Australian Nation-State
Decline and reaction

by Robert Birrell

At one level the Australian experience confirms the predictions of those who believe the nation-state is in terminal decline. Since 1983 when the newly elected federal Labor Government took office we have seen the dismantling of many of Australia's once formidable barriers to external economic influences. These included a tariff regime as high as any in the industrialized world, pervasive state regulation of industrial relations and wage setting and rigorous controls over migration movements.

The dismantling process began with the deregulation of the financial system, including the floating of the Australian dollar in December 1983 and the invitation in 1985 to foreign banks to set up house here. Subsequently, tariff barriers against imports have been sharply reduced, as have constraints on foreign take-overs of Australian enterprises. By the early 1990s the Labor Government was asserting that its mission was to move Australian society down a one-way track toward full economic and cultural integration with the nations of the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.

By 1996 the trend seemed inexorable. Once Australia had been propelled down the globalizing

> Reformers in Australia and Canada, like those in the U.S., are struggling against the perception that their countries are still open for massive immigration. We can learn from their experience.

pathway, it followed that further urgent restruc-turing of the country's institutions and culture was necessary if the experiment was to succeed.

These outcomes do not seem quite so inevitable now. In March 1996 a new federal Coalition government (which combined conservative urban and rural interests) was elected after 13 years of Labor rule. Though the Coalition embraced Labor's free trade objectives, it took a much more cautious line on issues of economic, and particularly, cultural sovereignty — a line which appears to have contributed to its success at the polls.[1] The Coalition's electoral platform included the slogan "one nation." Its leader, Mr. Howard, refused to use the "m" (or multicultural) word during the electoral campaign and has continued with this stance since becoming Prime Minister. This is significant, because for most of Australia's cultural and business elites, multiculturalism had become a symbol of Australia's internationalist economic policies and a parallel rejection of the traditional, more insular Australian ethos.

Once in Government, the Coalition has acted to strengthen some of the nation's borders. It reduced the immigration intake for 1996-97 by 10,000 to 84,000. More significantly it has sought, with some success, to toughen the rules determining family reunion eligibility and to diminish the access of recently arrived migrants to welfare benefits. It has not been able to legislate all its proposals because of opposition in Australia's upper house (the Senate). The Coalition has also distanced itself from the "Asianizing" cultural agenda. Indeed, Mr. Howard announced that political correctness should no longer be allowed to inhibit debate about issues of immigration and multiculturalism. Howard has not been without his detractors on this account. Australia's business and professional elites are split along the conservative-libertarian dimension. We too have our "Wall Street Journal" advocates of complete abandonment of any sort of economic and

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people-movement barriers. But at least when it comes to elites active within conservative politics the liber-tarians seem less influential than in the USA.

As it has happened, soon after Mr. Howard's invitation to debate the immigration issue, the newly elected Independent Member of the Federal Parliament from Queensland, Pauline Hanson, set alight a huge public debate on immigration. In the course of her maiden speech (10 Sept 1996), Ms. Hanson stated:

> I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians... They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.

Ms. Hanson has been reviled as a racist by media commentators. Mr. Howard too, has been criticized for allegedly opening the gates for persons like Ms. Hanson to express such views. But her opinions appear to have found a wide constituency (not just on the immigration issue but also on her insistence that Aboriginal or indigenous persons should receive the same welfare and other public benefits as other Australians, that is without any reference to racial criteria).

The significance of these developments for the Australian nation-state lies in what they hint about the prospects for the mobilization of popular feeling against further losses of national sovereignty. In the aftermath of Hanson's statements, there have been a number of opinion polls which indicate significant popular support for some of her views. For example, a national poll taken early in November, 1996, registered 53 percent support for the proposition that "The proportion of Asians in our migration intake should be reduced" and 62 percent support for the statement that "There should be a short term freeze in immigration." Ms. Hanson, like another well known Independent, Member-of-Parliament Graeme Campbell, has also indicated her commitment to a broader Australian independence agenda. Again, the evidence is that initiatives reflecting this agenda, like limits to foreign ownership of Australian enterprises and increased industry protection, are supported by majorities of voters.

For most of the period since the early 1980s there was a high degree of elite consensus (replicated in the major political parties) on the globalizing agenda. There was therefore little scope for the mobilization of popular discontent. Since the

1996 Federal election the political situation has changed. Both major political parties are now well aware of the extent of this discontent and its potential to shape the outcomes of future elections. The Labor Party has had to face the fact that, for the first time this century, more blue collar workers voted for the Coalition than for Labor.[2] The political professionals also know that worker disenchantment with the Labor Government's globalizing agenda was an important factor in this

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swing. As a consequence, the Coalition too, has to be careful, since an aggressive strategy may leave creative opportunities for an opposition politician to tap into voter concerns.

Causes of Voter Disenchantment

Dozens of articles have been written recently on the source of voter concerns. The predominant explanation among Australian pundits is that job insecurity is at the root of voter disillusionment and that hostility to migrants and to Asians in particular reflects a desire to find a scapegoat for this insecurity. There is something to the argument, but it is far from a full explanation. The opinion poll data show that opposition to migration is actually higher in country areas and in the peripheral states of Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland (where relatively few recent migrants including Asians have located) than it is in the main migrant settlement areas of Melbourne and Sydney. We also know that disenchantment with migration, multiculturalism and other concerns about loss of national sovereignty were evident well before the l990s recession led to a sharp increase in unemployment to over 10 per cent (it is still just on nine per cent as of late 1996). The late 1980s was a period of relative prosperity, yet during the years 1988 and 1989, there was a parallel national debate about the immigration issue during which majorities of the voters indicated their opposition to Labor's policies of high migration and multiculturalism. This evidence suggests that there is a more diffuse and broad-ranging unhappiness

about the elites' globalizing mission which extends well beyond immediate job losses and resultant migrant scapegoating. The economic consequences of the Labor Government's deregulatory policies have been severe. Large sections of manufacturing industry which relied on tariff protection have been wiped out particularly during the 1990s recession. Also, big chunks of the Federal and State public services (including the education sector) and the public energy and transport authorities — once havens of security — have been downsized, outsourced or otherwise disrupted. Farmers and graziers, who were told they would be beneficiaries of free trade initiatives, have in fact experienced desperately low returns for their products through the 1980s and l990s. The insecurities aroused extend well beyond the areas of migrant settlement. The migrant presence is not directly related to many of these issues nor is migrant competition for jobs an issue for residents in the "bush" or places like Tasmania.

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campaign to get Australians to embrace a notion of themselves as a nation of diverse communities oriented toward Asia. There is controversy among commentators about the strength of Australians' sense of ethnocentrism. Some have argued that, like Canadians, we have a weak sense of identity. This is disputable. One piece of evidence indicating a desire to maintain the older, more insular ethos, is the strong popular response to imagery evoking additional nationalist symbols. During the 1980s we also saw an upsurge in the national film and TV industry in which films like "Crocodile Dundee" and "The Man from Snowy River" received a rapturous response from ordinary people. This material was criticized by critics as "Gumnut nationalism" and as unrepresentative of the new Australian cultural diversity. But the enthusiastic popular response and the parallel high ratings for Australian produced "soaps," even when in direct competition with

Hollywood TV products, indicate the wide interest in associating with national images untouched by the multicultural agenda.

The Political Implications of Voter Insecurity

It is only in this broader context that one can appreciate why emigration and multiculturalism have been such contentious issues in Australia. The changes to Australian society wrought by migration and multiculturalism appear to have become potent symbols of the wider impact of the globalizing process. Thus the discomfiture of city and country people. I suspect that many of those who feel threatened by rapid social change also feel that migration and multiculturalism are linked to a larger loss of national "community" and thus the undermining of the Australian state's willingness to defend their interests.

There is good reason to believe these concerns would be particularly potent among Australians. As noted at the outset, Australian history since Federation has been dominated by defensive state policies directed at providing security from foreign influences. Australians have never shone a welcoming beacon to the world's dispossessed. There is no parallel to the "Emma Lazarus" tradition in Australia's migration history. Likewise there is little in Australia's heritage to match the American confidence about taking on the world economically in a global trading free-for-all. Our tradition is one of building industry behind protected walls. Nor is there any similar embrace of competitive individualism in Australia, at least in comparison with the United States. Rather the ideal is more that of an easy-going, balanced lifestyle.

Australian elites have striven valiantly to change this situation in recent times. Australians are being told they must give up their relaxed way of life in the interests of successfully competing against their Asian neighbors. But the defensive heritage is not likely to be quickly discarded, especially given widespread doubts about Australia's capacity to succeed in such a competition. This means that there is a growing window of opportunity available for politicians interested in taking advantage of popular anxieties. At the very least, the major parties will be more cautious about pressing the open-ended Asianizing vision in the near future. Though we enter the realm of speculation here, I think it is quite likely that dissenting politicians

inside or outside the major parties who take up a more defensive national stance will be rewarded with electoral support. If so, they may well arrest the recent pattern of nation-state attenuation.

For Australians who feel threatened by the globalizing process, the only recourse is to appeal to the protection of the nation-state. If they want decent wage levels relative to blue collar wage rates in Asia, guarantees that Australians rather than foreigners provide the bulk of goods and services to the home market, a welfare safety net, and so on, they have little choice but to appeal to the state (and particularly the Federal nation-state) in the name of the obligations of the national community to their cause. No one imagines the United Nations, or some ill-formed Asia-Pacific "community," will come to their aid.

Just as in Europe, the Hanson phenomenon may portend the rise of a defensive nationalist movement directed at re-erecting national borders.

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[1] Katharine Betts, "Patriotism, immigration and the 1996 Australian election," *People and Place*, December 1996.

[2] Katharine Betts, "Class and the 1996 Australian election," *People and Place*, December 1996.

[3] Thoughtfully explored in Hans-George Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994.