

Between Fear and Fairness

Rethinking Australia's Immigration Story

Prepared by Householders' Options to Protect the Environment (HOPE) Inc. (Australia)

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1. Introduction – Australia’s Continuing Argument About Belonging

In every generation since European arrival, Australia has asked itself who belongs. From the convicts, settlers, and fortune hunters of the nineteenth century to those who came seeking new beginnings in the twentieth century, and the refugees, students, and skilled workers of today, each wave of newcomers has raised the same anxieties and questions among those already in residence. It is this very process that has incrementally re-shaped the boundaries of our national identity. Immigration is thus not a peripheral issue of numbers or visas, but a mirror in which Australians see both their hopes and their insecurities reflected.

The national conversation today reflects that same strained familiarity. Housing shortages, congested cities, and rising costs of living are cited as evidence that migration has gone ‘too far’, even as employers warn of chronic labour gaps and ageing demographics. Commentators speak of ‘sustainability’ and ‘capacity’, yet these terms are ill-defined and so often mean different things to different people. For some, it is about fiscal prudence; for others, environmental limits; and for many more, social cohesion. Beneath these arguments runs a deeper unease that the country’s sense of balance between openness and control has been lost.

To speak about immigration in 2025 is therefore to enter a crowded moral landscape. On one side stand those who view a diverse, outward-looking Australia as the natural expression of its modern maturity, whilst on the other stand citizens who fear that rapid change erodes stability and shared purpose. Between them lies a broad, often silent middle that senses the need for recalibration but resists the bitterness of extremes. This essay seeks that middle ground, not as compromise but as a way to engage in a conversation where evidence and empathy can co-exist.

Australia’s immigration story is, at its core, an exercise in morality. Each policy, from post-war resettlement to the present skilled-migration boom, has carried implicit judgments about fairness, need, and belonging. It is not just about how many people we can accommodate, but what kind of society we wish to become. The measure of success cannot be confined to economic output; it must also account for the more subtle elements of civic trust, cultural confidence, and ecological responsibility that underpin sustainability.¹

History offers both caution and guidance. The exclusionary policies that once defined the nation’s borders remind us how fear can present itself as prudence, yet the multicultural transformation that followed shows the creative power of openness when coupled with fairness and foresight. The challenge now is to sustain that confidence in a world of accelerating movement and uncertainty, and to reaffirm that inclusion and stability are not opposites but mutual conditions of resilience.

In framing this exploration, the essay adopts three guiding assumptions:

- i) That migration is an enduring structural feature of Australia’s destiny, not a temporary pressure to be ‘managed away’.
- ii) That the quality of public conversation matters as much as the content of policy, as rhetoric can either build bridges or weaponise division.
- iii) That a morally coherent immigration approach must integrate social, economic, and environmental wellbeing to ensure long-term national equilibrium.

What follows is not a policy platform but an invitation to think together. The sections ahead trace the long arc of Australia’s inclusion and exclusion, unpack the modern anxieties that shape current debate, and re-examine the ethical foundations of belonging in a global and interdependent society. It will be argued that evidence alone cannot mend fractures of identity and trust; only a renewed imagination that connects responsibility to compassion can do so.

2. Historical Context – The Long Arc of Inclusion and Exclusion

The questions of belonging and balance that animate Australia’s current debate did not arise overnight but rather represent the latest instalment in a much longer national conversation. To understand why migration continues to stir such mixed feelings, we must trace the historical patterns that shaped the more inclusive and constrained phases of public discourse and policy.

Beginnings: Two Worlds in View

Long before any immigration quota or border checkpoint, the first encounter took place on a strip of sand. From the shore, people whose ancestors had cared for this continent for tens of thousands of years watched white sails approach across the water. That moment, in which two worlds first glimpsed one another, through shock and curiosity, became the defining image of Australia's origin story.

The First Fleet's arrival in 1788 began a project of settlement that would soon harden into dispossession. Yet it also introduced the first of many paradoxes, whereby Britain's transported poor, themselves displaced, became agents of another people's displacement. The colony that emerged was both an outpost of empire and a reluctant social experiment; a society of exiles attempting to create order and belonging in a land that already possessed both.²

Nineteenth-Century Openings and Closures

As free settlers replaced convicts and pastoral expansion gathered pace, migration became an instrument of ambition. Assisted passages brought waves of Britons seeking land and fortune, while the gold rushes of the 1850s drew thousands from China, California, and across the Pacific. For a brief moment, Australia seemed a frontier of global movement.

But the same forces that built prosperity also bred fear. Anti-Chinese riots in Lambing Flat and discriminatory colonial laws signalled a new anxiety that cultural difference might threaten social order. Immigration policy, even before Federation, began to divide newcomers into the 'desirable' and the 'other'. The ideal of a cohesive settler society was framed not by openness but by hierarchy.³

Federation and the Myth of Homogeneity

When the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed in 1901, one of its first legislative acts was the Immigration Restriction Act, which formed the legal cornerstone of what became known as the White Australia Policy. It codified racial exclusion under the guise of national integrity, asserting that unity required uniformity. The result was an identity defined as much by who was kept out as by who was invited in.^{4 3}

Yet even in this period of deliberate isolation, Australia's self-image contained contradictions. The same Federation Parliament that wrote exclusion into law also spoke of fairness, mateship, and democratic equality. That moral dissonance, in which professed egalitarian ideals stood alongside an active practice of racial hierarchy, would echo through the century to come.^{4 5}

War, Displacement, and Post-War Renewal

The two world wars disrupted the old certainties. Australian soldiers fought alongside allies from various backgrounds, and returning veterans faced the limitations of parochialism. The devastation in Europe resulted in unprecedented displacement, and in 1947, Australia initiated its first large-scale humanitarian resettlement program, welcoming refugees from war-torn Europe.^{6 7}

This new migration phase was both pragmatic in its drive for labour and reconstruction, yet idealistic in its language of nation-building. The slogan "Populate or Perish" reflected both economic necessity and existential anxiety: a belief that survival required growth, yet that growth must remain under cultural control. Governments promoted 'assimilation', urging newcomers to shed old identities and adopt Anglo-Australian norms.^{5 6}

Still, the arrival of millions of migrants from southern and eastern Europe quietly transformed daily life. Cities filled with new languages and cuisines, as churches, unions, and local clubs adapted and tolerance broadened by familiarity. Beneath the official rhetoric of sameness, a more plural society was already forming.^{5 7}

The Dismantling of Exclusion

By the 1960s, moral and geopolitical pressures began to erode the edifice of racial preference. Decolonisation in Asia and Africa exposed the hypocrisy of discriminatory immigration, while domestic reform movements challenged inequality at home. Successive governments moved cautiously from 'assimilation' to 'integration' and finally to 'multiculturalism'.^{3 5}

The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and the formal abolition of the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy signalled a turning point. Immigration was reframed not only as an economic strategy but as a moral statement; a declaration that diversity could coexist with cohesion. Policy shifted from preserving sameness to managing difference, with all the complexity that entailed.³

Multiculturalism and the Search for Balance

The late twentieth century brought new arrivals from Vietnam, Lebanon, and Latin America, and later, from Africa and the Middle East. Programs of refugee resettlement, family reunion, and skilled migration expanded in tandem. Multiculturalism evolved from a policy slogan into an everyday reality.⁵

Public sentiment oscillated between pride and discomfort. Many Australians embraced the enrichment of language, food, and art, while others felt unsettled by the pace of change. Governments responded with initiatives to promote community harmony and citizenship education, seeking to anchor cultural diversity in shared civic values.⁵

Through these decades, the First Nations' struggle for recognition continued alongside the migration narrative as a quiet counterpoint, reminding the nation that belonging cannot be granted by policy alone. While Indigenous and immigrant experiences differ profoundly, both challenge Australia to reconcile settlement with justice. That moral thread, though delicate, runs through every chapter of this history.⁵

Globalisation and the New Century

By the turn of the twenty-first century, immigration had become both normalised and politicised. Economic globalisation demanded the mobility of skills and humanitarian crises required compassion, yet populist politics increasingly framed migration as risk. The balance between openness and control again came under strain.⁵

Successive governments expanded points-tested skilled migration, international student programs, and regional sponsorship schemes, linking entry more directly to workforce and educational demand. Temporary and permanent visas intertwined, creating pathways that were at once opportunity-driven and precarious. New arrivals reflected the world's shifting currents: students and professionals from India, China, and the Philippines, skilled tradespeople and health workers from South Africa, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand and humanitarian entrants from Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and later Syria.⁸

These flows were not accidents of geography but expressions of policy and circumstance. Economic migrants came seeking opportunity in a stable democracy, students came for education and a bridge to global careers, while refugees came because Australia offered safety when few others would.^{8,9}

The early 2000s also witnessed new debates over asylum seekers, offshore detention, and temporary visas, policy instruments that reflected a shift from nation-building to border management.⁵ Public discourse hardened, yet migration continued at record levels, revealing the paradox that Australians remained economically dependent on global movement even as the politics of fear narrowed moral confidence.

Still, the underlying rhythm of adaptation endured. Each wave of arrival forced another conversation about who 'we' are and what 'home' means. From the goldfields to the suburbs of modern cities, the story repeated itself. The pattern is neither linear nor complete, but a cumulative, slow broadening of what it means to belong.

A Parallel Story

While successive governments managed migration as a project of national growth, another, deeper story ran alongside: one that was never about arrival but about endurance. For First Nations peoples, each new wave of settlement and policy reform unfolded across a landscape still marked by dispossession. Even as multiculturalism expanded the idea of inclusion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were asking a different question: how does a nation built on migration reconcile itself with the sovereignty it had never ceded? Their calls for recognition and voice give moral depth to the broader conversation about belonging, reminding Australia that diversity cannot rest securely on the foundations of unresolved justice.

The Long Arc

Seen in retrospect, Australia's migration history resembles a long arc bending, unevenly, toward inclusion. Progress has rarely been smooth or unanimous, with every advance encountered by resistance. Yet each generation has, in its own imperfect way, expanded the circle of belonging. The legacy of exclusion remains in the background of current policy stakeholders and in social divides, but so too does a resilient belief that fairness and opportunity should define the national character.

Understanding this lineage matters because today's arguments about population, housing, or social cohesion draw unconsciously upon it. The fears of being 'overwhelmed', the pride in being 'a nation built by migrants' and the caution toward rapid change all echo earlier eras. Recognising those echoes allows a calmer conversation about the present.

Australia's migration story, for all its progress, has also been shaped by the economic narratives of its time. After the Second World War, migration became central to a national strategy of reconstruction and growth. The call to "populate or perish" was more than a slogan; it reflected a conviction that prosperity depended on expansion in the form of more workers, more houses, more production, and more people to fill the vastness of the continent. In the decades that followed, this belief hardened into an orthodoxy that still dominates political thinking today.

3. The Growth Illusion: How Economic Dogma Shapes the Migration Debate

Few ideas are as deeply entrenched in modern politics as the belief that economic growth is both inevitable and desirable. It sits beneath nearly every headline about interest rates, wages, productivity, and population, a quiet assumption that progress can be measured in percentages and that prosperity is the natural outcome of expansion. Yet beneath this arithmetic lies a troubling illusion: that growth itself guarantees fairness, that a rising tide must eventually lift all boats.

For decades, governments have told this story while quietly adjusting the levers that keep the illusion intact. When housing prices soar, the Reserve Bank raises interest rates in the name of 'stability', a blunt instrument that punishes mortgage holders and renters while leaving speculative wealth untouched. When wages stagnate, migration is invoked as both the problem and the solution, too many people, too few workers, not the right skills, anything to keep the spotlight away from structural inequality. Each shift in rhetoric serves the same purpose: to deflect attention from the architecture of the system itself.

That architecture does not end with corporate boardrooms or Cabinet tables. It extends into the everyday economics of comfort, the investment property, the self-managed super fund, and the expectation that housing will appreciate faster than wages. In ways that often go unspoken, many of us have become minor shareholders in the growth machine, our security and aspirations bound to a system that rewards scarcity and penalises empathy. This is not a matter of individual guilt but of social design, a structure that turns citizens into stakeholders in inequality even as they lament its effects.

When the cost of living rises, frustration seeks an object. It is far easier to blame migrants, governments, or abstract 'markets' than to acknowledge that much of the wealth dividing society flows not only upward to corporations but inward toward the already comfortable. The politics of resentment thrives on this dissonance. It invites people to condemn the consequences of a system from which they still hope to benefit.

At its core, neoliberal capitalism depends on a cycle of perpetual expansion and unequal reward. Governments rely on GDP growth to justify budgets and maintain electoral confidence. Corporations rely on expanding markets and populations to sustain profit margins. Central banks fine-tune the entire machine by controlling the cost of money rather than confronting the distribution of wealth. The result is a carefully choreographed distraction, a moral sleight of hand that turns complex systemic failures into simplified cultural conflicts.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the immigration debate. Rather than addressing the deeper forces that drive inequality, such as tax avoidance, financial speculation, and the enclosure of public wealth, political discourse redirects public frustration toward population numbers. Migrants become both symbol and scapegoat, praised for their productivity when growth falters, blamed for housing shortages when prices rise. This rhetorical cycle keeps

the conversation safely within the growth frame and ensures that no one asks the more unsettling question: growth for whom?

The real crisis is not one of population but of purpose. A society that equates success with expansion will always need more people, more consumption, and more extraction until the ecological and social limits bite. A different path begins when we loosen growth's moral grip and ask instead what kind of economy sustains life, fairness, and belonging.

In such a reframing, migration policy ceases to be an economic instrument and becomes a measure of ethical imagination. The test is no longer how many workers we can import to feed the system, but how we can design a society that values contribution, care, and ecological balance. Growth will still matter, but as a servant rather than a master.

Until then, the illusion endures, a theatre of numbers and forecasts that keeps citizens distracted, markets calm, and the rich secure. But illusions, by nature, are fragile. Once seen for what they are, they lose their hold. And perhaps that is where genuine reform begins, in the quiet recognition that prosperity, like belonging, is not something to be accumulated but something to be shared.

To look beyond this illusion is to see that Australia's migration debate is not simply about numbers or national identity but about the kind of economy and society we are willing to sustain. When growth becomes the measure of worth, fairness and empathy are easily displaced. But when we begin to ask how prosperity might serve human and ecological wellbeing, the conversation changes shape. The question ceases to be, "How many should we take?" and becomes, "How do we live well together within our means?" It is from this shift from expansion to balance, from transaction to relationship, that a more honest and inclusive vision of belonging can emerge.

4. Beyond the Growth Frame: Inequality, Insecurity, and the Search for Blame

If the previous section exposed the illusion of perpetual growth, this one explores its human aftermath. The promises of prosperity and trickle-down fairness have left many Australians feeling that they have done everything right yet still fallen behind. The house that once symbolised stability now represents unattainable aspiration. Secure employment has given way to short-term contracts and stagnant wages, while the cost of essentials continues to climb. Against this backdrop, the migration debate becomes not just an argument about numbers but an outlet for frustration and loss.

Public discourse often treats this discontent as a clash of values, when it is equally a collision of lived experiences. In cities where housing and services strain under pressure, newcomers can appear as competitors for scarce resources. In regions facing depopulation or labour shortages, migrants are welcomed as lifelines for local economies. Both reactions are understandable, but each is filtered through a broader sense of precariousness produced by the growth model itself. When opportunity narrows, belonging can feel like the trade-offs are too great.

Political rhetoric amplifies this insecurity. Talk of 'big Australia' or 'border control' offers simple explanations for complex problems. These slogans frame migration as the cause rather than the mirror of inequality, inviting citizens to choose sides rather than address causes. The moral tension lies not between open and closed borders but between two competing fears, the fear of losing what one has and the fear of being excluded from what others enjoy.

Yet there are signs of renewal beneath the noise. Local councils, community groups, and regional employers continue to demonstrate that inclusion can strengthen rather than dilute the social fabric. Where policy and planning link migration with tangible public benefit (such as affordable housing, training pathways, health access, and environmental limits), resentment can soften, and people are less susceptible to statistics and more to visible fairness.

To move beyond the growth frame is therefore to widen the field of vision. It means recognising that migration debates are, at heart, reflections of how fairly we distribute opportunity and how honestly we share responsibility. The task is not to silence economic concerns but to situate them within a broader ethic of reciprocity. A society that measures success by collective wellbeing will find less need to assign blame. And it is from that recognition that the next stage of discussion, separating myth from measurable reality, must begin.

5. Myths and Realities: What the Evidence Really Shows

Having considered the various aspects of belonging and morality in earlier sections, we now turn deliberately to the field of evidence to test the claims that so often shape public debate. By placing perception beside fact, we begin to see how much of what we fear reflects media framing or policy design rather than migration itself.

Myth 1: “Immigration takes jobs from Australian-born workers and pushes wages down”

The notion that migrants undercut local employment has long been a fixture of Australian politics. Yet research consistently finds the opposite. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development observed that a one-percentage-point rise in migrant inflows correlates with a 0.53% increase in employment among Australian-born workers, while regions with a 10% larger migrant share record higher overall wages.⁹ The Committee for Economic Development of Australia similarly concluded that migration “does not harm the employment prospects of local workers, and the overall effect on wages is small to negligible, and sometimes positive”.¹⁰

What complicates this picture is the structure of the economy itself. Certain industries have come to depend on migrant labour precisely because it is undervalued. Agriculture, hospitality, aged care, and manufacturing rely heavily on temporary or insecure workers to keep costs down and production moving. This reliance reflects not the failings of migration, but the dynamics of a system that treats low pay as a competitive tool. Migrants, eager to establish a foothold, often enter the labour market where bargaining power is weakest. Their willingness to accept lower wages is understandable, yet it can entrench a wider pattern of wage restraint that affects all workers.

Seen in this light, immigration does not cause inequality; it reveals it. The deeper question is not whether newcomers take jobs, but why so many jobs are structured to depend on vulnerability. A fairer system would value essential labour, whether local or newly arrived, as part of a shared social contract rather than a disposable cost.

Myth 2: “Immigration is driving housing unaffordability and weakening social cohesion”

Rising rents and mortgage rates have led many to link immigration to housing stress and social division. The 2024 *Mapping Social Cohesion* survey found that almost half of respondents viewed immigration as “too high,” but most cited housing costs and infrastructure pressures as their concern rather than cultural change.¹¹ Yet social cohesion in Australia remains broadly steady, even through periods of record population growth.¹² The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare notes that discrimination against migrants, rather than diversity itself, poses the larger risk to cohesion.¹³

Housing stress is real, but its causes run far deeper than population growth. For decades, governments have treated housing as a financial asset more than a public necessity. Tax settings have favoured investors over first-home buyers, while planning systems have struggled to release land and coordinate infrastructure at the pace required. These factors have allowed speculative demand to outstrip supply, particularly in the major cities. The result is a market that rewards accumulation and treats shelter as a commodity rather than a right.

Immigration interacts with these dynamics, but it is not their origin. Blaming newcomers for housing shortages is politically convenient because it shifts attention away from the difficult reforms needed to fix the system, such as rebalancing tax incentives, reinvesting in social housing, modernising planning approvals, and aligning population policy with regional development. When governments fail to plan for growth or to distribute it fairly, frustration finds an outlet in visible change (e.g. the arrival of migrants), even though the real constraint lies in the political and economic design.

Social cohesion follows a similar pattern. Communities under financial stress are more prone to division, but the driver is insecurity, not diversity. When public systems are under strain, the perception of competition for housing, jobs, or services deepens mistrust. Yet the remedy is not to close borders but to rebuild fairness and confidence at home. Cohesion tends to grow where people feel secure, heard, and included, not where they are encouraged to fear one another.

Myth 3: “Migrants are a burden on the welfare system and offer little economic benefit”

It is often claimed that newcomers arrive only to draw on public services and contribute little in return. Yet the evidence paints a more complex picture, with clear differences across migration streams, and highlights how policy, support, and opportunity shape outcomes.

For the skilled migration stream, the story is relatively straightforward. Data show that permanent skilled migrants have high employment rates and earnings close to, or sometimes above, the national median. For example, overall permanent migrants aged 15-64 had a personal-income payment rate of 83% in 2022-23, while skilled-stream migrants had a rate of 88%. By contrast, those arriving under the humanitarian program face significantly steeper

settlement challenges. A recent Australian Bureau of Statistics release shows that for humanitarian migrants who had been resident in Australia for less than five years, only 36% of those aged 15-64 received a personal income in 2022-23.¹⁴

The reasons are clear. Humanitarian entrants often arrive after periods of displacement or trauma and must rebuild their lives from disrupted education or careers. The Australian Institute of Family Studies finds that these migrants face long periods of under-employment, occupational downgrading, and difficulty transitioning into roles aligned with their skills.¹⁵ Similarly, Treasury research shows that while skilled-stream migrants perform strongly, family and humanitarian visa holders generally record weaker short-term economic outcomes than both skilled migrants and Australian-born workers.¹⁶

Despite these disparities, the moral claim that migrants are net burdens is unsupported. Migrants of all streams contribute in multiple ways as workers, consumers, taxpayers, and community members. The divergence in outcomes reveals not failure of migration itself, but the limits of support, recognition, and structural inclusion. From the standpoint of justice and belonging, it becomes a question of design: are we offering newcomers the pathways, recognition, and social support that enable meaningful participation and contribution? For the humanitarian cohort in particular, accepting our moral responsibility means ensuring that settlement policy is adequately resourced; not to treat them as passive dependents, but to unlock their potential for benefit to themselves, their families, and the broader society.

Myth 4: “Immigrants bring crime and weaken the justice system”

Fear of crime is among the oldest reactions to migration, yet it has little basis in evidence. National data show that overseas-born residents make up about 14% of Australia’s adult prison population, well below their share of the community.¹⁷ This pattern has been consistent for decades, suggesting that migration itself does not increase crime.

Where disadvantage and exclusion cluster crime can rise, but the cause is structural, not cultural. The factors that drive offending are poverty, disconnection, and inequality, not country of birth. Recognising this distinction matters: when communities are supported to participate fully, they become safer and more cohesive, not more divided.

Myth 5: “Migration numbers are out of control, and Australia cannot cope”

Protests and online forums increasingly frame immigration as a problem of sheer volume. Yet recent analyses show that claims of “record migration” exaggerate the facts. SBS News and *The Guardian* both report that protest figures often conflate short-term arrivals with permanent settlement, giving a distorted picture of population growth.^{18 19} Although the post-pandemic rebound was steep, migration rates remain within historic ranges once temporary visa cycles are accounted for. What overwhelms infrastructure and housing is less the number of people than the failure to plan. For decades, successive governments have allowed population and service investment to drift apart. Migration exposes that gap; it does not cause it.

Myth 6: “Cultural diversity fragments society and weakens democracy”

Anxiety about identity often surfaces as the belief that diversity erodes common values or civic trust. Yet the evidence suggests that inclusion, not homogeneity, sustains democratic health. When migrants are welcomed, recognised, and supported to participate, levels of civic engagement and community volunteering tend to rise.²⁰ International research shows that diverse societies with strong civic institutions are often more adaptable and resilient than those built on sameness.²¹ The risk to democracy lies not in difference but in exclusion. A confident democracy builds shared purpose through fairness, representation, and mutual respect.

Myth 7: “Migration is damaging the environment and fuelling urban sprawl”

Some protesters now link migration with environmental decline, arguing that population growth inevitably worsens climate and land-use pressures. The relationship is far more complex. Environmental stress depends chiefly on how cities are designed and how energy is used, not simply on how many people live within them. As *The Diplomat* observes, urban sprawl and emissions reflect planning and transport decisions, while migration also provides skilled labour for renewable energy, conservation, and sustainable technologies.²² The path to ecological balance lies in better planning and cleaner systems, not in smaller communities.

Taken together, these myths reveal a common thread. When unease about migration grows, it usually mirrors deeper failures in housing, infrastructure, or inclusion rather than problems created by newcomers themselves. Myths persist in the spaces where leadership falters, and evidence is drowned out by fear.

The next section turns from diagnosis to direction: how Australia might rebuild trust and purpose in its immigration system, guided by fairness, foresight, and a renewed sense of belonging.

6. Rethinking the Conversation

If myths grow where leadership falls silent, then leadership might begin with something simpler, rebuilding trust in the story we tell about who we are. The trouble is not only misinformation but the narrow way we frame the whole subject. Migration is too often discussed in terms of numbers, targets, and costs. To find our way again, maybe we need to talk less about totals and more about belonging, about how people live side by side and build a life together.

Reclaiming the Moral Ground

The language of migration policy has become dry and distant. Terms like ‘intake’ and ‘caps’ serve officials well enough, but they leave out the people behind them; the families, the hopes, the daily acts of starting again. When the debate is reduced to volume instead of value, it is no wonder that migrants start to sound like statistics. When we talk instead about ‘people’, the conversation feels human and connected.

UNESCO reminds us that societies that nurture fairness and inclusion are the ones that stay strong under pressure. That is not idealism, it is simple experience. When people feel welcome and supported to take part, they give back; when they are treated with suspicion, trust breaks down. Belonging cannot be created through quotas or paperwork alone. It has to grow out of how we treat each other, the tone we set, and the stories we choose to tell about who we are as a country.

Beyond the Growth Lens

For decades, migration has been discussed mainly in economic terms, such as filling skill gaps, boosting GDP, and maintaining a healthy tax base. There is truth in that story, but it leaves out what really shapes people’s lives. When belonging is measured solely by economic output, people become numbers and their contributions are reduced to market transactions. It also hides the larger pattern behind our frustrations.

Many of the problems blamed on migration are symptoms of a deeper system that has treated the market as the only measure of value. As Grace Blakeley writes in *Vulture Capitalism*, when governments and corporations become partners in the same growth game, democracy starts to hollow out from within. Public goods are sold off, wealth concentrates at the top, and ordinary citizens are told that private profit is the price of progress. We are left with the illusion of prosperity and the reality of scarcity.²³

Most people can feel that contradiction even if they do not name it. They hear promises of reform while watching wages stall, rents climb, and services shrink. They are told that migration policy will fix what are, in truth, failures of economic design. When success is judged by profit alone, fairness and stability quietly fall off the ledger.

The challenge is not to abandon growth, but to decide which kind still serves the public good. Markets have their place, but they cannot carry the whole moral weight of a society. A democracy built only on competition will eventually exhaust its own trust. Policy needs to find its balance again, so that the economy works for people rather than the other way around.

Recent studies already hint at this shift. The Centre for Population notes that long-term outcomes for migrants depend as much on opportunity and belonging as on qualifications.¹⁶ The Scanlon Foundation finds that trust in institutions rises when people believe the system is fair.⁶ These insights suggest that when fairness becomes the measure of success, both democracy and prosperity are strengthened.

Listening Before Arguing

Changing how we talk about migration also means changing how we listen. People's worries about migration are not always born of prejudice. They often come from feeling left behind, or unheard, or uncertain about the future. When citizens feel ignored, fear finds a home. Good leadership listens first.

Most Australians still see migration as a positive part of our story, but they also worry about how it is managed. Those feelings deserve respect. Listening does not mean agreeing with every view; it simply means understanding that fear and generosity often live in the same heart. When we meet one another with a bit of patience and curiosity, an argument can turn into a conversation. The question then becomes not *should* we remain open, but *how* we stay open in ways that feel fair to everyone.

A Shared Vocabulary of Belonging

Australia's migration story has always been a mix of self-interest and moral hope. From the post-war dream of "Populate or Perish" to the shift toward multiculturalism, each generation has had to redraw the lines of belonging. Now that idea needs to stretch again, to include the realities of climate, fairness, and community life. Belonging today does not mean sameness; it means learning how to hold difference without fear.

That starts with language. Words like 'care', 'responsibility' and 'reciprocity' speak more clearly to what holds a community together. Migration policy then becomes less about logistics and more about the everyday exchanges that make life work: the volunteering, the small kindnesses, the quiet work that keeps society civil and kind.

Policy Through the Lens of Trust

Trust is the innate, underlying currency of any good policy. People need to see how decisions are made and why. When the process feels open and steady, confidence grows. When it feels rushed or hidden, suspicion takes its place. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has shown that social connection and participation link directly to wellbeing and civic life.¹³ We could use that insight in how we plan settlements, housing, and community programs so that integration feels natural and shared.

Trust also grows through mutual respect. Migrants who feel accepted are more likely to invest their energy and families in the nation's future, and communities that welcome them tend to thrive in return. That give-and-take, invisible in the data, is what keeps a society steady when times are rough.

Reimagining Inclusion

To reimagine inclusion is to remember that it works both ways. Newcomers adapt, but institutions and communities need to adapt too. That might mean making it easier for people to use their skills, learning from each other's histories, and giving space for different voices to be heard. Australia's multicultural experience shows that inclusion and cohesion can grow together when fairness underpins both.

The world ahead will test that balance. Climate disruption, shifting populations, and global tension will keep migration on the agenda. The real measure of success may be how we manage it with decency and foresight, staying within environmental limits while still honouring our responsibilities to one another.

The term moral imagination is widely held to have been first used by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).²⁴ Today, it is used widely in ethical and philosophical circles and is highly relevant to the immigration discussion. Professor David Bromwich of Yale University quotes Bourke in discussing his book *Moral Imagination*, "If you succeed, you save those who cannot so much as give you thanks. It is an arduous thing to plead against abuses of a power which originates from your own country, and affects those whom we are used to consider as strangers."²⁵

Simply put, moral imagination is the active practice of picturing yourself in someone else's place, be they a familiar or a stranger, and shaping decisions you would think fair if the roles were reversed. It is a habit as much as a principle. When people believe fairness runs both ways, cooperation comes more easily.

This kind of imagination does not erase difference; it makes room for it. It reminds us that every migration story adds to the shared picture of who we are. If we keep speaking less about control and more about connection, less about cost and more about contribution, that picture stays alive and open.

Closing Reflections

No country ever settles the migration question once and for all. Each generation wrestles with it again in its own time and circumstances. What matters is whether we handle it honestly and with care. Every decision, from a national policy to a neighbour's welcome, helps define the kind of people we believe ourselves to be.

Beneath all of this lies an older story that still shapes our moral bearings. Long before migration became policy, there was an established society with a dynamic culture that had lived here for tens of thousands of years. First Nations peoples continue to remind us that any conversation about belonging in Australia begins on their Country. To imagine a shared future is, in part, to listen to that older understanding of place, one that measures belonging not by arrival or entitlement but by care and continuity.

To hope for a more generous future is not naïve; it is part of the work of belonging itself. That work is never finished. It has to be renewed again and again in how we treat one another and how we speak about who belongs.

A shared moral imagination invites us to see migration not as a contest but as a chance to keep learning who we are together. Australia's strength has always grown from its ability to widen the circle of "us." Yet the questions remain: how wide can that circle stretch, and how much difference can we hold before it frays? There are no easy answers, only the continuing responsibility to listen, to care, and to keep talking. If we can do that, the Australian story will remain open enough for everyone to find a place in it.

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