

Myths about Migration and Australia

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Public debate about multiculturalism and the work force is full of myths that take on a reality of their own when they are repeated often enough. There are a number of key questions that we can ask about the multicultural work force, important questions with answers that are not all that simple to find. We can put these best as “myths”, or commonly believed but inaccurate statements about the situation.

Myth 1: Immigrants take jobs from local people

This seems fairly obvious - there are a limited number of jobs, if you increase immigration and unemployment is going up, the immigrants must be the cause. Well it doesn't exactly work like that. Immigrants bring real resources, and they create demand - for homes, schools, food, clothing, etc. This demand stimulates local job growth - indeed the whole Australian economy depends on an increasing population - and immigration provides one of the growth factors.

Myth 2: Immigrants all go on the dole

You may think it's weird that some people can believe this and the previous myth at the same time. If we look at immigrants generally, overseas-born people do have slightly higher unemployment rates over all - but it is very different group to group. Communities that have been here a longer time tend to have lower rates of unemployment - Greeks and Italians for instance. Some newer groups, who came into Australia when the economy was worse, have found jobs harder to get. So in some communities - particularly among people who

were refugees from wars - unemployment rates are unacceptably high. But going onto unemployment benefits is not a choice that many people make because they want to - it may be they experience racism and that makes it more difficult to find a job; or their education has been so damaged by war that they find it hard to get a job when employers are looking for well qualified workers.

Myth 3: Immigrants are a drain on public services

In any “equation”, there are two sides - what we need to look at are the benefits as well as the costs. The provision of schools, hospitals, roads, urban infrastructure, electricity, recreation areas all cost public resources, as do family allowances, unemployment benefits, and invalidity pensions. This money could be going into the upgrading of existing services, rather than providing new ones for new immigrants. In the 1996 Budget a number of benefits were tied for the first time to the citizenship status of the individual - if you were not a citizen, then you were not entitled to various benefits. But the new immigrants are also workers, they pay taxes and they make a contribution to the wider economy. There is a real and unresolved difference of opinion about what the correct balance should be. In mid-1996, NSW Premier Carr wanted immigration to Sydney to slow down because of the pressure on the Sydney basin infrastructure from a rapidly rising population, Victorian Premier Kennett wanted more people to come to Melbourne, while South Australian Premier Brown was extremely anxious to increase immigration dramatically to Adelaide to cover falling population.

Myth 4: Immigrants cause environmental degradation

People are a problem in the Australian

environment. When Europeans came to Australia in the late eighteenth century the land was heavily forested, the water pure, the air clean. In just over two hundred years European civilisation has stripped the landscape, generated massive soil erosion, poisoned much of the water, and reduced the air quality in some cities at certain times of the year to barely breathable. The question becomes, how much of this is due to recent immigration? And how much improvement would occur if the population growth rate were to be reduced? The problem with this myth is that it implies immigrants alone are responsible for the decline in the environment. It is easy to shift the blame to ethnic communities, but they did not decide the nature of Australia's economic development path, nor do they control the planning agencies that opted for private cars over public transport, thus contributing to one of the major sources of pollution.

The myths may sound simple and “true” - they are neither.