims who threaten Salman Rushdie, and Irishmen who defend cowardly bomb attacks on soft targets. Nevertheless, these cases are sufficiently rare that I am convinced that the Department already discriminates against the world's more lunatic cultures.

We should continue consciously to select against people who might not leave their fights behind them; who might not give their first allegiance to Australia; and who might not value parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom from arbitrary arrest and punishment, freedom of speech, association, religion and thought, and private property. These values are not negotiable. For what it is worth, we should make this known to intending migrants/refugees before they come. Apart from these requirements, the more diversity the better.

The ultimate purpose of immigration/refugee policy should be to permit as many people as possible to enjoy as much liberty and prosperity as Australia can possibly offer them. The selection criteria can be improved by making them as objective as possible. If they were improved, I am convinced the numbers of newcomers could be increased.

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