

Privileged 'whites'

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If the Minister for Immigration wants to adjust the refugee intake to admit more people from countries closer to Australia than the Horn of Africa, perhaps he could take the same approach to the mainstream migration program? This would have interesting consequences for Australia's ethnicity and the distribution of its considerable wealth among people of different races.

The "Africans" on whom the Minister's attention has recently focused are, of course, "black" people (particularly tall ones who stand out at railway stations). But in theory at least, an "African refugee" could include a "white" person fleeing Robert Mugabe's regime. However, the large numbers of "white" Africans who have migrated to Australia in recent years need not worry that Mr Andrews is talking about their friends and relatives who intend to follow. Most "white" Africans have language, money, skills and social capital enough to qualify for a place in our large mainstream migration program, rather than waiting for one in our tiny humanitarian intake.

It is easy to understand why white people want to leave Zimbabwe now, just as it was easy to understand why good citizens wanted to leave apartheid South Africa. There may also be good reasons for leaving post-apartheid South Africa - living there would probably challenge most white Australians. But this post-1994 migration raises the obvious question of whether some of the people who waited until after a racially stratified society was dismantled to leave are the kinds of people who will integrate easily into a theoretically "multicultural" Australia.

Similar questions might arise about some British emigration, particularly by "whites" leaving multicultural London. Antisocial behaviour by white supremacists or European or Christian chauvinists is not always defined or prosecuted as crime, or even detectable by "character tests", but it can be just as destructive for a nation's social fabric as other threats to "the Australian way of life".

Indeed, "the Australian way of life" itself may encapsulate undesirable social values, if that phrase extends to the idea that it is legitimate for those of us who already live here to continue to monopolise far more than our fair share of the earth's resources, while people who live in African refugee camps and Javanese slums must get by on far less. It would be helpful if more of this perspective on the distribution of global wealth could be injected into Australia's otherwise entirely self-interested immigration "debates".

Australia's immigration intake is like native title: it's one of those areas of life and law to which our much-trumpeted, and supposedly nationally defining, anti-discrimination standards simply do not apply. We couldn't possibly allow these standards to operate in this way: if we did, Australia would no longer be a regionally anomalous white enclave run largely by white people to our own advantage.

The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) and equivalent state and territory laws have never controlled Australia's migration intake, not even after, as the self-congratulatory cliché has it, the "white Australia" policy was abandoned. If these

standards had applied, a majority of Australians would no longer be of northern European ethnic heritage. We live next door to the world's fourth most populous nation (Indonesia), which contains millions of people who would love to live here, or even just visit for work or a look around. We live near Eurasia's - and the world's - two largest populations (China and India), yet that continent's western peninsula (Europe) and a handful of its offshore islands still provide us with the largest numbers of migrants from any region of the world, both permanent and temporary.

Keeping Australia predominantly "white" takes quite a bit of effort, considering that most people in the world (particularly most young people) are some other colour. We've started to admit more migrants from Asia because Europe doesn't have the surplus populations of working age for export that it once offered. Until Mr Costello's generation of "one for the country" babies grows up to secure Australia's destiny as a "white" nation, we appear to need migrant labour (skilled and unskilled) as much as Asians and Africans need Australian money and (in the case of refugees) peace and security.

There could be a win-win deal in all of this if governments were prepared to spend enough time and money on making it work.

Resettlement programs were once par for the course, not novelty extras. Resettlement resources need directing not only at new migrant populations, but also at existing populations in receiving areas, particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged ones where the newcomers' arrival might otherwise be resented.

It may be worth selecting settlement areas more carefully: for example, people from rural Africa with initially limited resources and employment prospects may find it easier to settle in economically viable areas of rural Australia than in the cities, at least if they get proper language assistance. It may be particularly important to encourage recently-arrived refugees out of Sydney, with its high costs and significant wealth gaps, which can fuel crime by members of marginalised groups.

Attention may also need to be paid to ways in which other aspects of the migration program contribute to integration problems, for example where refugees who migrate permanently to Australia are displaced from the bottom of the labour market by holders of 457 visas from other parts of the "developing world" on lower wages.

These complex social problems are not addressed by inane mechanisms like the new citizenship test, the content of which reinforces the dominance of Anglo-Australian values, some so obscure and unimportant that some Skips don't bother to learn them. The test also applies in a way that advantages whites. It doesn't apply to someone whose parent was an Australian citizen, even someone who's lived their whole life overseas, provided the parent lived here for two years after the child's birth. Children of Australian citizens cannot be refused citizenship as easily as other migrants can, and their two-year intergenerational qualifying period pales into insignificance beside the 10 years' residence required for acquisition of Australian citizenship by Australian-born children of people not entitled to permanent residence, or the four years now required of Sudanese migrant refugees.

Giving the descendants of Australian citizens privileged access to citizenship sounds like nothing more than what other countries do - until you remember the "white

Australia” policy. Its legacy is that even overseas-born children of Australian citizens are still more likely to be white than most other colours. But for those who want to ensure that Australia’s political future remains under white majority control, who cares if applicants for citizenship by descent prefer Becks to Bradman (or even Christian fundamentalism to freedom of religion)? Who cares if they’ve never even been here, including because (unlike the Sudanese) they have somewhere else better to live?

What many Australians, including Mr Andrews, still seem to want - decades after the “white Australia” policy was supposedly abolished - is a little piece of northern Europe at the crossroads of Asia and the Pacific. What they don’t want are too many funny-looking people from Elsewhere coming here, intending to stay and vote, and provoking the racism latent in “the Australian way of life”.