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The Misguided Advocates of Open Borders

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The poor quality of analysis behind Australia's abandonment of traditional assimilationist immigration policy reached its apotheosis recently in a spate of articles by well placed commentators. The proposal of the moment was open borders, immigration unrestricted by consideration of all factors save for security. Most Australians will reject the proposal as absurd. Unfortunately the analytical basis for policies followed by federal governments since the 1970s has not much differed apart from economic criteria.

Prof. Mirko Bagaric (*SMH*, 7 April 2010, p. 15¹), professor of law at Deakin University, argues for unrestricted immigration from the poorest to the richest countries as the best means to reduce Third World poverty. Initially his article came as a pleasant surprise to one who applies biological concepts and methods to the study of human society. Prof. Bagaric opened by stating two truths about human ethnocentrism: "[M]ost still prefer people of their own type and find different cultures jarring"; and "It is in the human DNA."²

However from that point the article provided almost no hint that humans are an evolved species with an interest in survival. Prof. Bagaric superficially discusses three interests that could be affected by open borders – material prosperity, national security, and cultural tradition – more of which later. This leaves many interests unmentioned.

Unrestricted migration would harm Australia's national interests in ways documented by scholars in economics, sociology and related disciplines. Much of the harm is predictable from what is known about the dysfunctions of diversity. They include growing inequality in the especially invidious form of ethnic stratification. No one likes to be ruled over by a

different ethnic group or to see his own people worse off than others. The result is resentment or contempt, depending on the perspective taken.

Diversity has also been associated with reduced democracy, slowed economic growth, falling social cohesion and foreign aid, as well as rising corruption and risk of civil conflict.³

The loss of social cohesion bears emphasis. Disapproving of birds flocking together is beside the point; it is a biological fact that needs to be taken into account.⁴ Rising diversity within human societies tends to drive people apart, causing them to take sanctuary in individual pursuits and ethnic communities. The practical consequences are reduced public altruism or social capital, evident in falling volunteerism, government welfare for the aged and sick, public health care⁵ and a general loss of trust.⁶ Ethnic diversity is second only to lack of democracy in predicting civil war.⁷ Globally it correlates negatively with governmental efficiency and prosperity.⁸

Thus the thrust of accumulating research in several disciplines indicates that unrestricted mass immigration would be disastrous for wealthy countries. Some of this research has been well publicised; some has been published in Australia.

There are also philosophical issues that deserve comment.

I found the single-minded concern with Third World poverty puzzling, especially coming from a declared moral universalist. It is true that poverty would be reduced for those immigrating to the wealthy West, but do not the populations of industrial countries also have interests – in ecological sustainability and national continuity – that would be injured by the influx of millions of foreigners? Should not global problems be solved in ways that optimize interests instead of benefiting one population at the expense of another? Should we not be aiming at win-win outcomes?

From the global perspective, humanity as a whole stands to lose from overpopulation. As the late Garrett Hardin pointed out, allowing poor countries, which generally have high birth rates, the expedient of offloading excess population on low-birth rate regions reduces the incentive to solve their own population problem, for example by tackling the poverty and under-education of women. Global overpopulation can only be solved one country at a time, not by rewarding profligacy.

Another philosophical issue is Prof. Bagaric's equating parochialism with morally repugnant "racism". Surely that is not true, firstly because "racism" has no agreed definition and has been deployed for ideological and ad hominem purposes. It is more an instrument of abuse

than of reason. If its use cannot be avoided it should be reserved to describe ethnically aggressive statements and acts, not the peaceful expression of pro-social sentiments common to humans everywhere.

Secondly, the notion that preference for one's own people is immoral ignores the universal interest we all share in particular affiliations. All humans share parochial interests that give rise to social preferences. It would be maladaptive not to prefer people of our own type, beginning with kin. And in general this preference is moral. Bearing and caring for our own children, choosing friends on intuition, and having a special affection for our own country cannot be equated with hating others.⁹ A liberal society that allows free expression of these moderate preferences is hardly the moral inferior of one in which the elite scolds and punishes the people's aspirations to have a country of their own.

The universality of parochial interests contradicts Prof. Bagaric when he states: "For most of human history there have been few migration limits. . . . A relevant reason [for restricting immigration] cannot be a person's birthplace. This is merely a happy or unhappy coincidence." The anthropological reality is the precise opposite: until recent decades almost all human societies have sought to prevent permanent mass migration. Western societies since about 1965 are rare exceptions. Hunter gatherers and primitive agriculturalists, farmers and herders have all laid claim to a territory and fiercely defended it. Marriage partners have been found almost exclusively within the ethnic group, encompassing the local dialect. The psychological motivations for this are well established in such predispositions as social identity mechanisms, collectivism, assortment by similarity, innate cognition of human kinds, and rational choice.¹⁰ Evolutionary origins of territoriality and ethnocentrism are indicated by their being human universals as well as being found in apes. And from the evolutionary perspective, which acknowledges the limited carrying capacity of all territories and of the world itself, it is maladaptive to allow one's lineage – family, clan, or ethnic group – to be replaced by others.¹¹

The vital interest all societies have in controlling a territory also falsifies the assertion that national security consists solely of defending individual citizens from attack, for example by vetting immigrants for terrorist connections as is already the practice with tourists. Unlike tourists, immigrants affect the receiving country's numbers, identity and cohesion. Societies thus have a corporate interest in retaining national sovereignty, which entails control of a territory. This helps explain the historical pattern of corporate liberty being put before citizen's rights.¹² Inviting the world to a country as prosperous as Australia would result in

the displacement of the Australian people inside their historical homeland. This is an outcome even more maladaptive than enslavement because it would be permanent.

The final philosophical point I shall discuss is the claim that open borders are somehow consistent with liberal thinking because everyone in the world has the same rights. The problem with arguing from rights is that they can conflict, as implicitly admitted in the disclaimer that no one should infringe on others' rights. Arguments based on interests have the same problem, but also the advantage of undercutting a mountain of abstractions. Interests are more readily prioritised in accordance with knowledge of biology and society. John Stuart Mill, the father of modern liberalism, though generally a universalist, was sufficiently acquainted with human nature and the real world to support the national principle:

Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart . . . One hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do if not to determine with which of the various collective bodies they choose to associate themselves.¹³

Mill also wrote:

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.¹⁴

Mill is not the final word on these subjects but he does show that basing an argument on rights does not logically entail open borders.

The poor calibre of open-borders arguments raises questions. How could the research documented above be ignored – not even hinted at – by a professional academic in the age of google? Individual scholars are technically responsible for covering the literature bearing on their research. But in this case there is the mitigating circumstance of the general state of the social sciences in Australia and overseas. A month after Prof. Bagaric's article appeared I have not come across one academic rebuttal. The *SMH* has not published a reply by another professor pointing out the obvious empirical fallacies, the failures of scholarship, the sloppy and inflammatory language. Neither has there been a storm of denunciation by colleagues or the media; no multiply-signed letters sent to newspapers defending the

credibility of Deakin University or the humanities and social sciences. No meetings of academics and students calling for an explanation. Nothing on radio or television. The online comments were generally critical and cogent but none of these authors identified as an academic. It seems that ordinary citizens have retained their common sense, while intellectuals are ominously silent.

Mike Steketee, a senior commentator at *The Australian* newspaper (10 April 2010¹⁵), appears to disagree with Bagaric. He also takes issue with Chris Berg,¹⁶ a research fellow at the Institute for Public Affairs who also proposes unrestricted immigration. Steketee writes that advocating open borders is “well intentioned” but would cause “chaos”, without describing the latter state. Well intentioned? He agrees with Bagaric and Berg that opening the floodgates would be ethical and that it would reduce Third World poverty. It would be the liberal thing to do in light of universal human rights: “[W]e believe individuals have the same rights, wherever they live”. But alas democracy would get in the way. Voters would reject the dissolution of the nation state and the installation of a world government. They continue to support (immoral) tough treatment of boat people. Mr. Steketee thinks that despite the proven benefits of immigration the Australian people wish to retain “control of their destiny”, implying that a rational electorate would let go and accept a much larger immigrant intake.

It seems that Mr. Steketee cannot fault Prof. Bagaric or Mr. Berg on social or ethical grounds. Indeed, he agrees with them that the free movement of people across borders is ideal. His disagreement, such as it is, concerns public relations and the pace of transformation that is politically feasible.

Berg’s article strikes a radical libertarian stance that also fails to acknowledge collective interests. Instead he focuses on moral claims, namely that all humans have equal moral worth regardless of where they live (p. 1). He also emphasises the benefits of immigration to immigrants. The following provides the gist of the remainder of his argument:

But immigration is good for the developed world, too. It’s good for the economy—immigrants end up being entrepreneurs and shopkeepers; employees and employers; and consumers and producers. More people mean more creativity, more opportunity, and more culture. Migrants bring skills, knowledge and international connections (p. 3).

As Mr. Berg does not distinguish immigrants by education or origins, every sentence of the above quote is either outright false according to available research or contentious. Immigrants from impoverished countries do not provide overall benefits to advanced economies, though they help some employers by reducing wages.¹⁷ Inequality rises. In the United States Third World immigration increases the size of the overall economy but reduces per capita incomes. It is the latter that affects living standards. Immigrants from different cultures differ dramatically in their educational performance and entrepreneurship for several generations.

Prof. Bagaric writes off the nation as essentially racist. Mr. Berg thinks that “[t]here’s really nothing that special about national borders or the nation itself.” This is a strong claim but it becomes clear that Mr. Berg thinks that a nation is a state, failing to make an elementary and important distinction.¹⁸ A nation is at its core an ethnic group living in its homeland, with shared elements of culture and means of communication. A nation can exist without its own state, an example being the Kurds. And most states contain more than one nation. Examples include empires and the products of colonial cartography such as Iraq and most of sub-Saharan Africa. All nation states are built around a founding ethnic core.¹⁹ However even without this distinction Mr. Berg is wise to state that: “A nation is the most convenient mechanism by which the institutions of liberty can be delivered.” (p. 4) True enough, but is that not a good reason for libertarians and all who treasure civil rights to defend national integrity?

The intellectual void surrounding the concept of the nation becomes most apparent when Mr. Berg wonders why an otherwise consistent libertarian, Murray Rothbard, thought that culture is worth defending by restricting immigration (p. 6). He quotes Rothbard’s reason thus: “[A]s the Soviet Union collapsed, it became clear that ethnic Russians had been encouraged to flood into Estonia and Latvia in order to destroy the cultures and languages of these peoples.” Not a bad reason. It could be supported by other examples of regimes that have used the demographic weapon, such as China in Tibet or Indonesia in West Irian. The extraordinary thing is that Mr. Berg offers no comment after quoting Rothbard. It is as if the concepts being used, “ethnic” and “destroy the culture and languages” failed to register. But they are real. Australian policy makers should bear in mind that ethnic nationalism is still a powerful force that tears countries and empires apart and creates new nations. Recent examples are the dismemberment of the Soviet and Yugoslavian empires in the 1990s. When people are allowed to choose they vote for policies that make or keep them as the ethnic majority. The result is that spreading democracy creates relatively homogeneous small states

with heightened social capital and its flip side of social stability, efficient government, low corruption, more democracy, and higher economic growth.²⁰ Why would a libertarian want open borders? Why would anyone want to become a minority in his own country?

By the way, one can add to Rothbard's excellent reason for defending the cultural integrity of nations. All the benefits of relative homogeneity (and thus of assimilation and prudent immigration) documented above belong to nations, not to multi-ethnic states. Switzerland's highly decentralised structure in which the cantons resemble semi-autonomous nation states is the exception that proves the rule. The Soviets attempted to Russify Estonia and Latvia as a means of controlling those territories. They assumed that the ethnic-Russian minorities would maintain their identity distinct from that of the target nations for some time. As these national communities shrank in relative size they were meant to become just another competing ethnic group, national unity would be replaced by a multi-ethnic state, and the capacity of the original Estonian and Latvian nations to strategise on their own behalves would be diminished. This is what Rothbard was getting at. And who would put it past the Soviets to have reckoned that if demographic transformation could be continued long enough, the original nation would die. Another might arise in its place but that would take a long time and would not replace what was lost to the original nation.

Combined with the lack of critical response to the Bagaric article, these two pieces, one by a senior press commentator, the other by a researcher with a respected think tank, confirm the impression that the egregious standard of analysis behind open borders advocacy is not aberrant but common at the elite level of Australian political culture. The problem lies with an influential tradition well established within the universities and intellectual class as a whole.

How have so many scholars come to ignore accessible knowledge about human nature and society bearing on issues of immigration and ethnicity? Australia's 39 universities employ thousands of lecturers and professors in relevant disciplines. Any one of them should be able to expose elements of the case for open borders. A first year student of social anthropology should know that borders have always been closed to replacement-level migration. Students of government and sociology should know in outline both sides of the diversity debate. How can bold assertions such as those in the three articles examined here go unremarked? What is being taught at our universities?

A century ago the social sciences began suing for divorce from the biological sciences.²¹ Reconciliation began in the 1970s but sociology, political science, large sections of anthropology and much of the humanities remain aloof. Add to that the political straight jacketing of these fields, an important reason for their doctrinaire rejection of inconvenient scholarship and biology alike, and it is not surprising that we see utopian socialism of the most naive variety emanating unchallenged from the professoriate.

The evidence refuting the case for open borders also applies to the scale and diversity of existing immigration policy. Any policy is suspect that threatens a country's ecological sustainability, increases diversity or tends to subordinate the core ethnic group. Such a trend was already in place for many years before historian Geoffrey Blainey warned that immigration from non-traditional Asian source countries was outrunning its welcome in the mid 1980s.²²

Continuing high level of immigration, let alone open borders, are endangering the sustainability Australia's First World living standards. We are burning up our ecological capital. The only populational difference between the immigration levels adopted by succeeding governments over recent decades and open borders is the date at which the country becomes an overcrowded waste land. In addition ethnic stratification is growing. Most Aboriginal Australians remain an economic underclass and some immigrant communities show high levels of long-term unemployment. Anglo Australians, still about 70 percent of the population, are presently being displaced disproportionately in the professions and in senior managerial positions by Asian immigrants and their children.²³ The situation is dramatic at selective schools which are the high road to university. Ethnocentrism is not a White syndrome and it is not surprising that immigrant communities harbour invidious attitude towards Anglo Australians, disparaging their culture and the legitimacy of their central place in national identity.²⁴

The democratic process has been prevented from correcting our maladaptive immigration policies due to bipartisanship – a long-term deal between the major political parties to keep immigration issues off the table at election time. The collusion began responsibly enough as a measure to facilitate assimilation during the massive post-WWII immigration program from Europe. By the 1970s bipartisanship served to shield both parties from majority objections while they profited from multicultural politics, garnering votes from immigrant communities in exchange for immigration favours. Arguably this collusion would have been difficult to sustain if a substantial number of academics and commentators had spoken truth to power.

Instead, the rapid transformation of Australia by mass Third World immigration has been a top-down revolution in which politicised circles within academia have been complicit. Political leaders and citizens alike look to intellectuals for the facts and analysis needed to make wise policy. In technical matters we have been well served, but not with regard to issues of population and diversity. The policy failure is not limited to the present federal government. It goes back decades, as does the failure of the nation's brain trust. Correction will necessitate tackling the intellectual and ideological corruption of the humanities and social sciences by greatly increasing intellectual diversity and free speech within the universities. The world of ideas is one arena in which diversity is an unalloyed benefit, where imposed homogeneity demonstrably degrades standards.

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ENDNOTES

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