The election campaign showed how we don’t seem able to have a rational debate about population, writes Peter Mares.

The “right kind” of migrant? Postwar immigration minister Arthur Calwell (above, left) with the Kalnins family - one of whom was “the 50,000th New Australian” – in 1949.

Photo: National Archives of Australia

WHEN I was a teenager growing up in Adelaide in the 1970s, the prominent local environmentalist John Coulter – doctor, founding member of the Conservation Council of South Australia and, later, a Democrats senator and party leader – was calling for a public debate about population and its impact on Australia’s fragile ecology. In 1994, launching a House of Representatives report on Australia’s Population Carrying Capacity, Labor’s Barry Jones called for an “ongoing and informed community debate on population and resource use in Australia.” Now we have Dick Smith, a new convert to the cause, funding his own documentary to promote debate about population. Is this the debate we never start or the debate we never stop having?

Public concern about population numbers seems to ebb and flow and the most passionate campaigners often suggest that there is a degree of complicity among the major political parties and the media to keep it off the agenda. It’s true that there is no good reason not to talk about population. Coulter, Jones, Smith and others are well-intentioned, intelligent people raising issues that are worthy of investigation and discussion. But talking about population is not easy. As we know from the One Nation days, it can provide cover for all sorts of prejudice. And we have just seen what a population debate can look like when it coincides with a federal election campaign: even without One Nation, it was not an edifying spectacle.

During the campaign the talk about population was usually a thinly veiled attack on immigration. A true discussion about population would debate the appropriateness of pro-natalist policies like the baby bonus, but raising that issue would not have sat very comfortably with all the baby-dandling on the campaign trail. Instead we got a migration blame-game, with all the major parties taking part.

The first Labor Party campaign spot I saw on television featured footage of a customs vessel and Julia Gillard talking about her commitment to “stronger borders” and “cracking down on people smugglers.” Then it cut to footage of busy freeways while she talked about the need for “a new approach to population.” Get the message? Keep those asylum seekers out and the traffic will flow more smoothly.

Ms Gillard reinforced this link in her speech to a population conference in western Sydney on 20 July. “Can we really ask Western Sydney to keep absorbing hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people without regard for the key issue of quality of life?” she asked. “How many more people can fit onto the sardine express to Central, Town Hall or Wynyard? And on our motorways and roads there are days when they could be forgiven that whilst they got into the car in Penrith they feel like they’re in an LA traffic jam.”

So if you’re late for work because the roads are clogged, it’s the fault of too much migration rather than too little planning. If you’re squeezed uncomfortably on a crowded train then that’s because there are too many migrants/refugees/asylum seekers rather than too little investment in public transport.

Before the campaign began Julia Gillard referred to her own migrant background. She told Laurie Oakes that her
parents had migrated from Wales at a time when “Australia reached out for the right kind of migrants, and I hope people would conclude my parents were the right kind of migrants.” At Labor’s campaign launch she again talked about her migrant background and how it informed her ethos of hard work: “When my parents migrated to this country they did not come asking for a free ride, they came seeking a fair go and they found it. They found it and they worked hard for it. When we first came to this country times were tough and Dad had to knock on many doors to get a job, but he got that first job and then a better second job and then he took other jobs to work hard for our family.”

In making these comments the prime minister skated blithely over the complexities of history and policy. When her parents came here in the 1960s, the “right kind” of migrants were chosen in large part by the colour of their skin. Today we select migrants for their qualifications and skills. Without the appropriate level of qualifications, hard-working people like her parents would probably not make the cut, regardless of how many doors they were willing to knock on in search of a job. Julia Gillard’s comments inevitably invite an unspoken question in the mind of her listeners: “Who are ‘the wrong kind’ of migrants?”

Despite the manifest complexity of the asylum seeker issue, Tony Abbott’s campaign strategy relied heavily on the simple promise to “stop the boats.” There are no simple solutions, as we saw once again this week in the rooftop protests at a crowded immigration detention centre in Darwin. The apparently simple solution of mandatory minimum sentences for people-smuggling has not prevented Indonesian fishermen from being seduced into helping sail boatloads of people to Australia. Instead, it has punished people for being poor and vulnerable and saddled Australian taxpayers with the cost and responsibility of managing the long-term imprisonment of scores of unhappy foreign nationals. Their plight, over time, could take on a diplomatic tinge if Jakarta begins to express concern for their welfare.

Complex and fraught as it is, to put the asylum seeker issue at the very top of the concerns facing an incoming government is to dumb down politics. It is reassuring to see that the country independents, in all their discussions with the major parties about who should form government in Canberra, have not once raised the issue of asylum seekers arriving by boat as a major policy concern. They seem to realise that matters like government stability, accountability and democratic processes are more important.

Back in January Mr Abbott seemed to be comfortable with the idea of a Big Australia, just as Kevin Rudd once was. “Since 1970, an Australia that’s four times richer has more than coped with a population that’s two times greater,” he said in an Australia Day address. He saw “no reason to think that Australia has a fixed carrying capacity” and concluded that his “instinct” was “to extend to as many people as possible the freedom and benefits of life in Australia.”

During the campaign Mr Abbott whistled a different tune. Defending the Coalition’s plans to cut migrant numbers, he told Sky News that the idea “that we owe it to the world to take 180,000 or 300,000 as the case may be, year in, year out, is just not right.” This is certainly true: Australia doesn’t “owe it to the world” to take any particular number of migrants. But it is also disingenuous to suggest that altruism or obligation were somehow important factors in shaping Australia’s migration program. Migration has always been built primarily on national interest, with a small humanitarian program on the side.

Listening to the election debate, you would have thought that Australia was full to bursting point – that new migrants were neither needed nor wanted – yet during the campaign it was pretty much business as usual at the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. In week 3 of the campaign I received a media release from the department with the headline, “UK Skilled Workers in Hot Demand Down Under.” The Australian government, it reported, “is hosting an employment expo in London during September to help employers find skilled workers from the UK. Are you skilled in engineering, medical services or trades? If so, Australia needs you.”

Australia seeks out highly skilled migrants to fill gaps in the labour market, yet we then behave as if we are doing the migrants a favour. Which brings to mind Abbas El-Zein’s memoir, Leave to Remain, published last year by the University of Queensland Press. As well as being an elegant writer, El-Zein is an environmental engineer, originally from Lebanon, who came to Australia as a skilled migrant. He recounts how, when he was having a tooth extracted, his dentist asked him where he came from. When El Zein answered, the dentist’s response was,
“Lucky you.”

My dentist went on to inform me that I was one of the fortunate few amongst the multitudes who sought an Australian visa every year. Suddenly, unwittingly, my country of origin turned into a dark place that one could only escape from. The possibility that migration could be unlucky did not seem to have occurred to my dentist. Had I been an Australian living in Nepal or an Englishman living in the Caribbean, I would have probably been seen as an “adventurous” man. The word “lucky” would not have come up.

There was no place for my other stories in my surgeon’s world; no words, simple, short and efficient enough to convey them. There was a form of death there, since I was summarily reduced to a dumb abstraction: a poor man from the Middle East lucky enough to find a better life in Australia.

Next time you have a health problem and you are looked after by a Bangladeshi doctor, a Polish dentist or a Fijian nurse, don’t forget to tell them how lucky they are to have the opportunity to provide you with care.

THE GREENS may have taken a more generous stance than the major parties on asylum seekers, but when it came to Australia’s population (migration) debate they were not above scare tactics either. Appearing on a Q&A panel following the broadcast of Dick Smith’s population documentary on ABC1, party leader Bob Brown warned that by the end of this century the world’s population could reach eleven billion. This alarmist figure represents the most extreme of estimates. The best calculations by those who study these things are that the global population is likely to peak in around 2050 at a bit above or below nine billion and then begin to decline. Providing nine billion people with water, food, shelter and energy while simultaneously cutting greenhouse gas emissions is an enormous and daunting challenge. There is no need to make out that things are even worse.

Senator Brown went on to endorse Malthus’s warning about this problem a couple of hundred years ago. I wonder if he is aware of what the Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus actually preached? Malthus’s simplistic belief was that while population would always grow exponentially unless checked, food production could only ever grow arithmetically – and so food would inevitably run short and famine would result. He failed to foresee such developments as contraception, the liberation of women and the productive revolutions of agricultural science. As Fred Pearce writes in his fascinating new book Peoplequake, Malthus’s solution to the population problem was to allow for the operation of natural laws: those who could not feed themselves should starve. Pearce quotes the following example of Malthus’s thinking:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents, or if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him.

She tells him to be gone.

Malthus backed the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which made workhouses “as like prison as possible.” He was the inspiration for the character of Scrooge in Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, responding here to two gentlemen asking for donations to keep the poor out of workhouses and prisons:

“I don’t make merry myself at Christmas and I can’t afford to make idle people merry,” says Scrooge. “I help to support the establishments I have mentioned” – the workhouses and the prisons – “they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can’t go there; and many would rather die,” responds one of the gentlemen.

“If they would rather die,” says Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”
The election campaign must have been an unpleasant experience for recently arrived migrants. It would have been hard to feel welcome. Former NSW premier Morris Iemma – like me, the Australian-born child of migrant parents – summed it up well on Radio National Breakfast last week. He was speaking about Labor’s election campaign in particular, but his comments could equally apply to the other parties. “In the centre, in those middle-rung suburbs of metropolitan Sydney,” he said, “we abandoned multicultural Australia... because we said to them – subliminal message – ‘We don’t want you. We don’t welcome you and we don’t want you.’”