

Rising multicultural middle class

Plaque commemorating the work of migrants in the construction of the Mundaring Weir

In response to [my blog post about the disparity between educational qualifications and employment outcomes faced by select country of origin groups in Australia](#), [Val Colic-Peisker](#) reminded me that there is also a more optimistic way of looking at the intersection between ethnicity and class in Australia: one that foregrounds social transformations over the past half-century that have led to the decoupling of 'non-Anglo identity' with 'working class.' Australia today has something that few other countries have been equally successful in achieving: a linguistically and culturally diverse middle class.

The plaque in the picture commemorates the construction of the [Mundaring Weir](#), one of Australia's iconic post-war construction projects. When I visited the Mundaring Weir in 2008, I took the picture because of the poignant reference to the professors labouring on the construction site. It felt like a reminder of my good fortune to have arrived in Australia at a different time where migration did not necessarily mean having to swap academia for a construction site.

In the post-war period, almost all migrants from continental Europe ended up in Australia's working class, irrespective of their pre-migration qualifications and experience. As a result, what emerged in post-war Australia was an almost complete overlap between being of non-English-speaking background (NESB) and being working class.

This overlap has started to fracture since the 1980s. Sydney's affluent North Shore suburb [Wahroonga](#) provides an example: according to [the 2011 census](#), Wahroonga residents have a weekly median personal income of AUD789 (in comparison to the Australia average of AUD577). 36.7% of Wahroonga residents are overseas born (more than the national average of 30.2%). The top countries of origin for the overseas-born residents of Wahroonga are England, South Africa, China, New Zealand and India. 22.1% of Wahroonga residents speak a language other than English at home (slightly less than the national average of 23.2%) and the top languages are Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Hindi and Persian (all of which are more frequent in Wahroonga than the national average). In sum, Wahroonga residents, as a sample of affluent Australia, are a diverse group and around 20% of them are NESB migrants.

As such Wahroonga is reflective of the growing multicultural middle class in Australia. According to Colic-Peisker (2011), the contemporary multicultural middle class feeds from two sources: the second generation and skilled migrants.

The second generation, i.e. the Australia-born and/or Australia-educated children of NESB migrants are educational high achievers and achieve significantly higher educational levels than both their migrant parents and their third (or more) generation peers. The sons and daughters not only of the post-war migrants from continental Europe but also of the early Asian migrants from the 1970s onwards have by now entered the workforce and have become one group that makes up the multicultural middle class.

Furthermore, the make-up of migrants themselves has changed. Since the introduction of the points test in 1979, the largest group of permanent entrants are in the skilled migration category. That means that they have high levels of educational qualifications and work experience and – [even if they end up being employed below their level](#) – still mostly join the Australian middle classes.

The table shows the percentage of the tertiary-educated, the percentage of those in professional employment and the median personal income for selected country of origin groups. Recent migrant groups are quite obviously more likely to be tertiary-educated and to be employed in professional roles than the old and intermediary birthplace groups and the Australia-born. As a consequence, the median personal income of some NESB groups is higher than the national average. The group with the highest median income are the Malaysia-born, followed by the Sri Lanka-, India-, Philippines- and Singapore-born.

HIGHER EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME OF SELECT "OLD,"
"INTERMEDIARY," AND "RECENT" BIRTHPLACE GROUPS (PEOPLE AGED 15 YEARS AND OVER)

	Degree and Higher (%)	Professional Job (%)	Income (Individual, per Week, Aus \$)	Arrived Before 1971 (%)
Total Australian population	15.3	20	486	
Australia-born	14.8	19	488	
All overseas-born	17.3	26	411	
<i>Old birthplace groups</i>				
Italy-born	4	11	288	83
Greece-born	4.5	11.8	246	76
Croatia-born	6.5	10	307	58.5
Malta-born	5.5	9	310	41
<i>Intermediary groups</i>				
UK-born	17	24	509	47
Germany-born	15.5	15.3	393	63
Poland-born	21.5	26	373	37.5
<i>Recent groups</i>				
China-born	32	22	342	4.5
India-born	33	30	513	16.5
Sri Lanka-born	32	30	553	8
Pakistan-born	47	27.5	360	1.5
Malaysia	45	42	577	8
Bangladesh	56	22	376	6.2
Singapore	37	35	482	7.5
Taiwan	42	32.5	213	6.3
Vietnam	18	37	349	6.5
Philippines	36	18	518	1.5
South Korea-born	34	22	218	6.5
Indonesia-born	37.3	25	230	8
South Africa-born	35	34	780	5.3
Brazil-born	37	36	335	14.5

Source: 2006 Australian Census.

Note: 34 percent of the Poland-born arrived during the 1990s.

(Source: [http://www.census.gov.au](#))

Of course, another way of looking at it is that most NESB groups have lower incomes than the national average despite the fact that they include up to three times more tertiary-educated people than the national average.

That disparity notwithstanding, it is obvious that the Australian middle-class is indeed culturally and linguistically diverse and that the nexus between NESB and working class has been broken in this country.



**Research
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Colic-Peisker, Val (2011). A New Era in Australian Multiculturalism? From Working-Class
“Ethnics” To a “Multicultural Middle-Class” *International Migration Review*, 45 (3), 562-587 DOI: [10.1111/j.1747-7379.2011.00858.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2011.00858.x)