

Where Does the PC Line on Immigration Come From?

Occupying the moral high ground

by Mark O'Connor

FOREWORD

As a member of a group dedicated to reducing Australia's population growth, I worry that Australia over the past 15 years has had by far the world's highest per capita immigration rate. Luckily we seem to have turned a corner, and our net immigration (if you believe the lowest of the figures being put out by government sources) may now be only 50,000 a year, which is a little over one-third of our net natural increase (i.e. the excess of total births over total deaths — currently about 142,000 persons annually). Clearly our first priority now should be to work on attitudes as to family size.

Yet immigration remains important. It sends a most negative message to the community. How can the ordinary citizen see having a small family as a contribution to the community's well-being when he or she must also watch (and pay taxes to help) the government increasing our population through immigration? Indeed the Department of Immigration has favorably cited a recommendation from the growth economist John Neville that if the birthrate falls or stays low then immigration should be increased to compensate for this.

Clearly we environmentalists must question the rather bizarre assumptions on which the immigration debate is conducted. How can it be "selfish" to resist immigration yet be enormously to

our benefit to take in immigrants? How could former Prime Minister Keating simultaneously claim immigration benefits the economy yet want to charge New Zealand for dole payments to our NZ immigrants? How can it be "racist" to want to control immigration when most immigrants, especially until the last few years, have been of the same Caucasian race as the overwhelming majority of Australians? How is it that when we have rescued people whose own countries or cultures have failed them, we are so often and so complacently told by "ethnic leaders" that we are in their debt rather than they in ours?

Similar questions are asked in the United States. In October 1993 I was an invited guest at the annual conference of FAIR, the Federation for American Immigration Reform. At its final session Professor Otis Graham from the History Faculty at Santa Barbara (CA) spoke brilliantly about the internal contradictions of the USA's current official (or politically correct or PC) line on immigration. Subsequently he was asked how such self-contradictory positions had become established as dogma. He answered, "I simply don't know — I wish someone would explain it to me."

Later in the discussion I offered a rather tentative explanation in the form of a very simplified "story" of how these positions may have been reached. I wasn't very sure how complete or accurate this story (or theory) was, either as a comment on American or even on Australian history; but several of those present, including Professor Graham, pressed me to write it down and publish it. So here it is, still tentative, but a little more fleshed out.

Perhaps our "politically correct" attitudes to immigration come from particular conditions produced in the decay of 1960s and 1970s radicalism. Sociologists like Alvin Gouldner and Katharine Betts have pointed out the paradox that entire groups of the tertiary-educated, who once

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saw themselves as anti-establishment radicals in fierce opposition to the values of their parents, have now moved up the social system and are running bureaucracies and governments. The old “anti-establishment,” these scholars imply, now runs the establishment.

This is clearer in Australia where the more left-wing of the two major parties has won the last five elections. (In the U.S., the Bush and Reagan years prevented there being quite such a conspiratorial left-wing tone to the current bureaucratic power group.) Many such people were among those who “saw the light” in the Sixties and Seventies but then in the Eighties, when they were getting a little complacent, were offered money instead — “the

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money or the light?” — until they eventually chose the money.

They were also (again, this is more clearly true in Australia than in the U.S.) the first generation in which easy access to tertiary education became open to a meritocracy of the talented.

Gouldner and Betts¹ see this new ruling class as differing from a traditional aristocracy in that it does not depend on inherited wealth. Its capital is largely intellectual capital, represented by its tertiary degrees. It sees itself as a meritocracy; and one gains admission to this class not by inheritance or descent but by having the appropriate skills — *and* the correct opinions. Let us accept this term “New Class” on probation, for the moment, and see what we can do with it. (Luckily this is not a matter of speculating about some poorly known and distantly observed group; it is essentially my own class I am talking about, and includes many of my own friends and former class mates. Reading this, they may

well complain that I have “turned conservative,” though, oddly enough, I believe that it is they who have done so.)

In Australia in the 1980s, many members of this class entered the bureaucracy and went on to earn degrees in economics, often training in the most cynical of economic rationalist schools (like that of the Australian National University). Thus, under-neath the cement of avowed radicalism which binds the new ruling class together (serving as their meal ticket and union card) is sometimes a guilty conscience about having betrayed so many of their utopian and Aquarian ideals — for this was a generation whose hopes went far beyond the dull obviousness of social justice. The triumphalism of their politics often reflected the lyrics from the musical *Hair*: “This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius” — an age of transcendent and psychedelic possibilities, of trusting the universe, and of release from constraints.

The result of this guilt can be a desperate attempt to find new grounds for difference and for moral superiority — no longer, this time, to justify revolution, but rather to maintain an establishment. Any ruling class that lasts more than a decade will feel the need to justify itself by having some ideal to which it appeals. It will invent some central legitimizing principle — usually a moral one. Thus a traditional aristocracy may place a moral value on the notion of “nobility” itself — a quality on which, by definition, it has something of a monopoly. By contrast it may see the classes it exploits as not merely “villains” but “villainous” and therefore needing to be ruled and guided. Our modern ruling class needs some similar principle to justify its free lunches and overseas travel.

They — or let me say “we” — used to be comrades in the struggle that built a better, more humane society. But what radical ideals are left when so many have been abandoned for pragmatic reasons and profit? Most utopian and Aquarian concepts of the 1970s have been quietly drowned. The psychedelic substances are only occasionally used by the successful baby boomers. Experience in running bureaucracies and governments has taught them not to be unduly idealistic about human nature. And so they have fallen back on a more basic or background ideal, one which, at least in Australia, was almost forgotten during the high point of 1970s radicalism. Yet when I went up to

university in 1962 this had been the one ideal we all took for granted: to treat everyone equally, regardless of race, color or creed (and some were beginning to add: of gender).

Almost everyone in Australia believed in this ideal, at least in theory. So it is hardly surprising that the New Class still believe in it, at least in theory. The problem is that it is hard to claim moral superiority on grounds of such a common ideal.

The left-wing and tertiary-educated elite was now quite used to the fruits of power, yet already troubled by increasing evidence that it was just as corruptible as any previous establishment, and that it might soon lose favor with the electorate. In the resulting search for moral self-assurance and legitimacy, radical egalitarianism was the virtue it eventually focused on.

Why? It seems that the divide between left and right, liberal and conservative, is a persistent if fuzzy human tendency. It may be the characteristic mild schizophrenia of our species. And yet, most of the qualities that mark this divide between left and right are as morally neutral as those that differentiate, say, French culture from Greek culture. For example, tending to believe or disbelieve in the perfectability of human nature is not of itself a moral position; nor is the tendency to visualize oneself as a rebellious youth rather than as a controlling parent. The one quality by way of which the left can plausibly claim a specifically moral superiority is its concern with equality — its tendency to side with the underdog.

Before long some politicians and media people who were members or aspirants to this successful class were prepared to side with such underdogs as illegal immigrants, and even against the clear interests and beliefs of their own constituents and nation. Both idealism and self-advancement now combined to produce the mild paradoxes of an establishment that favors anti-establishment sentiments and styles in the arts (and often elsewhere), of believers in democracy who brush aside the majority's views, and of an elite whose claim to privileged status is based quite largely on

anti-elitism.

Yet, even a decade ago it was getting harder and harder, at least in Australia, to find true racist red-necks against whom the no-longer-very-young, left-wing, educated classes could rebel — especially after those classes had been running the government and much of the media for years.

Their answer was a trick borrowed, I believe unconsciously, from the McCarthy-ites of the 1950s, and from their spiritual cousins, the Stalinists of the same era. It involves what Freudians call "projection." You project upon

some real or invented victim-class your own secret guilts. If you were one of Stalin's henchmen, your secret guilt was an aspiration to privileged middle-class status in a very poor country. Down with the Kulaks! If you were someone like J. Edgar Hoover you could project upon others your own betrayals of public trust and public interest. Down with the communists!

You might then encourage the media to work up an intense obsessive concern about this evil, a concern which contains its own built-in, self-reinforcing loop. The pursuit of communist conspiracy (or in the USSR of a capitalist-revisionist conspiracy) became so omnipresent and all-encompassing that it readily discovered all the evidence it needed to sustain and even intensify its own belief.

By the 1980s, if "racists" (i.e. anti-egalitarians) had not existed it would have been necessary for the meritocracy to invent them. (In Australia, where most ethnic leaders were Europeans and thus of the same Caucasian race as the population that had invited them in, they used the term "racist" just as freely, even though the differences at issue were not racial but cultural — unless one believes in sub-racial classifications.) For some members of the New Class the term "racist" became a way to disparage anyone who believed in "inappropriate" meritocracies and elites — i.e., ones other than those by which they themselves were sustained.

Their other great trick, also consciously

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imitated from the McCarthy era, was that when you need to enhance your own moral position you discover a conspiracy against some widely-revered public virtue — a virtue to which you can easily lay claim. Thus, by imagining (or exaggerating) a communist conspiracy the McCarthy-ites turned their own minimal and commonplace virtue — that of allegiance to the democratic rule of law and to the legitimacy of the American state — into grounds for a claim of moral superiority, even of heroism.

How could Betts' New Class, the new ruling bureaucratic class of the 1980s and 1990s, turn their own minimal and commonplace virtue of believing in the brotherhood of man (the siblinghood of humanity) into a special virtue that justified their rule? The high immigration policy, toward which some special interest groups were pushing them, inadvertently supplied an answer.

High immigration alienated and indeed damaged the interests of the non-tertiary-educated majority, yet it did so in ways that were deniable. A media blitz, started or helped by special interest groups, soon turned high immigration into a symbol for acceptance of human rights. Once this assumption was swallowed it became clear that those who opposed high immigration — the majority of ordinary citizens — were wallowing in moral error, denying human equality, and in dire need of "guidance" from an elite. ("How satisfactory!" purrs the Mikado in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.)

Initially high immigration had little cost to the New Class. It wasn't usually their jobs the immigrant workers were after, and poverty-related crime took place mainly in suburbs far from their own. For those who had hitched their bureaucratic careers to ethnic programs or multicultural policies, high immigration was pure profit. They could preach against "selfishness" and take the moral credit to themselves, sending the bill to the ordinary citizen. Like the Unjust Steward in the New Testament parable they had found a failsafe way to buy moral credit with someone's else's money (Luke 16:2-4).

The New Class tend to be internationalists (for a mix of idealistic and business reasons) who are strongly opposed to the evergreen appeal of nationalism. Worldwide, it would seem that nation-states based on ethnicity are being formed at a faster rate than at any time since just after World War I.

Ironically, the internationalists soon found

themselves in alliance with those who want to Balkanize, multiculturalize or racialize the nation-state. (Remember how often multiculturalism was associated with globalization in the discussions about NAFTA?) By a further, now familiar, paradox the cry of "racism" became a trademark of both the globalist New Class and of its allies, the racialists. Some members of the New Class discovered that high immigration, like some of the extreme forms of multiculturalism, could be a way to bring down the nation-state and undercut its loyal supporters. It was twice blessed: it could enhance one's status as

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an international high flyer and simultaneously as a noble fighter for the underdog.

The New Class globalists found themselves in effective alliance with leaders of certain immigrant groups who were practicing globalists only so long as the rhetoric of globalism could help them increase their "market share" and hence their power within the country. Some of these leaders are chauvinists who play the politics of ethnic pride in a way to resemble the Nineteenth century colonials: "We do have the right to enter your country, and on our own terms, because we need it and you don't really own it; and in any case we are doing you a favor by adding an admixture of our wonderfully rich culture to your sterile, narrow and un-diverse Anglo culture."

The new politically correct line on immigration — much like the plethora of new "culturally sensitive" terms with which the ordinary citizen could hardly keep up — was one more way for the New Class to assert its leadership over the insensitive masses, on whose behalf they had shouted in the streets barely twenty years earlier.

And the fact that there was popular resistance to high immigration was reassuring to the New Class. It enabled them to ward off any nagging doubts that they might have lost their radical edge

and suffered the common fate of aging into conservatism. If the New Class could not stay forever young they could at least stay forever radical. Some indeed seemed to desire even more public resistance to their ideas. Mark Ulmann recently accused one group in Australia of being “desperate for a witch to burn.”

In high immigration and multiculturalism the New Class had found its difference from the bulk of society, and what seemed to many of them a legitimizing moral principle. They could deliver expansive population growth with the steadily rising property values that meant billions of dollars to some of their friends in business. They could extend contempt to all those excluded classes that had failed to advance like them through the mandatory tertiary education into the new enlightenment.

From patronizing a people’s culture it can be a short step (as the history of imperialism shows) to denying their aspirations and interests. It soon became politically correct for the New Class to deny that there was such a thing as an Australian or

American cultural identity, other than a multicultural one. This made it easier to deny that the American or Australian people had any exclusive right to their own country, or even that there was such a thing as a cohesive Australian or American people. If the nation does not really exist, then why should not its elected and appointed servants sell out its interests in favor of a global one?

That’s the story/theory. How well does it fit the facts — in Canada? in the United States? in Australia? in New Zealand? **TSC**

NOTES

¹ Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, New York, Seaburg Press, 1979.

Katharine Betts, *Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987*, Melbourne University Press, 1988; “The Environmental Movement, New Class, and Immigration Reform,” *Papers of the 1993 BIR Conference: The Politics of Immigration*, available from the Department of Immigration, PO Box 25, Woden ACT. I am indebted to Dr. Betts for a number of insights woven into my “story.”