Multiculturalism in practice

The Blainey Debate on Immigration

Is diversity a danger to the nation?

1984 - A controversial debate on the number of Asian migrants coming to Australia

The passionate tone of artist Andrew Hill’s description of his poster *No Excuse for Racism,* Mr. Blainey provides an indication of the emotions aroused by historian Geoffrey Blainey’s comments in 1984 over the pace of Asian arrivals in Australia. The change in Asian immigration could be traced back to the refugee exodus sparked by the Vietnam War.

“Welcome on my boat. My name is Lam Binh and these are my friends from South Vietnam and we would like permission to stay in Australia.” With these words on April 26, 1976, the leader of a group of five young men greeted an immigration official in Darwin; Lam Binh and his shipmates were the first of the refugee “boat people” to land in Australia. The fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 had caused a huge exodus of Indo-Chinese from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and a dilemma for Australia. International humanitarian treaty obligations, plus a moral responsibility flowing from military participation in the Vietnam War, suggested Australia should be one of the recipient countries for the tens of thousands of homeless Indo-Chinese. But how many refugees should Australia take, and how would the country cope? The issue hardly surfaced until 1984 when Melbourne University’s Professor Blainey initiated a debate over the scale and pace of Asian immigration which has become known as the “Blainey Debate”.

Blainey, a well-regarded historian who had coined the term “tyranny of distance” to describe Australia’s relations with its British political founders, argued in a speech to a Rotary club in the Victorian town of Warrnambool in 1984 that the pace of Asian migration was too high, that it threatened the “social cohesion” of Australia, that migrants generally took “Australian” jobs and unless major changes were made to immigration policy, racial conflict and violence would ensue. Outrage over his speech kept Blainey’s ideas in the media for some time. His views, while repudiated by some mainstream conservatives (although embraced by the far right National Action and League of Rights), articulated in an intemperate form a concern about the dilution of Anglo-Australian society. But Blainey’s argument, and his assumption of public opinion, were refuted by many other historians and social scientists, as well as politicians and public figures.

In fact Australia had only taken around 90,000 Indo-Chinese refugees from April 1975 to June 1984 and they, with other Asian migrants and members of Asian ethnic communities, still represented less than 2% of the Australian population. Public opinion polls showed that despite an increase in Indo-Chinese migration because of the refugee crisis, the number of Australians willing to accept Asians was around the same as it had been twenty years before when White Australia had begun to be torn down. Studies have shown that immigration has either a neutral or slightly positive effect on employment. And Australia had and continues to have a remarkably low level of social violence based on ethnicity. Perhaps a majority of Australians, given the choice in the post-war years, would have argued for a continued Anglo-Australian identity; but researchers have shown that immigration policy has always led public
opinion in these matters, reflecting a general tendency for people to prefer what they know and resist change and the new. Successive governments have had to “sell” immigration to the wider population - ever since Calwell did so in 1946.

But the legacy of the Blainey debate has remained, and some years later in 1988 the then leader of the Liberal Party John Howard reignited it by again speculating on the level of Asian immigration which Australian society could accommodate.

Blainey’s criticism of Asian immigration, and also of what he called the “multicultural lobby”, was said to have been an attempt to overturn the Whitlam-Fraser consensus on cultural diversity and to shift the national political agenda to the right; but at the election of 1985 Blainey’s views were repudiated by the conservative parties, the intellectual right and most respectable political players. In fact his only support was from what political analyst Dr Gerard Henderson has called the “lunar right”: the National Action, the League of Rights and some elements of the RSL - the Returned Soldiers League as it was then called. However Blainey’s views remained part of the public debate, and have gained further supporters since the beginning of the 1990s.

Further reference:
Blainey, Geoffrey All for Australia, Sydney, Methuen Haynes, 1984.

