## MASS MIGRATION IN AUSTRALIA

## (essay)

In my view, the basic ethical outlook of Marxist and Catholic philosophy about the relationship between the human race and the material environment are quite similar despite the apparent conflict between them. Over the course of my own life both have contributed to the formation of my attitude to the migration question.

Both ethical systems regard the human species as the highest development of evolution and start with the notion that the interests of human beings are the primary point of departure in judging most ethical questions. Marxists would have it that human consciousness is the highest product, so far, of material development, and Thomists and Catholics would have it that the human soul and humanity are the peak of God’s creation.

While both ethical systems would not neglect at all the importance of the rest of the material world, the animal world, etc, they would regard the interests of the human species, viewed as a totality, as the primary point of departure in developing an ethical framework for migration policy.

In this, they would both be different, for instance, to the ethics of Peter Singer, who would rate the interests of the animal world as being on the same plane as the interests of humanity. The ethical standpoint of deep ecologists, and people like Tim Flannery, Ted Trainer and Mark O’Connor would, I believe in practice, give greater weight to the interests of the natural world than to those of the humans that use it.

These two moral standpoints, the Marxist one, expressed in the slogans of socialist internationalism: “the unity of labour is the hope of the world”, and “workers of the world unite”, and the similar Catholic moral view that all humans are brothers and sisters under God, have been major defining ideological influences, sometimes in conflict, but surprisingly often reinforcing each other, in the evolution of the labour movement in Australia.

The eventual, relatively recent, emergence in the labour movement of the idea of the unity of the human race as the dominant ideology, is really a kind of flowering of the ethical views of both the above streams. This flowering of humanism is one of the main reasons why the labour movement’s attitude to migration has so dramatically changed in the 20th century from entrenched British Australia racism to support for non-discriminatory migration and multiculturalism.

In Australian cultural terms I am a Marxist atheist of mainly Irish Catholic cultural background. All the original ancestors of the human population of Australia, including the indigenous population, are migrants. The migration history of Australia has been one in which, from the beginning, indigenous Australians, the Irish Catholics and the secular working class of British origin, initially convicts, were in constant conflict with the British ruling class of the new colony.

I’m mainly descended from the Irish, and I identify totally with the conflict against the British ruling class in 19th century Australia, in which my ancestors participated.

From my standpoint, every additional wave of migration has helped to undermine the cultural and political hegemony of the British ruling class, and this is unambiguously a good thing. I celebrate a healthy, plebian, popular Australian nationalism, which is necessarily, and has been historically, in conflict with the reactionary British-Astralian nationalism of the Australian ruling class.

The desperate nostalgia of someone like Miriam Dixson about the passing of what she calls the “Anglo-Celtic core culture” produces in me a certain bitter amusement. I celebrate the passing of that culture. It wasn’t my culture at all.

The new, diverse and cosmopolitan Australia, in which we all have a stake: indigenous Australians, Irish Catholics, the secular working class and middle class of British origin, and each wave of non-British migration, including the recent and spectacular Asian wave, has produced, and is constantly reproducing, a robust modern Australian culture of great diversity and strength, which I enjoy and celebrate.

Many of the most stimulating features of this modern culture are the product of, in particular, the post-war waves of mass migration. My Irish Catholic forebears, and the secular working class, took the process of humanising brutal British Imperial Australia a fair distance in the conflicts of the 19th century and the early 20th century, and the recent waves of migration have further civilised Australia.

Even the unquestionably important contribution of the civilised and humane strand within the British cultural tradition, as exemplified by a scholar such as Manning Clark or a writer like Patrick White, can only really come to full fruition within the framework of a healthy multicultural Australian polity, cleansed of the bigoted ethnocentrism of the old British ruling class Australia.

Anyone who has lived, as I have, from 1937 to now, has only to reflect on and remember the claustrophobic cultural atmosphere of British-Australia in the 1950s to understand what I mean in this context. It is hard for any young person now to even imagine the tension created in a cinema in 1960 if you didn’t stand up for God Save the Queen.

The most conservative forces in society, which hark back nostalgically to the useful cement provided for the preservation of class privilege by all the ridiculous and unpleasant cultural impedimenta of British-Australia, are at the centre of the sporadic attacks on multiculturalism. Their political motivation in these attacks is quite clear.

Cultural diversity and multiculturalism, incorporated as they are into a new modern, plebian Australian national identity, are a far more civilised human environment for us all to live in.

Those who disagree with me on this can try to reverse these developments, but I don’t rate their prospects of success very highly. We have already gone a very long way in this very healthy direction.

I don’t intend to spend too much time celebrating the immense advantages produced by all our past mass migrations. They are obvious, and they are most strikingly noticeable in the global city of Australasia, Sydney, where we are holding this conference.

Despite the Sodom and Gomorrah weepings and gnashings of teeth about Sydney that you get from the likes of Miriam Dixson, Robert Birrell and Katharine Betts, the extraordinary and workable cultural diversity of Sydney is the small model of what life will be like throughout Australasia within the next 20 or 30 years.

The constant Jeremiad of the Monash anti-migrationists over the last 25 years about ethnic ghettoes, particularly in Sydney, is emerging ever more clearly as time goes on, as merely anti-migration propaganda. These so-called ethnic ghettoes are, in fact, constantly changing and evolving.

In practice, in Australia, and particularly in Sydney, there are very few “unmeltable ethnics”, to use Michael Novak’s term from the United States of 30 years ago. While multiculturalists battles to preserve the useful aspects of discrete ethnic identities, nevertheless the evolving Australian national identity, which is quite real, remains the major cultural force into which the other ethnic identities tend to feed and blend, while the discrete contribution of the individual ethnic identities is often renewed by continued migration.

This whole process is accelerated by an increasing amount of exogamy (intermarriage between ethnic groups). The latest wave of mass migration, the Asian wave, has produced an enormous amount of this kind of intermarriage.

The striking feature of modern Australian society is the way the repeated predictions, over many years, of communal strife, by the likes of Birrell, Geoffrey Blainey and Pauline Hanson, are completely contradicted by the reality of Australian life. The further you get into the diversity in the heart of Sydney, for instance, the smaller the amount of noticeable ethnic conflict, which is far less overt now than it was in the 1940s or the 1950s.

We are well over the hump, so to speak, in these matters. Large-scale violent ethnic conflicts are very unlikely in Australia in the future. Most of us are now too civilised and we – in this context a comfortable majority of the population – will beat all xenophobia and racism, even when it is disguised as nostalgia for the “Anglo-Celtic core culture” back into its cave whenever it shows its ugly head.

**The benefits of past migrations, from the point of view of the migrants themselves and of the other citizens of the developing Australian society**

Up to the gold rushes of the 1850s, Australia was mainly a series of brutal penal colonies of British imperialism. But, paradoxically, many convicts stayed voluntarily in the colony after their release because in many ways, even then, it was a better place to live than Britain, Scotland or Ireland.The origins of the convicts were relatively diverse. Although most of them were drawn from the English urban underclass around London, about 20 per cent of them were Irish and almost 50 per cent of the smaller number of women convicts were Irish Catholics.

Over the whole period of convictism, about 1 per cent were black convicts from West Africa and the West Indies, and there were also about 1000 Jewish convicts. The gold rushes brought an accelleration of mass migration, from Great Britain and Ireland, China and Germany, and later in the century, a large forced labour component, the “Kanakas” from the “South Sea Islands” (mainly the Solomons and New Hebrides, now Vanuatu).

The gold rushes and the shortage of labour that caused the mass migration, both assisted and voluntary, resulted in a high price for labour in the Australian colonies, making settlement in Australia very attractive for workers. British working class migrants and Irish migrants contributed to the development of the country and were beneficiaries of the high price of labour in the Australian colonies, as were the Chinese, the Germans and others.

From the point of view of most of the participants in these migrations, Australia was a much better place economically than where they came from. Much historical research has been done on letters back home from Irish migrants in Australia. They were gathered mainly by the historian Patrick O’Farrell.

The overwhelming majority of these letters speak of the better standard of living in the new country than in famine-ridden, Britain-pillaged Ireland. The Irish were particularly motivated by the possibility of taking up land in Australia.

Even the “South Sea Islanders”, who had been “blackbirded” to Australia, and the Chinese, who had been at the bottom end of the Australian social ladder, were very reluctant to leave after the imposition of the White Australia Policy in 1900. There were more economic opportunities in Australia than in China or the Pacific Islands.

The migration to Australia was always much more heterogenous than British Australian mythology allows, and in the early 20th century particularly there were constant chain migrations from Russia, the southern Slav lands, Italy, Greece and Malta, despite occasional brutal outbursts of racism against these migrations. One of the worst examples of such racism was the forcible deportation of 6000 Germans and southern Slavs after the First World War.

A large number of Jewish people migrated to Australia just before the Second World War, escaping fascism in Europe. They were very glad to get here and many prospered in Australia.

Some parts of northern Australia, such as the Cairns area, the Townsville area, and particularly the Northern Territory, always had a much more diverse ethnic and cultural mix than many other parts of Australia, even despite the White Australia Policy.

For much of its history, for instance, the Northern Territory had a larger proportion of people of Asian origin, Aboriginal origin and mixed race origin than whites. A recent very useful article in Labor History by Maria Martinez underlines the complex interplay between the racial composition of the population in the Northern Territory and attitudes in the labour movement that helped to undermine the White Australia Policy, even on a national scale.

After the Second World War another wave of mass migration commenced, including people from the Baltic states, Eastern Europeans, Greeks, Italians and Dutch. They were very glad to get here, away from war-devastated Europe, and they participated in building the Snowy Mountains Scheme and developing modern Australia. In the 1960s and 1970s more people came from Arab countries and Turkey, and they, too, contributed to the development of Australia and did well here compared with the then relative poverty of the places they came from.

There are now 300,000 people in Australia of Indochinese origin, who are here because of Australia’s involvement in support of the United States intervention in the civil war in Vietnam. Although most of the Indochinese came here as refugees, they show no signs of wanting to leave and they have contributed to the development of modern Australia. Historically, Australia has been a haven for refugees from many countries, including now, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovars and East Timorese. They too have contributed to the development of modern Australia.

The latest wave of migration has been very varied, mainly from Asia, and this has pushed the number of people with some Asian background up to 1.4 million in the past 15 years. This migration has included both hard-working poorer people, highly trained young people and energetic business migrants bringing modest packages of capital with them.

This Asian migration is particularly obvious as a major factor in economic development, has served as a buffer against economic depression, and has particularly contributed to development in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, and to reducing unemployment in those cities.

The striking thing about these migrations is that, particularly since the Second World War, when our rate of migration has been by far the highest in the world (except for Israel), it has in fact been achieved at the same time as a substantial and obvious reduction in racial and cultural tensions, compared, say, with the 1950s. This is in fact the opposite of the exaggerated conflict that the chauvinist opponents of migration constantly predict even now, despite all the evidence in front of their eyes.

In Australian conditions, the more diverse the migration, and the larger it is, the more it undermines stupid xenophobic practices and attitudes.

Anyone with an eye to see, walking around this laid-back, tough, intense Sydney of ours, can’t avoid being struck by the way the cultural diversity that is now dominant in our city works so effectively. It has been very moving to me in the last couple of weeks attending demonstrations, which rapidly grew in cynical old Sydney, to 30,000 people, in support of the people of East Timor, to observe the wonderful cultural diversity of the Australians in those demonstrations.

I grew up in the 1940s and the 1950s and you’d better believe it, mass migration has been overwhelmingly beneficial to every aspect of the real quality of human life in Australia, as I experience it. Food, culture, politics, the economy, the whole universe of things that affect the essential features of our life.

#### “New class” theory

Opponents of migration and other reactionaries have recently dusted off the quite old theory of the new class to stigmatise supporters of migration and multiculturalism as members of an egregious elite, different to the popular Australian “volk” who, it is claimed, are ativistic and racist to the core.

This desperate rhetoric is inaccurate as a sociological description of modern Australian society, and rather ineffective as a call to arms. When examined closely, it is obviously a biased, primarily ideological construct.

Nearly 20 per cent of the adult population, including school teachers and nurses, now have degrees, and half of them are women. Do they all constitute members of a “new class”? The idea is absurd. When pressed, ideologues such as Betts, Dixson and Bill Hayden redefine their proposition a bit to say that maybe the “new class” consists only of people in the media and the bureaucracy who favour migration (and disagree with them), which makes this construction even more absurd sociologically speaking. It is merely a sort of bizarre point-scoring aimed at stirring up perceived popular animosity to people with degrees.

The problem with it as a call to arms is that a majority of the industrial working class without university degrees, at whom it is presumably directed, are recent non-English-speaking-background (NESB) migrants themselves, and are therefore very unlikely to respond to this demagogy. This recent desperate new class rhetoric underlines the developing social isolation of the people who use it in the newly evolving Australia that is already around us.

#### Opinion polls and notions of public opinion

Betts and other conservative populists make big fuss about some very old public opinion polls, which they claim show that migration is unpopular. Occasionally Betts acknowledges that opinion polls results are influenced powerfully by how the questions are asked, and what information is given to the people polled about the issues before they are polled, but she shrugs off this problem and makes much of her proposition that the elites are ignoring public opinion in their support of migration.

In the absence of carefully controlled polling, not overloaded by emotive construction, Betts’s conclusions from her polls have to be treated with great reserve for the same reasons that opponents of the death penalty tend to put aside emotive tabloid polls, which often seem to favour capital punishment.

We now know a great deal about the phenomenon of push polling, and many of Betts’s favoured polls get close this. The deliberately emotive way many public opinion poll questions are posed is the reason that most democrats are very suspicious of the right-wing populist mania for citizen-initiated referendums.

An interesting new development, probably caused by rapid demographic changes in Australia’s major cities, is that recent opinion polls, organised though they are in this fairly emotive way, are beginning to show a fairly substantial swing in favour of migration (article by Murray Goot in The Bulletin of February 15, 2000). What spin Betts and company will put on these changing poll results?

In reality, political outcomes in bourgeois democracies such as Australia are decided by a complex interaction between various aspects of the popular will, and the special interests of the ruling class, expressed through their manipulation of the media. What comes through in the media is much more an expression of the interests of the tiny elite that owns the media than any independent expression of opinion by a so-called new class of media workers.

In elections the voting is decided by a multitude of factors, and “public opinion” is actually a product of the push and pull of assorted interests and pressure groups. It is even possible that, influenced by right-wing populist hysteria against migration, expressed through the tabloid media, a majority of electors may wish for a reduction in migration. When they come to voting, however, many other factors influence their decision as well.

Many people who favour low migration end up voting for parties that will support high migration and, indeed, the reverse also applies because of the many factors that affect voting behaviour. That’s all part of the political process.For example, a clear majority of the population opposes a GST. Nevertheless, the Tories and the ruling class have managed to push through a GST because they succeeded in scraping together a slight majority in an election.

I believe that highish, humane imigration, non-discrimination in immigration, and reasonable family reunion, are overwhelmingly morally justified.

I believe that one takes advantage of one’s democratic rights to influence the political process in whatever reasonable way is available to get the outcome you want. Everybody else involved in politics does the same thing, and why should those who favour high migration suddenly impose on themselves a self-denying ordinance in these matters when the reactionary tabloid press puts so much effort into whipping up prejudice against perceived minorities, and migration in general.

An underlying British-Australia cultural egotism surfaces repeatedly in Katharine Betts’s book, The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia (Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999). Her ingenious use of the notion of “markers” in relation to the so called “new class” is very revealing. In her view, implacable hostility to racism, and any sympathy with multiculturalism are evidence either of membership of the “new class”, or “special interests”, by reason of NESB background.

She also indicts her so-called new class for an “anti-national” animosity towards wars and militarism, and associates this anti-militarism with “new class” attitudes on racism and migration. I find this construction extremely curious, as I’m told Ms Betts is herself a Quaker.

I wonder what Ms Betts makes of the almost total transformation of the bulk of the “new class” including myself, into advocates of immediate military action to protect the people of East Timor against the vicious Indonesian army.

I reject celebration of the imperialist bloodbath of the First World War. I spent the most useful part of my life campaigning against the Vietnam War and I take none of that back. Nevertheless, I strongly favour the recent Australian military intervention in East Timor, much to the chagrin of the right-wing populist P.P. McGuinness. (McGuinness and I always seem to be on opposite sides, and this pleases me. On the odd occasion when I’ve agreed with McGuinness, I very carefully examine my reasoning to see where I’ve gone wrong.)

Curiously, Sydney postmodern theorist Ghassan Hage, who expresses an ostensibly leftist opposition to existing multiculturalism in his exotic book White Nation, actually shares Betts’s methodology, in that he develops his own version of the inaccurate “new class” theory.

What an implacably British-Australia chauvinist construction Katharine Betts’s use of new class rhetoric really is. It has no appeal at all for me, given my largely Irish Catholic background, and it’s not likely to appeal to any social group other than a rapidly declining Anglo upper-class. The industrial working class is largely of NESB background. The nudging 20 per cent of the population who now have degrees, and the 700,000 students are, by definition, infected by this “rampant cosmopolitanism”. The audience for Betts’s now slightly eccentric “new class” theory is really quite small, and declining all the time.

#### The economic effects of migration

The most coherent, energetic and persistent anti-migrationists are the group around Robert Birrell and Katharine Betts at Monash University, who tend to make the ideological running for most other opponents of migration.

The really rabid xenophobes, such as Pauline Hanson, feed off their arguments. The Monash group has two quite contradictory lines in relation to the economic effects of migration.

One line of argument, which they share with people such as Ted Trainer, is a general, currently rather popular, polemic against the whole idea of economic growth. They argue that economic growth, which migration fuels, is bad for us.

Well, there’s a tiny element of truth in this line of argument. Some economic growth is bad and should be fought on a case by case basis. For instance, woodchipping of old growth forests is quite antipathetic to the interests of the human race and the environment. Much economic growth, however, while it should be made more civilised and reorganised in a rational way, is desirable from the point of view of most humans on the planet, who don’t yet have sufficient access to all kinds of material goods to make their life better.

The arguments of deep ecologists such as Ted Trainer against all economic growth are, in practice, hostile to the aspirations of most human beings for substantial improvements to their conditions of life. The use of this kind of argument by comfortable, affluent anti-migration academics in a rich, first-world country such as Australia is thoroughly repellant, and I’m fascinated that the Monash group has used that kind of argument in the six or seven books that I’ve collected of their published work, as far back as 1977.

The other main line of argument is more or less the opposite of the first one. It is that migration is bad for the economy because it diverts resources from unstated better uses to the construction of infrastructure for the migrants, and that much of this labour is used in a manufacturing economy that is being scaled down anyway because of globalisation and the destruction of tariff barriers (which the Monash group explicitly applauds).

They even argue that a bad feature of migration is that some resources are diverted to infrastructure for the new migrants, reducing the average productivity of labour. Nevertheless, interests such as the housing industry and manufacturing capitalists that want to sell their goods, are attacked for having a vested interest in migration.

Viewed in any sensible or even-handed way, these economic attacks on migration tend to undermine and contradict each other, but for these people anything goes in the war against migration. As one line of economic their argument after another is demolished by changing circumstances (almost none of their economic predictions in relation to migration have eventuated) the Birrell group works very hard to come up with a new economic angle against migration.

There is now a fairly considerable body of concrete analysis and description of the economic effects of migration, the most recent example of which is the work of Bruce Chapman in Canberra. The general conclusion of almost all economists, conservative or left-wing, with a few exceptions, is that migration is either more or less neutral in relation to economic effects or, in most circumstances, a positive stimulus to economic development and a positive factor in reducing unemployment.

Empirically, this would certainly seem to be the case. Cities in Australia such as Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, which are hot-spots for migration, are also at the lower end of the unemployment statistics. Cities such as Melbourne, Newcastle, Adelaide and Hobart, which are stagnant as far as recent migration is concerned, are at the higher end of the unemployment statistics.

There is another subtle economic point about substantial, diverse migration. One of the factors that helped Australia get the Olympic Games was the presence in Australia of substantial migrant communities from almost everywhere on earth, and the Games will give Australia a considerable economic boost, both before and after, for obvious reasons.

A similar point applies to trade, particularly with Asia. The presence of energetic trading communities from different countries contributes to trade with those countries. Again, a number of firms trading mainly in Asia have chosen to use Sydney as a location for their call centres and card centres because Sydney has a large reservoir of skilled labour speaking and writing just about every language on earth.

#### The argument about Australia’s carrying capacity

The anti-immigrationists make three main appeals. One is to the perceived latent resentment of Anglo-Australians against changes to the ethnic and cultural mix of Australia. This line of argument is essentially an appeal to cultural ativism.

It is usually there in the arguments, but it is often veiled a bit to avoid offending the more civilised Australians. At the popular level, talkback radio hosts, and the One Nation bunch exploit this perceived ativism mercilessly. At a theoretical level people such as Miriam Dixson and Paul Sheehan implicitly invoke this perceived feeling while ostensibly deploring it.

The second line of argument is that migration is economically bad for Australia. That argument is unsustainable and I’ve dealt with it above.

The third argument is much more powerful and potent these days, even with many people who are opposed to overt racism, and regard themselves as civilised. It is expressed in the viewpoint of the organization called Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Society and in the political outlook of the conservative electoral formation, the Australian Democrats, who advocate zero net immigration.

The best-known popular advocates of this point of view are Tim Flannery, author of The Future Eaters and his disciple Paul Sheehan, author of Amongst the Barbarians. Other people who write about these questions and claim some expertise in the field, are the poet Mark O’Conner, the CSIRO scientist Doug Cocks, Ted Trainer the deep ecologist, the Birrell supporters and Katharine Betts.

Their essential argument is that Australia is a supremely eroded, overwhelmingly arid continent, that we are already overpopulated, and that if our present rate of population growth, the historically general 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent annually that has been the case over most of our history, continues further, disasters will develop in the not-too-distant future.

In one article, Flannery advances the argument that we should reduce the population from 19 million to 12 million. One wonders whether that includes an offer of voluntary euthanasia on his part! This line of argument involves a very considerable virtuosity with statistics.

Cocks and Flannery, who attempt occasionally to quantify their views, toss around various figures for arable land available in Australia. They appear to concede that most estimates of available arable land, made by people who know something about the subject, show that there are still vast areas of unused arable land in Australia.

Nevertheless, they manage, by ingenious manipulation of the figures to argue that this is really not significant, because the arable land is in Northern Australia, the water is in Northern Australia and we should be ultra-cautious. They continually express animosity to agriculture, which seems to be the hallmark of quite a few modern pseudo-geographers and pseudo-anthropologists.

There is a whole school developing of semi-scientific popular journalism devoted to the argument that agriculture is destroying humanity. Flannery even argues that it would be a good idea to make a large part of Australia into an enormous ecological theme park, finding large mammals from overseas to replace the diptodron in the ecological niche that it used to occupy about 10,000 years ago. Flannery often seems to prefer animals to humans. I disagree with this approach.

#### Past arguments about Australia’s population. Tim Flannery’s curious legend about Griffith Taylor

Many of the ecological opponents of migration make a hero of Griffith Taylor, a past Australian geographer. Tim Flannery paints Taylor as an opponent of further increase in Australian population, and as someone who shared Flannery’s view that Australia has a very small population carrying capacity. He repeats this legend about Taylor and paints him as a kind of martyr to the forces in Australia, “the boosters”, who in the past favoured a large increase in Australian population, and are said to have forced Taylor’s academic exile from Australia to North America.

A rather vigorous academic argument has developed about the long-dead Griffith Taylor, with opponents of migration ascribing to him this martyr status, and academic liberals and leftists responding indirectly by drawing attention to Taylor’s mad, racist views, which he shared with many other geographers and anthropologists of his time, of which a representative and interesting sample is found in a letter from Ian Castles of the Academy of Social Sciences, in the March 2000 Quadrant.

Castles says of Taylor:

The demeaning assumption was alive and well in the 1920s. Second-year students in Australia’s first university department at the University of Sydney were instructed by its head, Griffith Taylor, to “insert the measurement of three skulls in a table”, using calipers, tapes and radiometers; and were directed to a paper on the Kamilaroi tribe, co-authored by Taylor, for a discussion of “the changes in skin-colour and nasal index which result from hybridisation”. In 1924, Taylor solemnly told the Royal Society of New South Wales of a teacher’s opinion “that blacks at the age of 14 were about as intelligent as white children at the age of 10″. In his Environment and Race, published by Oxford University Press in 1927, Taylor asserted that the development of man’s reasoning faculties was “correlated with the size of the brain”, and that “we can show a continuous series of measurements leading from the primitive Negro (69) up through the Iberian (75) group … and West Europeans to the Alpine (85) and the Mongolian peoples.

As Ian Castles is quite right to point out about Taylor, he obviously shared the nutty phrenological racism current among many academics in his time and place, but this argument about Taylor is eccentric for another, rather more basic, reason.

I have recently discovered that the Tim Flannery version of Taylor’s views on migration and the carrying capacity of Australia just isn’t true. I recently bought, in a package of secondhand books, Griffith Taylor’s book in the Oxford Geographies series, the fourth edition on Australia, published in 1925.

For that time, it’s a pretty good potted geography of Australia. What fascinated me most is the fact that Taylor’s views on settlement and population, as expressed in this very basic geography textbook, are almost the opposite of the views attributed to him by Flannery.

On page 262, Taylor asserts that there are 616,000 square miles of land suitable for close temperate settlement, 100,000 square miles of tropical agricultural lands, 1,009,000 square miles of good pastoral lands and 655,000 square miles of fair pastoral lands.

If anything, this is an overestimate in the opposite direction to Flannery’s views. Taylor was also a strong advocate of a large expansion of irrigation for agriculture, if his 1925 standard Australian geography book is any guide. The very last paragraph in the book, the postscript, commences with the following.

In a paper published in the American Geographical Review, July 1922, the writer shows that the prospects of the fertile temperate regions in Australia are very hopeful. Using the present condition of Europe (with her 400 millions of population) as a criterion, he deduces that 62 millions of white settlers can establish themselves in eastern and south-western Australia.

Despite his bizarre anthropological racism, Taylor wasn’t a bad prophet on some matters. He is well known for his prediction that Australia would have between 19 million and 20 million population in the year 2000, which has turned out to be spot on.

It is pretty fascinating the way legends grow. Rather than being a fierce opponent of population growth as painted by Flannery, Taylor was a bit of a “booster” himself in relation to population.

Flannery and company also praise the conservative economist Bruce Davidson, who conducted a constant polemic in the 1950s and 1960s against northern agricultural development, on dry economic grounds. In this instance, their account of Davidson’s views is probably accurate.

My heroes in this area are the “boosters”: people such as Ion Idriess, J.C. Bradfield, William Hatfield and Jack Timbery, who advocated various and quite feasible proposals for agricultural development, particularly in the immediate postwar period. The Snowy scheme was one product of this kind of outlook.

In the 1970s a vigorous Australian resident opponent of Malthusianism and supporter of Australian development and high migration was the late Colin Clark. He had worked as an economist for the World Food Organisation and been a major English university economist, and he conducted a considerable argument with Paul Ehrlich in the 1960s and 1970s. His predictions about world agricultural production etc have generally been confirmed by subsequent developments.

Ehrlich’s more alarmist predictions have repeatedly been refuted by later events. Colin Clark had a very serious debate with Derek Llewellyn-Jones, in the book Zero Population Growth published by Heinemann in 1974. Most of Colin Clark’s predictions have turned out more accurate than those of Llewellyn-Jones.

It is necessary to make some assumptions about likely future world developments concerning food, agriculture and resources. In this field I have found the very detailed literature of the World watch Institute of considerable use.

While the Worldwatch Institute is, in the main, overly alarmist, it has performed an enormous service over recent years in tracking world developments in food production, arable land, fertiliser use and many other important things. A very useful understanding of what is really happening on a global scale can be acquired from the very serious crossfire that takes place between Malthusians such as the Worldwatch Institute and major capitalist growth advocates such as the Hudson Institute.

The truth about likely future world developments lies somewhere between the opposite projections of these two schools of thought, and anyone seriously interested in these matters can derive great value from studying the material produced by these two currents of thought, and the debates between them.

Nevertheless, there is no serious doubt in my mind that the Worldwatch Institute alarmism is somewhat closer to the reality than the Hudson Institute optimism, for the medium-term future. There is likely to be a global shortage of food and arable land and water for quite a while, although not as catastrophic as the Worldwatch Institute believes.

Despite the short-term low world prices for commodities, artificially created by the global financial speculations of finance capital, over time there is likely to be enormous demand for food on a world scale, and ultimately prices for it must rise. That reality underpins my argument.

The second reality is that the global shortage of arable land and water produces a situation in which Australia cannot possibly afford to indulge the fantasy of Flannery and Paul Sheehan about making our country a big ecological theme park. We will be under constant pressure to develop agriculture to produce more food and we will be under constant pressure for more migration to these shores.

Politically it is much smarter to anticipate these developments by maintaining our historically highish, and now non-discriminatory migration policy, and we will, for obvious reasons of survival, have to improve our agricultural practices and remediate the Australian environment to fulfill our global human responsibilities in food and population.

#### Australia’s real carrying capacity

Stripped of all the manipulation of figures, the situation is that there is very large unused water capacity in Australia and also a very large amount of land that could be properly irrigated without environmental damage, as long as careful, modern and conservative irrigation methods are practiced.

The late Jack Kelly, an important economist who assisted in the establishment of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, was critical of many, initially faultily conceived, northern development schemes. Kelly knew an enormous amount about practical irrigation, and also about the economics of irrigation, agriculture and pastoralism.

He made a study of the Kimberleys in north-western Australia and of the Northern Territory in the 1960s. He was sceptical about the Ord River Dam because it was in his view on too large a scale, and in the wrong place.

In his useful book, Struggle for the North (Australasian Book Society, 1966), he located about 50 possible places for smaller dams that could supply water for assorted agricultural activities, irrigation agriculture and livestock uses. Jack Kelly had a particular objection to the way that the big pastoral companies, particularly the foreign-owned ones, such as Vesteys, had locked up control of the strategic riverfront grazing lands for extremely nominal rentals, and the way this monopoly control of the strategically placed holdings held back useful agricultural development.

He favoured small-scale, local, individually owned pastoral and agricultural developments, and his book is an eloquent plea in favour of such developments, and a specific blueprint for where they would be possible. Another major set of proposals for Australian development, the longstanding Bradfield-Ion Idriess schemes for Queensland rivers, are from a technical and engineering point of view, quite feasible.

A number of the technical problems inherent in such schemes were solved during the development of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and these days most such major infrastructure projects are technically feasible.

Obviously what would be required for any of these important development projects would be labour and credit and, as many people know, in conditions of national emergency, credit can be created by government, as it was during the Second World War, despite the avaricious way global finance capital attempts to preserve for itself alone the right to create credit.

There are enormous technical and practical problems in such agricultural and infrastructure development, but none of them are insuperable. For instance, the problem of salination is a question of drainage, and of selecting suitable land for irrigation instead of land in which there are already large amounts of salt at certain levels. (Often because this land consists of ancient seabeds.)

One innovative solution to some salination might be Israeli-type tapping of the ground water below the salt for irrigation, thereby lowering the water table. The question of markets for the food will be solved in the medium term by the inevitably increasing shortage of food on a global scale.

Already, the very important project of the railway through western Victoria, NSW and western Queensland to Darwin, and the other Adelaide-Darwin project, and a Wyndham-Derby-Darwin rail project, which could easily be devised, could create a satisfactory transport framework for food exports to our potential Asian markets.

None of these tasks are technically impossible. The real problem is finding the proper balance between these necessary projects and the equally necessary dimension of preserving the natural environment in an appropriate way.

In my view it would be possible to develop a gigantic agricultural program of this sort, at the same time as withdrawing a great deal of unsuitable land from scrubby pastoralism and marginal agriculture. (The land withdrawn could be turned into national parks.)

The agricultural future of Australia lies in developing large-scale, carefully designed, ecologically sustainable irrigation agriculture, rather than speculative pastoralism and marginal agriculture on semi-arid lands. Looked at in the framework of appropriate, intensive Australian agricultural development in the future, the proposition that we could not feed many more people is thoroughly unsound.

A recent issue of The Australian has a fascinating article about local proposals in the Bowen area of north Queensland to develop infrastructure, dam several rivers and commence a new major irrigation area, which is strongly supported by the whole local community. Similar projects are possible in many parts of northern Australia.

#### The example of Israel/Palestine

Tim Flannery, Doug Cocks and others make great play about the enormous difference in the agricultural potential between Australia and Europe, pointing to what they call ENSO or, in other words the variable Mediteranean nature of the climate, as an enormous obstacle to agriculture.

This comparison is a bit beside the point. Australia is obviously different agriculturally to northern Europe because of its Mediteranean climate. Therefore, it is useful to study and emulate the highest points of agricultural developments in similar Mediterranean environments.

As an example, the whole area of Israel/Palestine is about 20 per cent larger than the Sydney statistical district from Broken Bay to Loftus and out to Katoomba.

Sixty per cent of Israel/Palestine is desert, but it supports five million Jews and three million Arabs, with a Western diet, on a high calorific level, and in fact produces about a net 25 per cent agricultural surplus for export. While it is true that very special circumstances have applied there over the last 70 years, it is a fact that while developing agriculture to its maximum, the Israelis have substantially remediated the land from past environmental degradation resulting from more than 5000 years of relatively unplanned human activity.

The technical achievements of the Israel/Palestine agricultural set-up are of enormous practical importance in Australia, and include optimum use of water, very frugal and effective irrigation techniques, carefully designed arid agriculture, use of saline water in some circumstances, etc.

Looked at in the framework of the Israel/Palestine experience and comparing it, say, with the Sydney region, the argument over Australian carrying capacity falls more clearly into place. The intrinsic upper limits to Australian carrying capacity are still very far off.

The real task is to design optimum development, both to expand agriculture and to remediate the environment at the same time, and to do that you need more people and the creation of development credit at government level to overcome the artificial grip on credit of the global rentiers.

#### What the argument is about

It is worth noting at this point, even allowing for the aridity of the Australian continent, and taking into account the rainfall and the amount of well-watered land, that if Australia was to have a similar level of population development to the United States, the population would be 50 million.

Using a similar method of calculation, if we were to have a similar level of population to Europe, Australia could support 130 million people. Presently, we only use for agriculture about 11 per cent of the water that falls on Australia as rain.

Nevertheless, political and social realities underline all arguments about population. No one like myself, who is in favour of increased population and the continuance of mass migration, is arguing for anything more than the average continuance of the basic 1.5-2 per cent annual net population increase that has been the norm over the past 200 years.

The argument is between the continuation of the normal highish migration of a relatively new country, or the adoption of net zero population growth, which is appropriate to overpopulated countries. As the above figures indicate, we are a considerable distance from any situation where a continuance of the substantial mass migration of the last 200 years could present any real threat to the interests of the Australian people.

#### The footprint of cities

Another argument of the anti-immigrationists is that because most migrants settle in cities, the footprint of cities is the problem.

There is a limited element of truth in this in Australian conditions. In Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, due to the relatively unplanned nature of city growth, too much agricultural land has already been lost to urban development.

Even in these cities, however, this could be overcome for the future by a change to forward planning for city growth. For instance, further population expansion in Melbourne could be concentrated in the area out towards and past Tullamarine Airport (obviously away from the flight paths) where the land is of little agricultural potential.

In Sydney the logical places for further urban development are the sandstone plateaus north of Hornsby and south of Loftus which, in both instances, happen to be on major rail lines, rather than allowing further urban sprawl on usable agricultural land in the far western suburbs.

The Sydney region, Melbourne region and the Brisbane region could thus be developed into mixed urban and agricultural areas, like many similar areas in Europe and in Israel/Palestine. Australian society and the environment will degenerate rapidly, whether we have more population or we don’t, unless we make major and serious changes to our agricultural and urban practices.

The real task is the adoption of appropriate technologies, including the highest level of modern agricultural practices in all fields.

For the past 20 or 30 years many thousands of urban Australians have been stirred by a strong desire to go back to rural life, evidenced by the popularity of magazines such as Earth Garden and Grass Roots and the many thousands of people who have settled in rural areas, either individually or as part of collective experiements.

Much of this phenomenon has been marked by enormous human enthusiasm, sometimes not enlightened by much careful scientific experiment and enquiry. Nevertheless, the existence of this deep urge provides a basis for possible future development in agriculture.

What is to prevent us using all the technical achievements of Israeli agricultural practice in Australia? Other potentially useful techniques are the well-tested, Australian-invented, P.A. Yeomans keyline water harvesting and irrigation system, permaculture techniques, and the cultivation of new varieties of food crops, for which the markets are now emerging.

The possibilities in these areas are very great, and maximum government research and development funds should be devoted to such projects. What is so irritating about the Flannery/Cocks/O’Connor view of agriculture is that it is almost totally static, and focussed on the past.

Unless we dramatically improve agricultural practices, the Australian environment will suffer, regardless of the population. With appropriate agricultural improvements, increased population will benefit the environment.

Youth unemployment is a chronic problem in all major Australian cities. Many young people, including many young unemployed, share the urge to get back to the land that is fairly widespread in the population. The federal government has exploited this, in a mildly cynical way, by forcing unemployed youth to engage in work-for-the-dole schemes, a lot of which involve rubbish collection and land care activities, which are often rather cosmetic in relation to the real problems and possibilities of agriculture.

A much more useful kind of scheme would be for the government to sponsor the development of kibbutz-style farming experiments on usable agricultural land on the fringes of major cities, which are in fact locations quite close to big concentrations of youth unemployment.

Such experiments, if backed by government support and funding, could be combined with well-organised agricultural education for unemployed youth. Such activities would beat the hell out of some present cosmetic make-work schemes.

In the area of the new technologies that could contribute in agriculture, industry and other areas, to a more civilised energy-efficient Australia, once again an Earthscan Worldwatch book is of great assistance. This book is Factor 4 by Weizacker, Lovins and Lovins.

This book describes a fascinating variety of technologies that have been used successfully in different places, all of which could be adapted for Australian use. There is no lack of possible technologies to remediate both Australian agriculture, Australian industry and the Australian environment.

#### A civilised migration policy for Australia for the 21st century

The population policy I advocate is on the following lines:

(a) No discrimination in immigration on grounds of race, religion, nationality or political belief.

(b) A highish numerical objective at the top end of numerical objectives since the Second World War.

(c) The maintenance of a humane mix of high-income business migrants, skilled migrants and poorer migrants looking for a better life. To achieve the third end, and for basic reasons of humanity, extensive family reunion.

(d) Periodic amnesties for illegal migrants.

(e) The extension of the completely free movement that now applies to New Zealand, to the rest of the Pacific islands, to New Guinea (the whole island) and to Timor. The small populations of the Pacific have been the victims of Australian imperialist activities in the Pacific and as a proper moral compensation they should be allowed free access to Australia.

(f) A very proactive attitude to refugees. The current crises in Timor and Fiji and the crisis in Kosovo underline the importance of allowing refugee migration on the widest possible scale when crises arise. Much of the immigration history of Australia since the Second World War and, indeed, since the Irish Famine in the 1850s, has been based on providing safe haven for refugees. This is appropriate for a new country such as Australia, and people who come to Australia in these circumstances usually make a considerable effort to make a life in Australia.This migration program should be backed up by a considerable commitment to appropriate national infrastructure and agricultural development etc, at the same time as a vast public program to remediate the Australian environment.I believe that is the kind of policy on which both the labour movement, and possibly Australian society as a whole, will settle, and quite soon. The reason that this will be so is the effect of the already established cultural diversity and ethnic mix in the new Australia, and the obvious political implications of our location in the world.The current crisis in relations with Indonesia, produced by the necessity of defending the right of national self-determination of the East Timorese people, heavily underlines the need for nailing down such a general policy on migration.

Only the kind of multicultural, diverse Australia that I’ve outlined can have a reasonable prospect of further development, or even survival, in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century. Such an Australia will have a bright future as a civilised example to the rest of the world about how to handle the migration and population question in a relatively young nation in a difficult world.

#### Sydney University Law School graduations as a snapshot of a new Australia

Several close personal friends of mine have recently graduated in law from the tough Sydney University evening course – one of the few significant evening course left at Sydney University in these relatively affluent times. It used to be called the Barristers Admission Board Course and is notoriously the hardest way to do law.

My personal friends are a group of four Anglo women in their late 30s and early and middle 40s and I have attended two of their graduations. They have been, from my point of view, absolutely fascinating events.

Notoriously, many people drop out of this difficult course, but nevertheless, the two graduations I attended, six months apart, averaged 140 graduates each, adding to the very large number of law graduates crowding the marketplace.

The first interesting sociological feature was that about half of the graduates were women. The second fascinating feature was the ethnic and cultural mix of the graduates. Going by names, an average 40 per cent were of some non-British migrant background: Italian, Greek, Chinese, Indian, Arabic and many others, and another 15 per cent had recognisably Irish names, suggesting that at least 15 per cent, and probably more were of Irish Catholic cultural background.

Judging by appearance, an even larger percentage than the 40 per cent had non-English-speaking backgrounds, as some people with Anglo names were of Chinese or Indian appearance. At one of the graduations I noticed two good-looking young men, possibly brothers, with wonderfully exotic Indian subcontinent-sounding names, such as Fawez Nazmi Cameron and Duncan Ismael Cameron.

Events of this sort are very emotional and moving for the graduates and their families. The majestic, gracious and pleasant old Great Hall of Sydney University, built by the racist British ruling class of the colony in the 19th century, with its impressive portraits of past vice-chancellors, on these occasions was crowded with the families of the graduates, in their infinite, moving and boistrous variety.

One had only to look around to see our new Sydney and our new Australia as it really is. What is striking at these events is the matter-of-fact, routine cosmopolitanism of Sydney life. Obviously, many of these graduates of the evening course work in law, accountancy, unions, real estate, the public service, and even nursing and teaching.

The striking thing is the genuine mix of the new and the old. The Anglo middle classes and commercial classes are still fairly strongly represented. For instance there are quite a few older Anglo men who obviously work as paralegals and have finally got their law degree, and there are also obviously confident young women of the Anglo North Shore middle-class, etc.

Nevertheless, the extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity of the families and the graduates underlines the irreversible cosmopolitanism of our new Sydney and new Australia. At these graduations it is possible to see the future and, in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity, the future really works. It’s also worth commenting that in terms of the eccentric new class theory, all these graduates, by definition, immediately enter the so-called new class, which underlines the speed with which that class is broadening and expanding, to the point that the new class theory becomes ridiculous.