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Immigration Stereotypes Don’t Add Up
by Peter Browne

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Queuing up to buy myself lunch in the media tent at CHOGM a couple of weeks ago, I came across a depressing scene. A British journalist was haranguing the three people behind the counter, one of them on the verge of tears, the others stunned into silence, because the opening hours of the cafeteria didn’t suit his work schedule. It’s difficult to stand by while someone loudly makes the same point again and again, especially when you’re hungry, so I mildly suggested that he take up the question with someone who might conceivably have some control over opening hours, rather than harrassing the counter staff. Before resuming his tirade he suggested I should “get f***ed”.

I didn’t think much about the incident again until this week, when I read a surprisingly undogmatic article in the latest edition of Quadrant, which was a response to an essay about immigration by Wolfgang Kasper in the November edition of the same magazine. Going back to Kasper’s article, I realised that what I’d come up against at CHOGM was an example of a “transaction cost” – in other words, one of the “petty frictions in the humdrum business of daily life” which “account for no less than half of all the costs of producing and distributing the national product”.

Kasper’s argument is that some migrant groups generate more transaction costs than others. And those costs – not always petty – are borne most of all by ordinary Australians in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. Writing in the aftermath of the Tampa affair, Kasper says that one group in particular, migrants from the Middle East, creates unusually high transaction costs. This is a cultural problem, he says – a result of the deep “tribalism” of migrants from the “desert” nations of the Middle East. In support of his argument he mentions a notorious gang rape trial in western Sydney, an unsubstantiated proliferation of guns and drugs among Middle Eastern migrants, and the alleged mistreatment of women and children.

There wasn’t much else in the long article, which wrapped up a small, highly arguable point in a lot of sweeping generalisations peppered with economistic terminology and swipes at inner-urban “elites”. “All too often,” Kasper asserts in a typical passage, “members of certain immigrant groups admire and applaud prowess in provoking others”. Concluding, he argues that “the quality of particular migrants’ institutional baggage” – in other words, the similarity of their home countries to Australia – “will somehow have to be taken into account in determining the annual refugee and immigrant intake”.

On its own, confined to the pages of a cranky right-wing monthly, Kasper’s article would have done no particular harm. But it was picked up by sympathetic journalists in the mainstream press. In the Sydney Morning Herald, Miranda Devine quoted Kasper extensively in a column which argued that elite opinion is out of touch with the concerns of ordinary, law-abiding Australians. The Australian’s economics editor, Alan Wood,
summarised Kasper’s argument approvingly, concluding that something like what Kasper suggests – essentially a discriminatory immigration policy – could be in Australia’s “national self-interest”.

Perhaps the problem for Kasper, Devine and Wood is that they live no closer to “ordinary Australians” than do the elites they dislike so intensely. Whatever the reason, their arguments are short on supporting evidence, as the latest edition of Quadrant begins to show.

This rebuttal of Kasper comes from an unexpected source. Andrew Kaldor, a former director of the Centre for Independent Studies, a conservative think tank, until recently managed a number of industrial plants in western Sydney and rural New South Wales. Kaldor – the sort of person you’d expect to have run into Kasper’s transaction costs – found the predominantly Middle Eastern migrant workforce at his Punchbowl plant was productive and cooperative, posing no more difficulties than any other group. Their productivity was higher than the Goulburn plant, and industrial relations were smoother than at Milperra. Although he professes admiration for Kasper’s earlier work, he describes his ideas on Middle Eastern migrants as “dangerous” and “objectionable”.

Kasper’s article was an extreme version of a wider, longstanding trend in media coverage of refugees and immigrants, especially in Sydney. Crime rates have been a major focus – particularly violent, drug-related crimes and sexual offences committed by “ethnic gangs” in areas where the Middle Eastern migrant population is large. To a degree unknown in Melbourne for many years, ethnicity and crime are routinely linked in the media.

Australian and international research on the link between ethnicity and crime shows that migrants whose first language is different from that of the host country do indeed have a higher propensity to commit crimes. But their rate of offence relates more closely to their language skills, educational attainment and rates of unemployment than their cultural or racial background. In other words, the research shows that economic and social circumstances rather than ethnicity correlate most closely with higher rates of crime.

The largest concentrations of Middle Eastern migrants in Australia are two regions of Sydney: Canterbury-Bankstown and Central Western Sydney. There, according to statistics from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, rates of most categories of robbery and theft are higher than the state average. But the picture for other offences is far from straightforward.

In both regions the rate of assault is lower than the NSW state average, and none of the local government areas within the regions features in the Bureau’s 25 assault “hot spots”. For drug offences, Central Western Sydney’s rate is lower than average in all categories; in Canterbury-Bankstown, the rate is lower for most categories.

All broad categories of sexual offence in the two regions are below average. For the most notorious sexual offence, rape involving two or more offenders, the rate in Canterbury–
Bankstown (where there were ten incidents during 2000) and for Central Western Sydney (nine incidents) is about one case per year above the state average – but it is lower per capita than a range of other regions including north-western NSW, northern NSW, and the central-west and far west of the state. Again, the two regions don’t figure in the Bureau’s 25 “hot spots” for this category of crime.

So the statistics present a mixed, complex picture of life in these two regions. Like Andrew Kantor’s view from his factories, they don’t support any crude stereotypes.

Which brings us back to the CHOGM cafeteria. It’s quite possible to see the noisy British journalist as another example of that well-known national stereotype, the whinging pom. And the transaction costs associated with this “type” – three staff bailed up for five minutes in return for the sale of two meat pies and a can of Coke – are unusually high. But the behaviour of this man, and the stereotype he seemed to match, are of absolutely no use in predicting the character of the next migrant to arrive from Britain. And Professor Kasper’s stereotype of the Middle Eastern migrant is just as useless as a guide to immigration policy.