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IMMIGRATION AND TWO NEW WORLDS

An Australian's Reflections On a Visit to the U.S.

By Katharine Betts

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA —

As an Australian, I dislike the label "Anglo-Australia" because it implies a half-hearted, tentative identification with my country. Yet, in the sense of ethnic origins, it is a correct description. Most of my ancestors were English, and English is the only language I know well. Along with other classics, my father read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* aloud to me when I was a child and, to this day, books written in North America and Britain influence my thoughts and my work.

Many Australians who share this background feel that they know Britain and the United States. Of course we are wrong. My first visit to England as an adult was in 1971. I had looked forward to it eagerly but was surprised to find England a foreign country. The natives said kindly, "Well, you do have an Australian accent; but don't worry, it's not too bad." They were charming and friendly but this was not the cozy second home that children's fiction had created in my imagination.

I confess that I had less desire to see the United States. Of course American politics are important to Australians; we watch them carefully, often frustrated that we cannot vote there when the outcome affects us crucially. America is also the source of much of the theory and research that has shaped the social sciences in Australia. Just as British children's books coloured my childhood, American scholarship has influenced my professional life. But both the Australian media and scholarly literature paint a fairly grim picture of the United States. They show a people pushed to the limit by the pressure to compete, and a country stressed by extremes of wealth and poverty — violent and tense. The daily press assures us that whatever Australia's problems with crime, urban stresses, pollution, or industrial accidents may be, in America these are worse.

I spent five days in the U.S. in April last year with my husband, Gavin, for a conference about immigration in Austin, [Texas], and twelve days in October sponsored by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) — this time with my son, Christopher. On both occasions we were sheltered by kind hosts and good hotels, so I cannot

say that the stereotypes have been given a fair test. But, if they are universally true, Americans are good at hiding the fact from foreign guests. In the four cities we visited in October (Santa Barbara, Washington, Austin, and San Diego) the people were warm and welcoming, the streets were clean, and strangers were not only polite but actively helpful. (I found it disorienting to be called "ma'am" in shops and hotels. In Australia, if Christopher rings for a taxi he may be addressed as "mate", or perhaps "sir"; an unknown woman here is usually addressed as "love." In America, "Have a nice day, ma'am," may be only a formula but it has a reassuring and friendly ring to it.)

Yes, there were homeless people and beggars, but I had seen more in Paris. And if they did make an approach, they were apologetic and unthreatening. We have homeless people too, but they tend to be more hidden and, though violent crime is comparatively rare, one often sees people who *look* dangerous.

What about the "pressure"? Obviously the scholars and activists associated with FAIR are working very hard, not for their personal aggrandizement but for a cause that they are committed to. But they did enforce the image of a nation hard at work. Sometimes one sees car stickers in Australia that read "I'd rather be sailing" and business leaders tell us that we have too many holidays. Most people I know here in Australia do work hard; the stereotype of ours as "the land of the long weekend" is not true for them. But, when I got back, one of my first tasks was to go to the supermarket and re-stock the house. Alas, it was "Melbourne Cup Day" and everything was closed except the betting shop. What other country has a public holiday for a horse race? Still, if it does indicate a little less pressure in Australia, I hope we can keep it.

These contrasts are only drawn from a tourist's impressions. What of immigration and immigration reform? North America was the original "new world" magnet for immigrants; we were a later, smaller sibling. Is there a family resemblance? It was encouraging to see that FAIR was such a well-established institution — well-staffed and well-

resourced. The pro-immigration lobbies in Australia have much more money and personnel at their disposal than their scattered critics. I expect the pro-immigration camp in the US can outspend FAIR too, but at least you have a solid institutional structure to form a base for the reform movement.

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I was surprised to find that so many of the FAIR people I spoke to had a background in the family-planning movement. The connection is logical, but it doesn't happen in Australia. Most of the family-planning activists of the 1960s and 1970s came out of the women's movement. They saw the question very much in terms of women's rights (instead of women's rights *and* demography). When the battles for liberal access to contraception and abortion were won, feminists turned their attention to other women's causes — some even asserting that, just as it was a woman's right to limit her fertility, so it was her right to have as many children as she pleased.

Perhaps FAIR's roots in the broader population movement provide credentials that help its members deflect some of the more hysterical criticism that we encounter in Australia. (My husband is at this moment translating a piece from an Australian Italian-language paper. It talks of immigration reformers as "little groups of chauvinists, isolationists, xenophobes and mad greenies who have come up like mushrooms from one end of Australia to the other", and claims that they are thrusting the country "towards the putrid swamp of inertia, of mass egotism, of social and cultural closure".) Whatever the reason, American reformers seem to feel free to talk critically about the cultural impact of immigration. I was mildly surprised to hear questions about the impact of ethnic diversity on the schools and other cultural institutions being so openly discussed. "Political correctness" or, as we would have put it, the need to be "ideologically sound", is even stronger on the question of multiculturalism in Australia than it is on the immigration program itself. Because most Australian reformers feel that the numbers question is crucial, we restrict ourselves to demography as carefully as possible and avoid looking for extra trouble by being critical of multiculturalism as well.

Tactics? Cowardice? I'm not sure. My judgment is that cultural differences in Australia are a serious problem in only one respect: organized ethnic pressure

groups lobbying for further immigration use them to legitimate their case. If we could achieve nil net immigration, any residual tensions stemming from cultural differences would probably wash out quite quickly. (The sort of cultural problems I am thinking of here involve the limited role of girls and women in some ethnic groups, conflicts between ethnic groups derived from the politics of their countries of origin, and racism directed at visible immigrants minorities — either by "old Australians" or other ethnic groups. Racism of this kind does not appear to be widespread at the moment, but there is some evidence that it is growing.) In the United States, it may well be that the problems created by cultural diversity are much more serious, especially when the impact of illegal immigration is taken into account. Illegal immigration may also explain the tendency of American scholars to equate immigration with poverty more readily than Australian commentators would.

If these are some of the differences between immigration politics in the United States and Australia, a number of similarities are uncanny. The US adopted a program oriented toward family reunion in 1965 — at least partly in response to pressure from community leaders of Southern European origin. But, as I understand it, few Southern Europeans made use of the opportunities it provided, and the places were taken up by other groups which, through the process of chain migration, expanded rapidly. Fifteen years later, history repeated itself almost to the letter in Australia. Local Greek and Italian leaders protested that the existing programme, with its emphasis on skills and competence in English, discriminated against their relatives. Politicians responded with an increasingly open-ended family reunion scheme. This was almost ignored by Southern Europeans, but the handful of Asians established in the country, as well as a sprinkling of immigrants from other Third World countries, used the new provisions enthusiastically. And, in both countries, with the growing emphasis on family reunion, organized labour shifted from opposition to immigration to qualified support, tacitly adopting the curious position that only independent immigrants provided job competition for the local population.

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The family reunion episode demonstrated that, on this question at least, ethnic community leaders in Australia were not speaking for the average migrant. (Survey data show that, despite their leaders'

protestations, established migrants are not particularly keen on multiculturalism either.) In Washington, we also heard people talking about the unrepresentativeness of current minority leaders on the immigration question. Hispanic leaders, arguing against employer sanctions, were not speaking for most Hispanic-Americans; and the Black caucus in Congress, with its alliance with Hispanic leaders, was not speaking for black Americans either.

In both "new worlds," then, the general run of politicians is out of step with community feeling on immigration, and leaders of minority groups appear to be at odds with their constituencies too. But, because Australia has no functional equivalent of America's black minority, the parallels soon founder. People asked me how Australian Aborigines felt about Australian immigration. Australian Aborigines certainly resent being considered as just another ethnic group helping to make up the diverse mixture of a multicultural nation. They claim, quite rightly, that theirs is a special case. I had no ready answer to the question of how they felt about immigration except to say that I had heard different Aboriginal people express a range of viewpoints. I forgot to inquire in the US about the attitudes of Native Americans to American immigration. Are they asked? Is it an issue?

I had arrived in Washington certain of one fact: with the possible exception of Israel, in per capita terms, Australia has the highest migrant intake in the developed world. Not so, I was told. If illegal immigration is included, this first position must go to the United States — or, no, if several other factors are taken into account, the honour belongs to Canada. We were competing for a prize no one wanted to win, but the argument demonstrated a need: for good (or better) statistics. Would that the Population Reference Bureau's annual data sheet had a column for net migration! Of course, the information is not lying around to be picked up easily, but we need it — and governments need it. While many factors will confound long-range population projections, any conclusions about the future size and age-structure of developed nations based only on extrapolations of domestic fertility and mortality are certain to be wrong.

During the Washington conference, in recapitulating the argument of my book¹ I talked about the way in which the Australian "new class" has enthused over immigration and multiculturalism, how they had claimed that, in its pre-immigration condition, Australia had been boring, mindless, and lobotomized. John Meyer from Canada suggested that we could transfer our competition from "which country had the highest per capita intake" to "which was most often described as boring." I suspect that the international statistics on this are no better. But I wonder if the debate in the United States is framed in

these terms? The image of America as a "country of immigrants" seems too well-established for anyone to rest an argument for immigration on statements about a "pre-immigrant" condition.

Of course Australia is a country of immigrants too but, before the Second World War, most of them came from the United Kingdom. Consequently we did not have an image of ourselves as a microcosm of the world, a prototype of a universal nation. Public figures now like to tell us that we are a country of immigrants or that we are the most multicultural nation in the world. (Is there another competition here?) But, rather than striking a patriotic note, this usually makes the audience cross. One politician, bruised by the experience, told me he thought that people confused the word "multicultural" with "multinational" (as in "multinational companies"). Perhaps if he said it differently the response would be better? But, even though his staff was told to exorcise the word — and talk of "cultural diversity" or "ethnic pluralism" — the concept itself continued to grate.

Because Australians feel that multiculturalism is something that is recent and that it has been artificially imposed on them, immigration reform may be easier to accomplish here than in a country like the US where most people feel that diversity is part of their national heritage, and therefore part of the way they think about themselves. The fact that we still actively recruit and talk of immigration "targets" rather than "ceilings" could also mean that smaller numbers would be easier to achieve in Australia. I think that immigration is now seen to be a more pressing political issue here than it was even two years ago, and than it is now in the United States. In any case, winding back recruitment programmes and reducing targets is less taxing than deporting illegals and policing a land border.

FAIR arranged for us to see the border. We drove through the suburbs of San Diego down to where they meet Tijuana, where some 4,000 illegals cross each night. It was still day time but groups were already assembling on the Mexican side, ready to make their run. The metal fence was made of recycled bits of air force landing strips and Christopher thought he could climb it easily. As we watched, many young men, tired of waiting for dusk, did just that. I could only agree that, at least for the young and fit, fence-climbing was easy. In one place they'd dug a hole and were clambering under it. As the border patrol vehicle we were in approached, they retreated a few feet, grinned, and a few waved. They looked like naughty adolescents taunting the school teachers who'd lost control of the playground. Then we saw the young couple with the baby and it didn't look like a game at all.

The dedication of the patrol officers and their professionalism seemed beyond doubt, as was their lack of resources and political support. Was this really

the southern border of the nation that conducted Operation Desert Storm? I had heard one scholar, not a FAIR member this time, say that the idea that the border could be controlled was only "a macho fantasy." It did not look as if the "fantasy" were being put to the test.

Just as I thought I recognized America's features, the family resemblance shifted. The border is different; we have nothing like it in Australia and illegal migration is still only a side issue. The history of diversity is different. The political salience of the immigration question is different. But so much else seems to be the same. I hope that we can learn more from each other. ■

¹ *Dr. Betts' book Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987, published in 1988 by Melbourne University Press, is available at the office of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, 1666 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009. Cost: \$25.*