

Turning off THE TAP

Another sore point for the green movement is immigration. Jock Collins argues that the environmental case for shutting the gates is weak at best — shabby at worst.

A new immigration debate is snowballing in Australia today. If the critics of immigration are to be believed, stopping or dramatically reducing immigration would immediately solve Australia's current account deficit problem, help end the recession, overcome the problems of international competitiveness and herald the end to Australia's environmental problems.

Australia's immigration program has always been controversial. Debates about the impact of immigration on lifestyles, the economy, our defence and on the social cohesion of Australian society have surfaced many times since Arthur Calwell introduced the postwar immigration program in 1947. Public opinion has almost always been opposed to immigration. Occasionally, this opposition has erupted into major public debates. In 1984, the Blainey debate preoccupied newspaper headlines for more than a year, while in 1988 John Howard fell very publicly on his sword of anti-Asian, anti-multicultural policy.

In 1991, as economic recession deepens, immigration is once again under attack. In September, John Hewson announced that the Opposition would call for big cuts in immigration in the next federal election campaign. This follows the *Australia Speaks* survey of community attitudes commissioned by the Coalition, which found that more

than 40% of written responses raised concerns over multiculturalism and immigration.

Hewson's move to break the bipartisan immigration consensus comes at a time when immigration is under attack from both economic rationalists and environmentalists. Today's immigration debate is really the same old arguments dressed up in newer, greener, clothes. It is no coincidence that the 1984 Blainey debate emerged after the depths of the 1982-83 recession. As Hewson's predecessor John Howard showed in the bicentennial year, if politically desperate, play the prejudice card.

Just as the findings of the Club of Rome in the late 1960s led to calls to reduce Australian immigration on environmental grounds, so the names of international environmental gurus David Suzuki and Paul Ehrlich are invoked in the 1990s green demands to stop immigration. Groups such as Writers for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, leading Australian Democrats such as newly elected leader Senator John Coulter and environmentalists such as Milo Dunphy lead this attack. They favour maintaining refugee intakes and support limited family reunion, but are opposed to other immigration.

At the heart of the green critique of immigration is the argument that population growth is the key environmental problem. The leading advocate of this position is US academic Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (1968)

In 1990 Ehrlich, with Anne Ehrlich, reasserted the case that population control is critical to avert environmental disaster on a world scale.

If population is the principal environmental problem, immigration to countries like Australia is the major contributing element to the problem, the Ehrlichs argue, particularly when immigrants come from the Third World: "To the degree that immigrants adopt the lifestyles of their adopted country, they will begin consuming more resources per person and do disproportionate environmental damage".

Following this logic, the solution to Australia's manifest environmental problem is clear and simple: turn off the immigration tap, and we can have an environmental paradise of 18 million people—or 10 million, according to recent statements in Australia by Paul Ehrlich—living in a Zero Population Growth Nirvana. The argument appears to be that the best way for Australia to help the international environmental problem is to cut ourselves off from it, albeit after some conscience salving increase in foreign aid to help poor peoples in the Third World. This gives a new selfish twist to the slogan: think globally, act locally.

The green critique of immigration has three major problems. First, the link between Australian immigration intakes and population growth is not a simple one. Again, it serves to direct attention away from the real causes of the environmental problem. Finally, the danger emerges that scapegoating immigration as the main environmental problem may escalate anti-immigrant violence and act as a catalyst to renewed racism and prejudice.

To put population at the centre of any model of environmental damage distracts attention from the socio-economic framework in which past and present environmental damage has arisen. Environmental destruction is not something imported or exotic, but rather results from forces intrinsic to society itself. One key problem is that the marketplace puts prices only on what are called direct economic costs and benefits. The indirect costs and benefits of a corporation's activities—that is, the impact on the environment and on other people—are overlooked. "Externalities" or "spillover effects" such as pollution and congestion exist because of market failure. It then becomes profitable, and therefore rational, for corporations to continue their destructive practices. In addition, the government tacitly condones such activities by imposing puny penalties for corporations caught polluting. Clearly, reform in the area of the marketplace and government legislation are critical to rectifying past, and minimising future, environmental damage.

The other problem with the emphasis on an anti-immigration solution to the environmental problem is that it gives legitimacy—from a more enlightened sector of politics—to anti-immigration and anti-immigrant viewpoints. The process of scapegoating immigration for a complex problem like environmental deterioration as with other problems: recession, unemployment, lack of education places, crime, makes it hard to prevent a slip from an

anti-immigration to an anti-immigrant argument, despite the best intentions.

In the western Sydney suburb of Campbelltown, for example—according to the EEO Commission's National Inquiry into Racist Violence—47% of adult immigrants interviewed had experienced racist abuse, as had 36% of students. Moreover, 9% of adults and 14% of students had experienced racist violence. The newly-arrived suffered most from racism.

Recent history in Australia and overseas suggests that racism increases during recession times because many people blame immigration for their unemployment or economic hardship. Much of the Western world is in, or emerging from, economic recession. Some of these countries have large immigration programs, while in others immigration is almost non-existent. Any simple correlation between levels of immigration and economic recession cannot stand scrutiny. Even in Australia, the state (NSW) with the highest immigration intake is the state with one of the lowest unemployment rates.

Recent events in Germany and France sound a warning for Australia as the resurgence of racist violence against Turks and North Africans emerges as a response to economic difficulties. In eastern Germany, where foreigners are only 2% of the population, the *Guardian Weekly* (29 September) reports the "daily witnessing [of] brute attacks on foreigners, and an ugly rebirth of overt racism". Last month, former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing called for an end to the immigrant "invasion" and for a change in laws to make it harder for immigrants to gain French citizenship.

The contradictions of the 'green' anti-immigration position are reflected in the views of the new Democrat leader John Coulter. To strengthen the anti-immigration argument, Coulter has taken on board the position of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library researcher Stephen Joske that immigration costs Australia \$8 billion per year on the current account deficit. The argument is that immigration adds to the population growth of our major cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. As these cities push against their outer extremities, massive government investment is required to pay for urban infrastructure for the new suburbs.

There are a number of problems with this analysis. First, the economic benefits of such public investment—jobs, social infrastructure—are not considered. Second, most new immigrants live not in the new suburbs in outer Sydney and Melbourne but in the older working class suburbs which have traditionally been under-provided with community assets. Moreover, any long-term solution to the environment requires much larger public expenditure on public transport and on environmental resources. Should the Green movement put their support behind an analysis that rejects the economic and environmental case for public infrastructure investment?

JOCK COLLINS teaches in economics at the University of Technology, Sydney.