

Notes on Migration

Ian McAuley, prepared for colleagues November 2025

The global scene – past peak babies, peak population to come

The world reached [peak babies in 2017](#). Because there are still plenty of people born in times when we were more fertile (particularly the 1960s), and because we are living longer, peak population is still some decades off. The UN's modelling is for the world's population to [peak at 10.3 billion in 2084](#), up from around 8 billion now.

For more detail it's worth spending 8 minutes on an *Economist* U-tube video: [Why the world's population is heading for collapse](#), which applies a regional analysis to population and which outlines fertility trends within countries. The main message:

Two thirds of people now live in countries where the fertility rate --the number of babies a woman can expect to have in her lifetime – is below the replacement rate of 2.1.

The other third are in sub-Saharan Africa and central Asia.

The UN projections are biased on the high side – peak population will probably come earlier than 2084 – in 2050 by some projections.

It is no longer the case that poor people have more children than rich people: in fact it may be the other way around.

What this means for public policy, particularly migration policy, is in a *Foreign Affairs* article by Nicholas Eberstadt [The Age of depopulation](#). His main finding is that “policymakers are not ready for the coming demographic order”. He suggests reasons fertility rates have fallen. The main one is simple women are exercising choice. He covers dependency ratios, and the economic benefits to countries that take in migrants. He also poses questions challenging our thinking: for example do societies become less tolerant of engaging in war when the casualties are from one or two child families?

Although migration, particularly the displacement of people through wars and famine, looms large in our consciousness, the reality is that in any one year only about 280 million – 3.6 percent of the world population – actually migrate, and much of that migration is short distance. Annual migration to high-income OECD countries – the countries most likely to seek migrants to compensate for their adverse dependency ratios – [is only about 5 million](#).

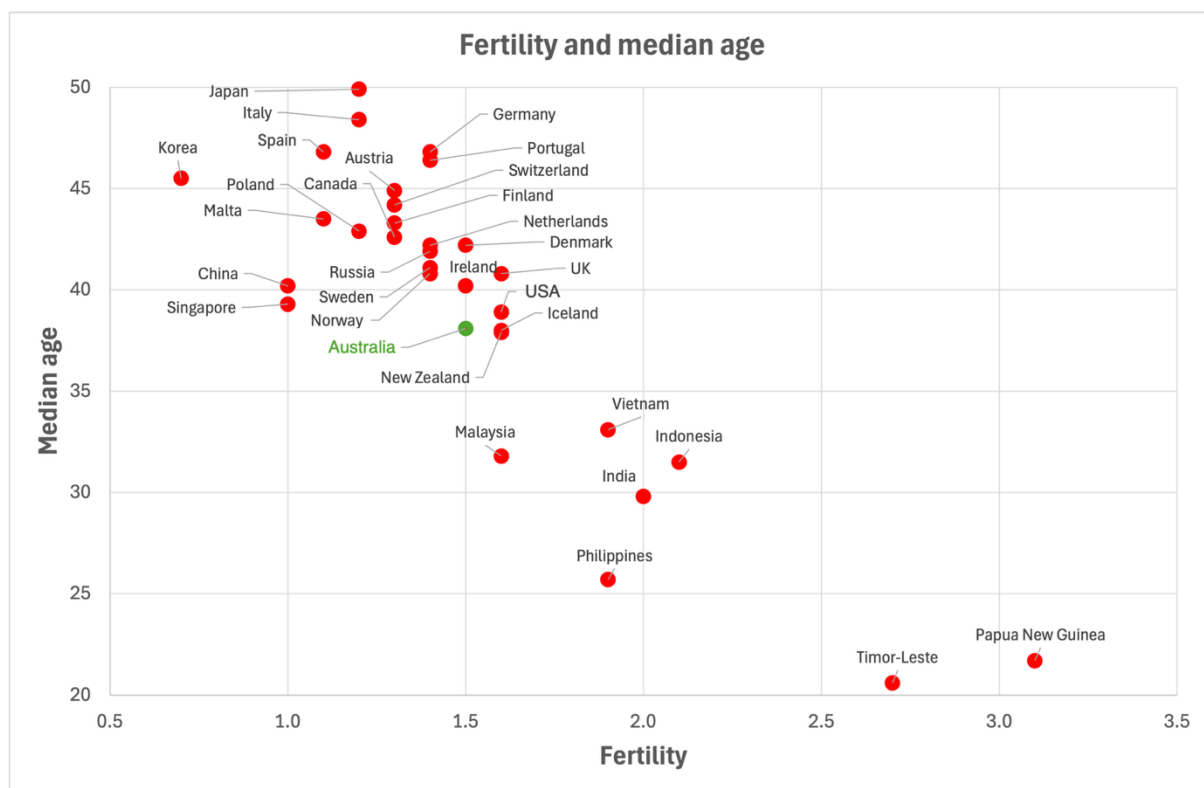
If we look at these figures in a way an economist or stockbroker would, we would say that they are indicative of a “thin” market – 5 million transactions in a stock of 8 billion – a turnover of 0.06 percent. For now it may be a buyer's market, but small perturbations can cause a thin market to collapse. In everyday language, the idea of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” that has underpinned assumptions about the attraction of countries like the USA and Australia, can suddenly become detached from reality.

Australia's atypical situation

Australia's declining fertility was covered in the roundup of 8 November – [Why have we stopped reproducing?](#)

In fact it hasn't been a sudden stop. Our fertility rate has been below 2.1 since 1975. After rising a little earlier this century it has fallen sharply since 2008, to 1.5. In fact that's comparatively high for a "developed" country, and is much higher than rates in Korea, Singapore and China, where rates are 1.0 or lower.

The graph below shows fertility rates and the median age in high-income OECD countries and in countries in east and southeast Asia. The negative correlation between fertility and countries' median age is clear: that's hardly surprising. (Data is from the [CIA World Factbook](#) and the [World Bank](#).)



Australia's position on this graph stands out, because it has a much lower median age than most other "developed" countries.

The explanation lies mainly in immigration. I say "mainly" because our comparatively high fertility rate is also partly responsible.

A figure that gets much airing is the fact that 30 percent of our population was born in other countries, classified by the UN as "immigrant". It's not the world's highest: the Vatican holds top place at 100 percent. There are many countries with small native populations and large foreign populations, such as Qatar, and the UAE. There are tax havens such as Liechtenstein, the British Virgin Islands and Malta. And there are countries such as Jordan and Lebanon that have taken in large numbers of refugees.

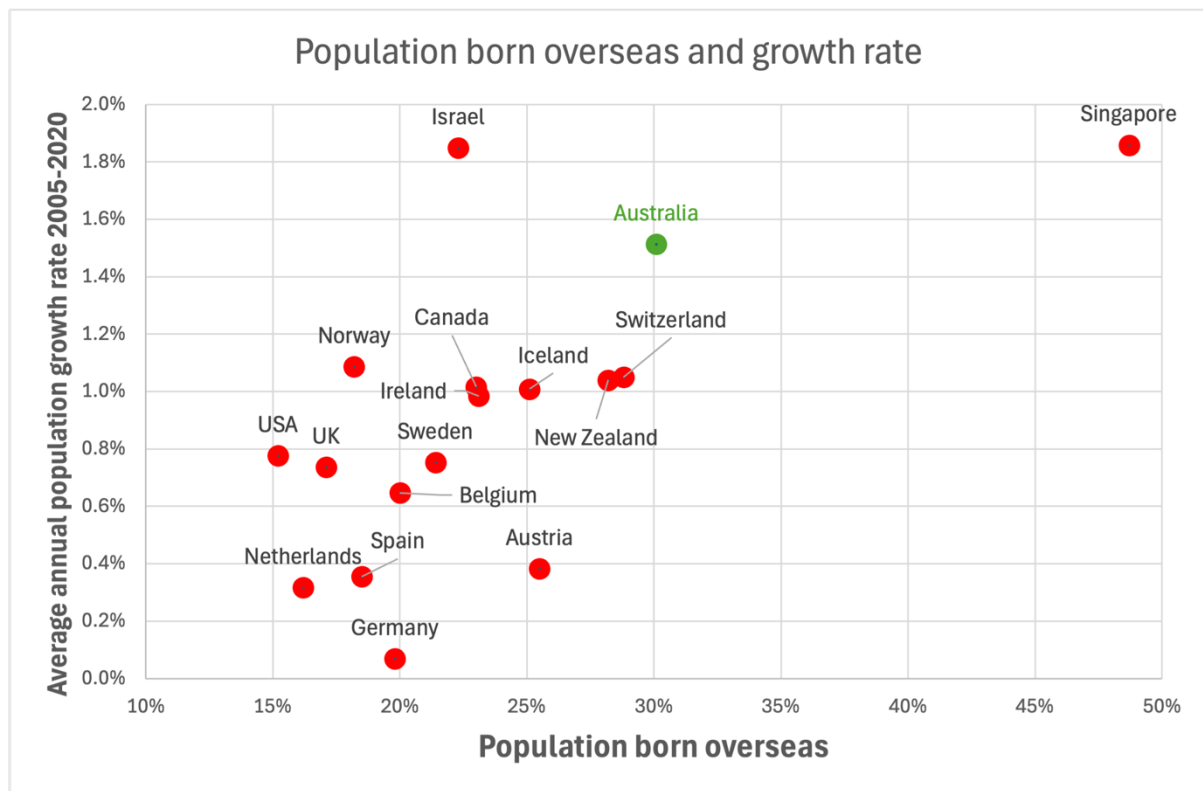
The table below shows the overseas-born population for 17 countries that have controlled migration patterns broadly similar to Australia's. One could dispute what's in and what's out – Singapore with its foreign labourers for example? But I have used this selection to draw attention to two strong points:

- there are other countries nudging Australia's 30 percent;
- and
- although most of these countries have nativist movements, there is not necessarily a strong relationship between the extent to which immigration achieves political salience and a country's foreign-born population. In this context notice America's comparatively low level of foreign-born, but immigration is a huge issue in that country.

Percentage of population born in another country, 2020	
Singapore	48.7
Australia	30.1
Switzerland	28.8
New Zealand	28.2
Austria	25.5
Iceland	25.1
Ireland	23.1
Canada	23.0
Israel	22.3
Sweden	21.4
Belgium	20.0
Germany	19.8
Spain	18.5
Norway	18.2
UK	17.1
Netherlands	16.2
USA	15.2

Source Wikipedia

We would expect that those countries with high immigration also have reasonably high population growth rates. The following graph checks that assumption for those same countries, showing that there is some correlation. We wouldn't expect that correlation to be tight, however, because some countries could have a high rate of immigration and a high rate of emigration, particularly European countries in the Shengen zone where people come and go.



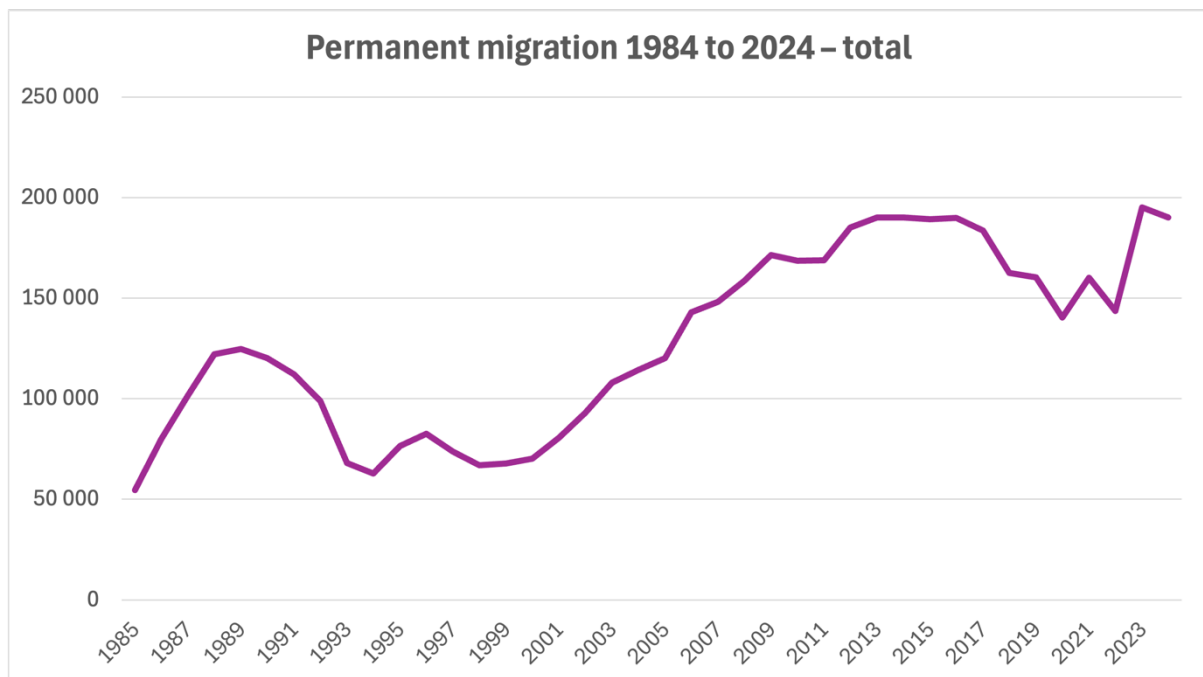
Again, Australia stands out as a country with high population and high immigration, suggesting that, by intention or by accident, immigration has been sustaining a high rate of population growth, at 1.5 percent. That’s high for a “developed” country.

Note that this is from a limited sample – “developed” countries with high immigration. Japan and many eastern European countries have declining populations, and at the other end of the scale are countries in sub-Saharan Africa with population growth rates above 3 percent.

Australian trends – apart from a Covid blip, a steady rate of immigration

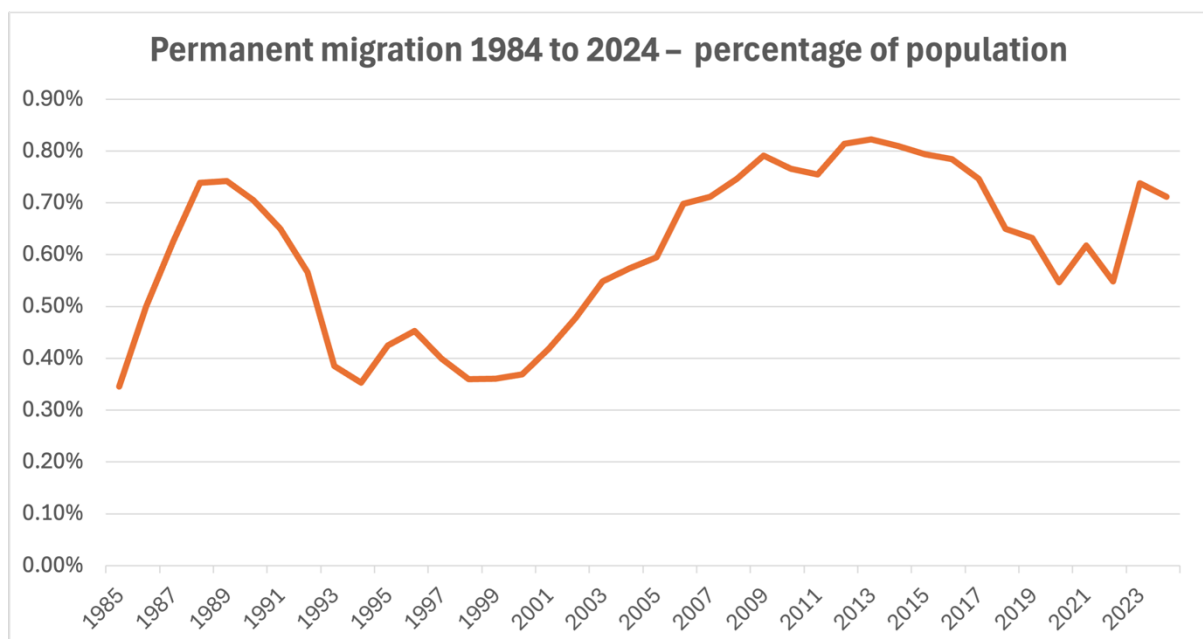
Australia’s permanent migration – the part the government can control in the short term – is shown in two graphs covering the 1984 to 2024 period.

The first graph which is often presented in a partisan context, shows the raw numbers, as provided in the Excel workbook [Historical migration statistics](#), provided by the quaintly-named Department of Home Affairs.



Yes, our permanent migration hit a peak in 2022-23 at 195 000 and in 2023-24 it dropped only marginally to 190 000. We now have data for 2024-25 and the plan for 2025-26, both at 180 000. Details of the categories of permanent immigration for these two years are in a Home Affairs document [Migration program planning levels](#). Of these 185 000 132 000 are in “skill” categories, 53 000 are in “family” categories.

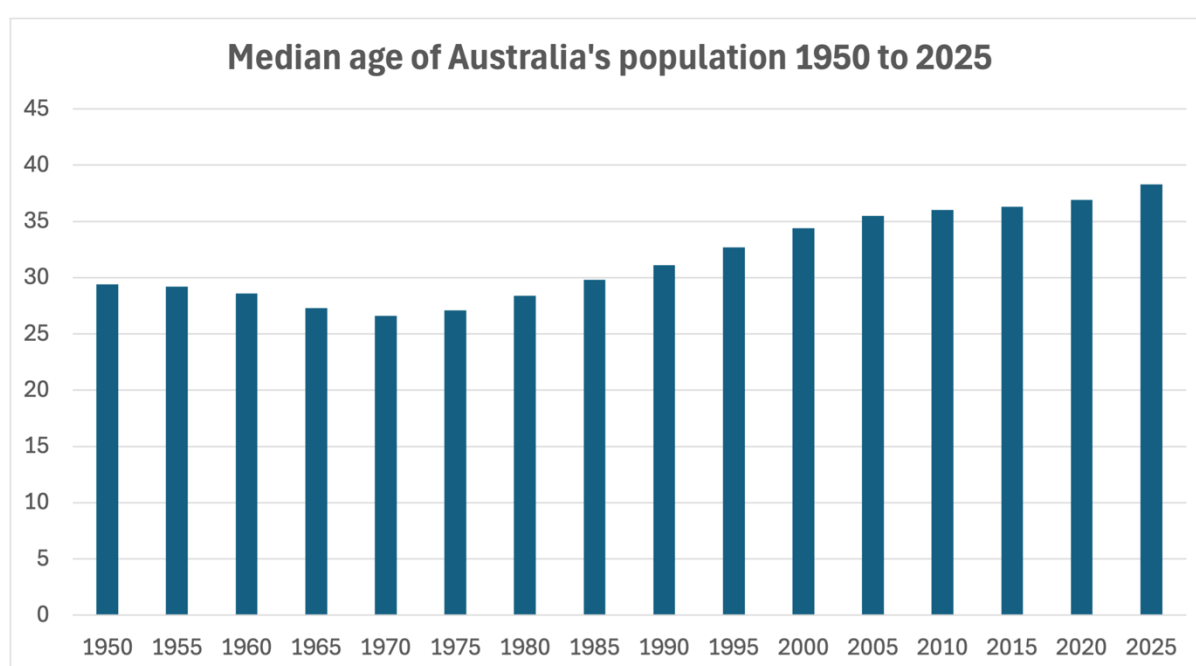
But those raw numbers ignore Covid and our growing population base. The second graph draws on the same data, but expresses it as a percentage of population. It doesn’t look so scary. But it does reveal the Howard government’s decision early in this century to boost immigration, a policy that has been sustained.



It is strange that neither the ABS nor the government presents data in this simple per-capita form. Doing so could help dispel some of the partisan misinformation about immigration.

We don't have consistent data going back to the postwar migration boom, but that same "Home Affairs" workbook shows that between 1945 and 1959 we were taking in 111 000 "Permanent and long-term arrivals", on a population base of around 9 million. That is a rate of about 1.2 percent, which would be well off the chart. Because in those days there would have been few students and others converting short-term visas, that's roughly the equivalent of our present "permanent migration".

It is notable that once that postwar boom was over the median age of our population started to rise, as is shown in the following graph, drawn from [Statista data](#).



That is not to assert that throttling back immigration was the sole cause of our rising age. As pointed out above there was also a decline in our birth rate and life expectancy has risen significantly over the last fifty years.

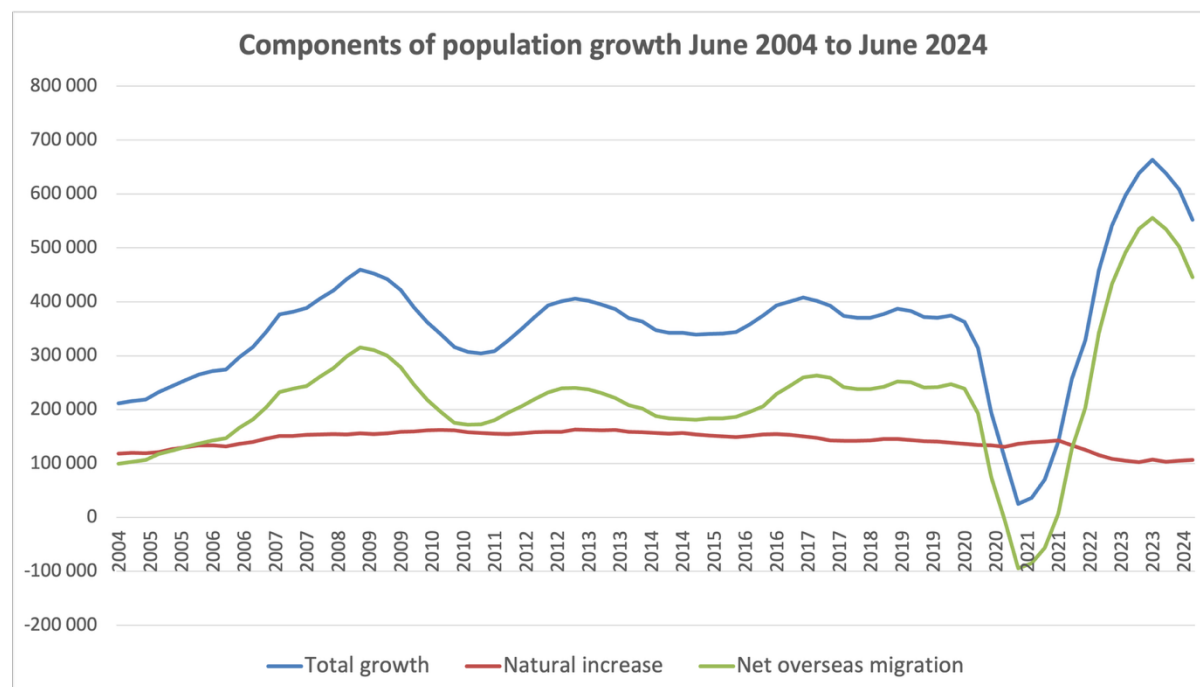
Net Overseas Migration and Permanent Migration: they're different

It used to be so easy in the days when Australia was such an out-of-the-way place that no one thought of coming here as a tourist, for a working holiday, to do business, or to study. We could understand all we had to know with a simple equation.

$$\text{Population (T + 1)} = \text{Population (T)} + \text{Arrivals} - \text{Departures}.$$

We still use that simple equation, and define Arrivals + Departures as "Net Overseas Migration", but it includes only those travellers who have spent at least 12 of the last 16 months in Australia. A rough way of looking at this categorization is that it includes

people who are likely to use some form of long-term accommodation while it excludes those who would stay in resorts, hotels or Airbnb's. The way we categorize travellers is in an ABS document [Measuring Net Overseas Migration in Australia](#). The graph below shows how net migration and natural growth have contributed to our population growth over the last twenty years.

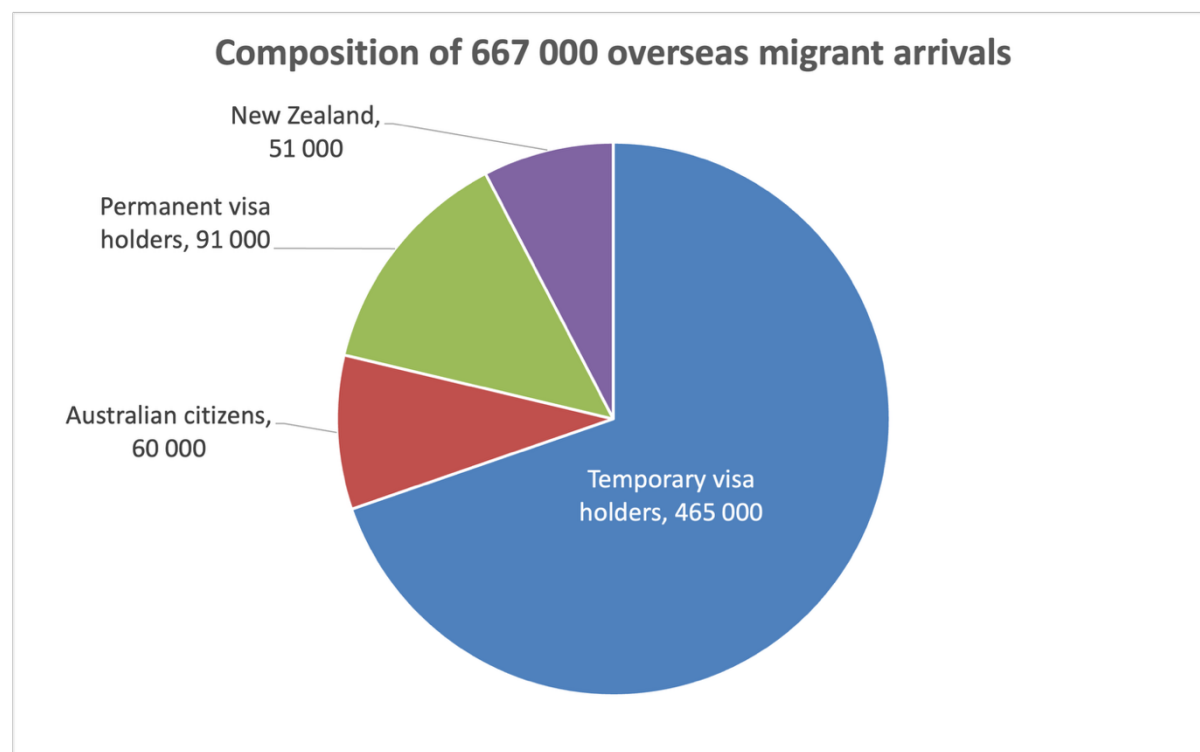


Such unstable figures give plenty of opportunity for partisan interpretation. But it's easy enough to look at the average from March 2020, just before Covid-19 broke out, to the latest figure for the twelve months ended June 2024 to smooth out the bump. Over that period net overseas migration has averaged 247 000 and population growth has averaged 363 000. In other words, around the same levels as in the ten years before Covid-19.

We can get much more detailed breakdown of migration from the ABS bulletin [Overseas Migration](#), which provides details of arrivals and departures. In the year to June 2024 there were 667 000 migrant arrivals, and 221 000 migrant departures, which meant that net migration was 446 000 – the final point on the green line in the above graph.

It would be neat if we could reconcile these numbers of migrant arrivals with our permanent migration figures, but it isn't so easy. One reason is that permanent visas can be issued onshore, typically to people who initially came on student visas, which is why the number of permanent visa holders coming through our airports is much lower than the number of people admitted under our permanent migration program. For example in 2023-24, while our permanent migration program was 190 000 (see above) we see from the ABS migration arrival data that only 91 000 of them turned up at our airports, having been issued visas overseas – the way migrants used to come in the postwar period.

The pie chart below shows the breakdown of those 667 000 migrant arrivals in the year to June 2024. The term “migrants” in this context is confusing, because it actually includes Australian citizens returning home.



That large number of temporary visa holders arriving looks as if it is overwhelming other categories, but it includes, for example, foreign students returning after going home during the summer break – who bring the numbers down when they start their home visit.

These figures on temporary migration, and therefore on net migration, are still heavily influenced by the disruption of Covid-19. In just a few days (19 December) we should see [the figures for 2024-25](#), which may see some convergence to the longer term pattern. That pre-Covid situation saw permanent migration of around 190 000, and net overseas migration of about 250 000.

The Australian government has firm control over the permanent migration figure. It also has control over student visas by setting caps on new visas – [295 000 in 2026](#) – but there are many reasons governments don’t want to discourage foreign students coming to Australia to cross-subsidize underfunding for Australian students. There are powerful rural lobbies who want to see working-holiday visas and temporary visas for Pacific Island workers. Unless the Australian government were to re-negotiate arrangements with New Zealand which essentially allow for free migration, the government has little control over New Zealand migration, which has risen strongly since that country elected an economically destructive right-wing government in 2023. Similarly the government has no control over the number of Australian citizens returning home – although the general pattern has been for more Australians to leave rather than to return.

In all, unless the government is about to undertake a drastic shift in immigration policy, when issues of ageing, dependency, the need for skills, and the influence of strong lobbies are taken into account the Australian government has little room to influence our net migration.

For a description of how our immigration policies have developed, Joe Walker has a 72-minute discussion with Abul Rizvi, former Deputy Secretary of the Department of Immigration, one of a handful of people who understand both the mathematics and politics of immigration: [Inside immigration policy](#). The session was recorded earlier this year before the election. Rizvi and Walker both believed (tenuously) that there is a “bipartisan” immigration policy and commitment to multiculturalism. It also includes Rizvi’s explanation of why many countries are tightening their border controls: it’s not just a response to right-wing nativism.

Where our migrants are coming from – many places.

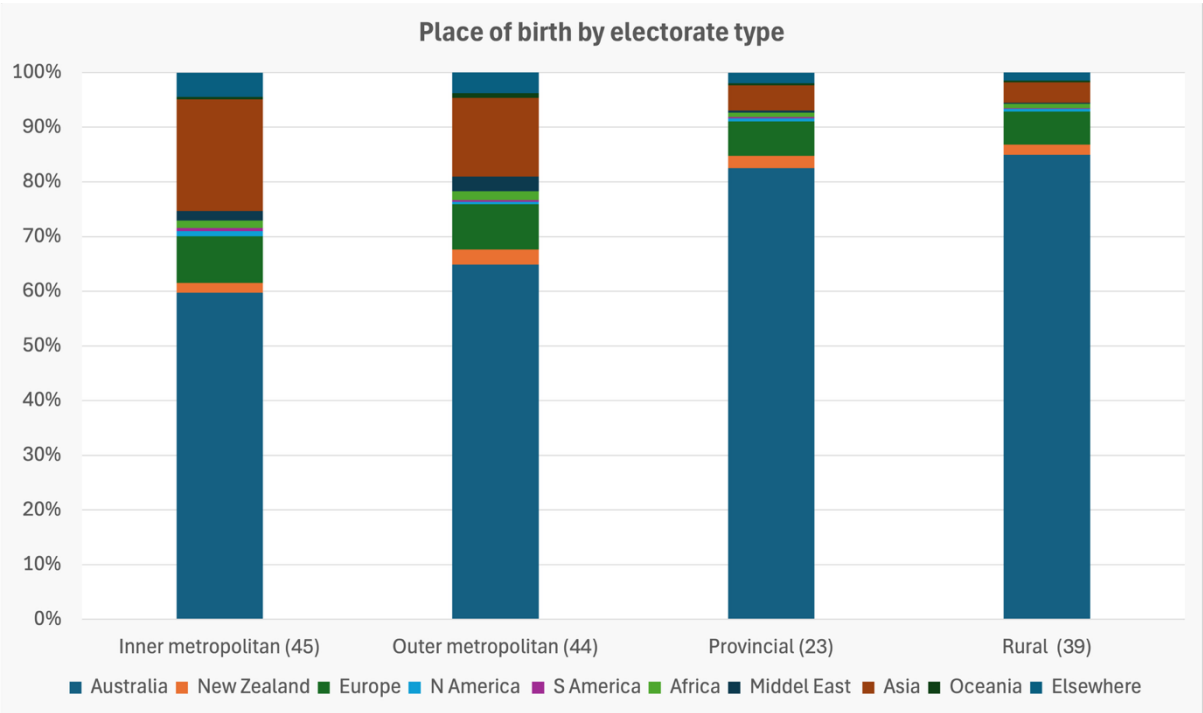
The tables below present two pictures of the diversity of Australia’s immigration. The table on the left shows birthplace (top 20 countries) of 8 million people born in other countries and living in Australia in 2021, while the table on the right shows the same for the 2.5 million migrants who have come in the last ten years. The first table is historical, the second is close to current.

Immigrants' country of birth			
As percent of 8 million foreign-born in Australia, 2021		As percent of 250 000 immigrants who came in the 10 years to 2023-24	
England	13.2%	India	20.3%
India	9.6%	China	10.0%
China	7.8%	Philippines	6.9%
New Zealand	7.5%	Nepal	6.0%
Philippines	4.2%	UK	3.8%
Vietnam	3.7%	Vietnam	3.6%
South Africa	2.7%	Pakistan	3.1%
Malaysia	2.4%	Sri Lanka	2.6%
Italy	2.3%	South Africa	2.2%
Sri Lanka	1.9%	New Zealand	2.1%
Nepal	1.7%	Malaysia	2.1%
Scotland	1.7%	Colombia	2.0%
Korea	1.5%	Thailand	1.9%
USA	1.4%	Brazil	1.9%
Germany	1.4%	Indonesia	1.8%
Hong Kong	1.4%	Afghanistan	1.8%
Iraq	1.3%	Iraq	1.7%
Greece	1.3%	Bangladesh	1.4%
Pakistan	1.3%	Hong Kong	1.3%
Lebanon	1.2%	Iran	1.3%
Elsewhere	30.6%	Elsewhere	22.3%
	100.0%		100.0%

Anyone who has observed Australia’s immigration over a long period would not be surprised to see that 20 percent of immigrants in the first table were from five European countries. These would include people who came as infants or children in the postwar boom.

Where immigrants settle – not in Coalition electorates

Because there are political debates about immigration, using [ABS Tablebuilder](#) I have looked at the distribution of immigrants and native Australians by electorate type, using the Electoral Commission’s four classifications.



The bars tell a story that needs no further explanation, particularly when they are combined with a table of the present representation in the House of Representatives:

House of Representatives, 2025 election							
AEC electorate classification	Labor	Liberal	National	LNP	Green	Ind	Total
Inner metropolitan	35	2	0	0	0	6	43
Outer metropolitan	35	5	0	2	1	2	45
Provincial	15	1	1	7	0	0	24
Rural	9	10	8	7	0	4	38
	94	18	9	16	1	12	150

The graph and table do not precisely align, because the graph is based on the 2021 census and the pre-2024 redistribution, but the differences are minor. And the table misses Barnaby Joyce’s recent migration.

Mixed attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism

There are frequent surveys on attitudes to immigration and to multiculturalism. The general revelation from these surveys is that Australians are sustaining strong support for multiculturalism, but are becoming negative towards immigration. Notes on three polls follow.

Essential, November 2005 [Attitudes to immigration](#)

In 2019, 51 percent of Australians were “generally positive” about immigration, while 35 percent were “generally negative”. There is now equal agreement (42 percent) with these statements, attitudes having hardened in the last two years. Younger people, Labor and Green voters, and men, are more strongly in support of immigration than older people, Coalition voters, and women.

Scanlon 2025 [Mapping social cohesion](#) survey, 2025

This shows shifting attitudes to immigration. Until around 2018 we were split about 35/40 between considering immigration to be “too high” or “about right”. Then we became more positive, but since 2022 attitudes have hardened: “too high” now has 51 percent agreement.

At the same time, however, we have been sustaining strong support for multiculturalism and diversity of our immigration sources.

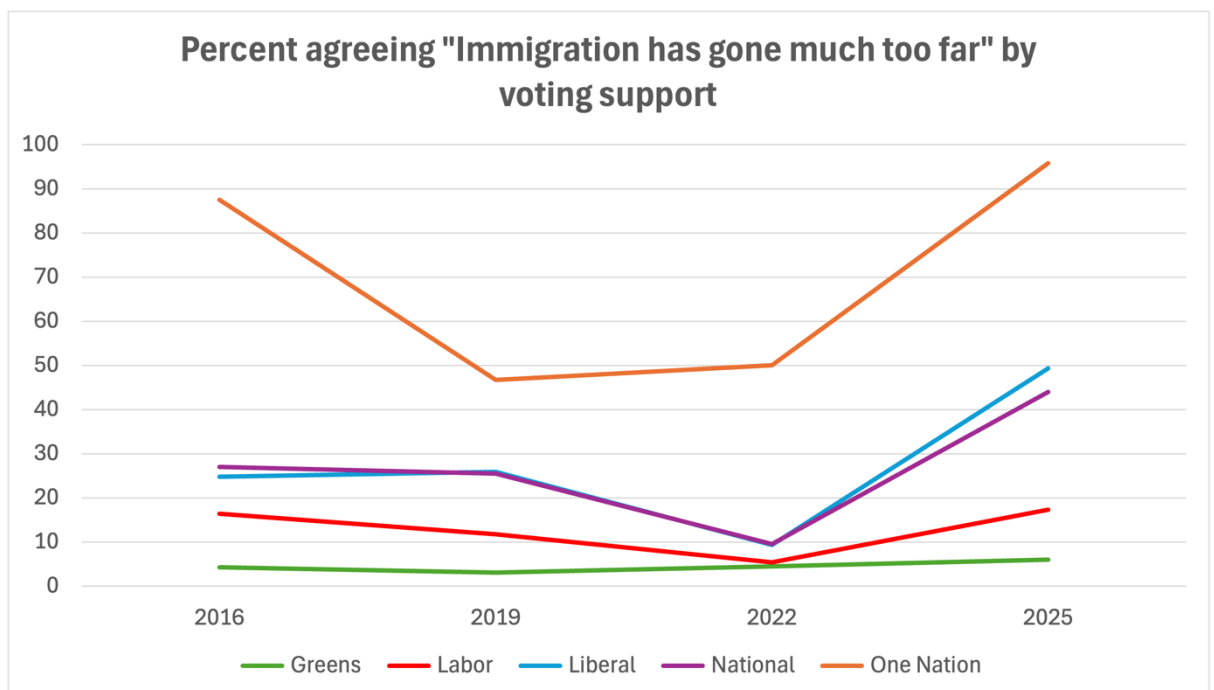
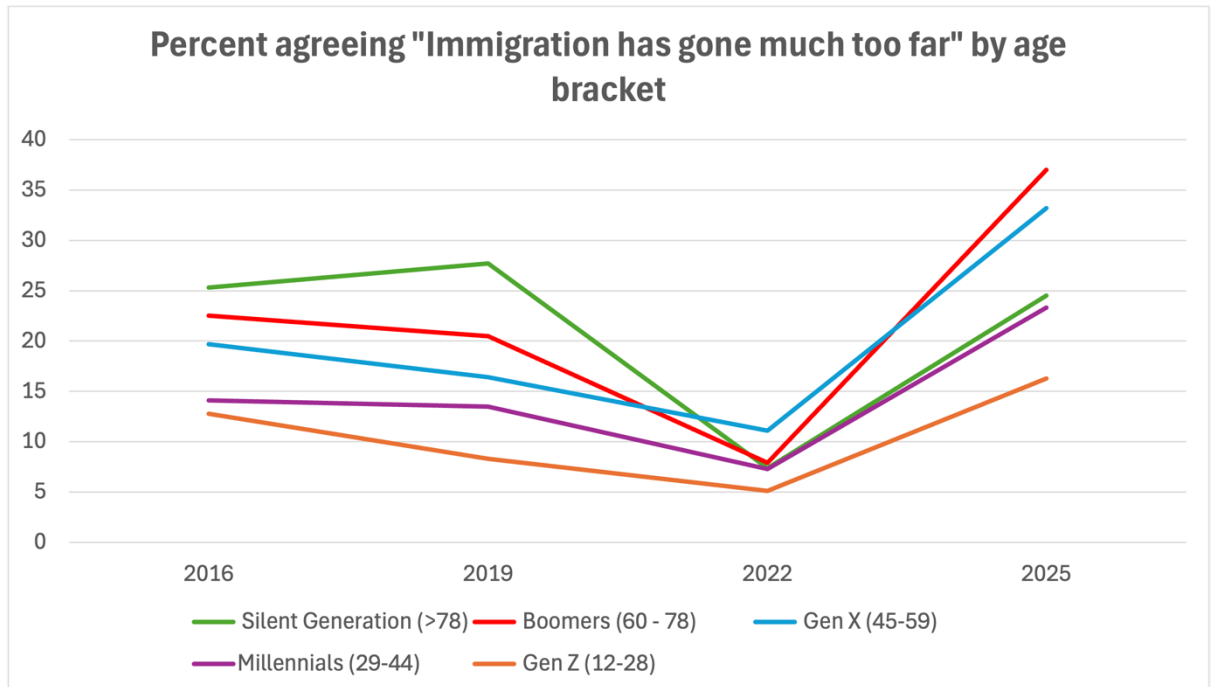
Scanlon has questions about our attitudes to immigrants from selected countries. We feel strongly positive towards immigrants from the UK and the USA, neutral towards immigrants from China and India, and negative towards immigrants from Iraq and Sudan. (These are the only countries mentioned.)

Respondents are also asked about attitudes of people of different religious faiths (not restricted to immigrants). We seem to like Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and Christians, but feel negative towards Muslims.

Australian Electoral Survey, December 2015, compiled by Peter Mayer of the University of Adelaide and Sukhmani of the University of New South Wales, , published in *The Conversation*.

Over the long term, people’s concern over migrant numbers tends to rise in step with the unemployment rate. More recently concern rose during the Covid-19 pandemic (remember those ugly anti-Chinese outbursts) and during the recent far-right anti-immigration protests.

Using AES data they have generated two graphs on agreement with the statement that “the number of migrants allowed into Australia has gone much too far” – one by age, the other by voting intention (which are probably correlated).



Age and voting intention are not the only variables that relate to support for immigration. We can generally count on big business to favour immigration, in terms of providing markets and sources of labour. Treasury departments see benefits in terms of

containing outlays in the short term and delaying ageing in the longer terms. Politicians, particularly premiers and prime ministers, probably like the idea of representing a large state or nation. Liberals are generally in favour of diversity in immigration while conservatives tend to be more nativist. There was a time when unions were wary of immigration, but that sentiment arises when immigration is used as a means of suppressing wages, which isn't the case now.

There are concerns about immigration causing stresses on housing, infrastructure and services, but these stresses relate more to population growth rather than to immigration, specifically, and over the longer term immigration has tended to complement native population growth. That leaves the question whether Australia can or should sustain a population growth rate of 1.5 percent.

There is indeed evidence that [high population growth contributes to housing demand](#) and therefore housing affordability, but migration is only a small part of this contribution. We probably need some regional research on this matter, because there are cities such as New York and Sydney, which have been magnets for migrants, where housing stresses have been very high.

And there are political opportunists in the Liberal and National Parties, who would never dare advocate a return to "White Australia", but who know how to use the dog whistle, At least One Nation politicians tend to be more honest.