



the middle  
ground

THEME 1 RESEARCH PAPER

“WE DECIDE WHO COMES HERE”



Photo credit: Dave Hewison Photography / Shutterstock.com

## 1. KEY MESSAGES (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

- Migrants have poured tremendous energy into shaping their lives and those of their families, through immense sacrifice and hardship in most cases.
- They have also - in effect - made significant contributions towards the betterment of Australian society and its economy throughout history, contrary to widespread assumptions held about them burdening the country and its resources.
- Furthermore, migrants have been, and continue to be, a necessary asset for advancing the Australian economy and its competitiveness in the face of growing trends including globalisation by enhancing Australia's social, cultural and economic fabric.
- Australia's communal harmony can be improved by appreciating the sacrifices, circumstances and abilities of those who arrive in Australia from another country, and by dispelling myths about them. This includes those that relate to their their work ethic.

## 2. CONTEXT: A CONTENTIOUS TOPIC

The debate about migration and Australia's economic development is highly contentious. There are a number of unfounded myths and misconceptions in public discourse. These myths and misconceptions concern the supposed negative impacts of migration on Australia's society, generally, and economy, specifically. This particular theme (the first) of *The Middle Ground* project looks at this issue.



A common point raised is that migrants are responsible for draining the country's resources such as welfare, housing, hospitals and transportation infrastructure. Their addition to society is viewed as a threat to the availability and accessibility of resources. The assumption is that existing citizens have to “compete” with more people.

Another point commonly raised is that Australia is “too full” to accept further migrants (see part 7 below). This anxiety is driven by the concern of population overcrowding and congestion in Australian cities. If Australia is overcrowded, the stakes for inaccessibility and unavailability of resources become higher with increased migrant intakes.

Yet another assumption is that migrants are responsible for taking jobs from those who are born in Australia. If Australia is facing problems of overcrowding and resources are being drained, unemployment is perceived to rise, and migrants are blamed for occupying limited job vacancies.

Furthermore, migration has proven to be a contentious topic as it has also been used as fodder in elections and broader commentary. For example, right wing journalists such as Andrew Bolt have invoked the discourse on migration to espouse inflammatory remarks on migrants posing a threat to Australia's cultural values and population control. In August 2018, Bolt released an article with the heading *The Foreign Invasion* and described migrants as a “tidal wave” that “sweeps away what's left of our national identity”, “not just crowding our cities but changing our culture.”

The migration debate has also been employed by the political class.

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**The assumption that migration negatively impacts the Australian economy has been extolled by far right parties (e.g. One Nation) and in election campaigns (e.g. the Victorian elections in late 2018).**

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For example, Pauline Hanson notoriously demanded an migration plebiscite earlier in 2018, and the One Nation party has repeatedly called out for anti-migration policies and reduced migrant intakes. During the campaigns in the Victorian election of 2018, migrants were vilified when a Liberal candidate appeared in a far-right video demanding a ban on Muslim migrants.

### 3. WHY SOME AUSTRALIANS ARE FRUSTRATED

Some Australians are frustrated with the country's migration status quo. Part of this frustration can be explained by the historic and political dimension. As mentioned previously above, the media and political class in Australia frequently engage in the migration debate to further certain agendas. Hence, far right-wing media commentary and "conservative" political rhetoric have combined with various developments overseas - such as Donald Trump's highly controversial migration policies - to construct the view that Australia's national identity and cultural values are becoming "lost" to migrants. They have frequently fostered intolerant attitudes through inflammatory remarks and portrayals that present a caricature of migrants as a nuisance or dangerous threat.



*Migration debates in Australia echo myths peddled about migrants abroad*

Photo: Ronen Tivony | NurPhoto | Getty Images

The second dimension - the economic one - is the perception that not all Australians have "benefited equally" from the results of migration. There are those who have not gained their share from the periods of economic progress and prosperity in Australia. They have thus felt "left behind". This is a notion that has gained traction in recent years at the behest of the same said class of

media and political protagonists. This sense of being "left behind" has emerged as a result of the low wage growth in the last 2 years, the closure of certain industries (car manufacturing in South Australia being a key example) and the general unequal distribution of gains from economic growth. Despite overall growth in the economy, significant levels of inequality still remain. This has led to the question of whether this growth has been inclusive.

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**The third and more ideological dimension is the frustration that stems from the perception that Australia is being "sold out" by its "politically correct" politicians.**

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This too has gained traction in certain parts of the community. It has been driven by certain players in the media and more far-right voices on the political spectrum, who seek to break this "correctness" by "speaking out". The likes of Cory Bernardi and Pauline Hanson are obvious examples in this regard.

Finally, the frustration may be said to result from ignorance. An ignorance about the significant sacrifices and efforts of migrants throughout Australia's history and their contribution to its national and economic fabric. This will be further addressed in following sections. They will highlight the disparity between the actual facts and perceptions that exist.

### 4. THE NEED FOR A FRANK DISCUSSION ON THESE ISSUES

There is a growing urgency for Australian society to engage in more frank discussions.

The aforementioned issues require open conversation to avoid future divisions between various cultural groups. The existing political discourse is increasingly polarised. It also involves shifting blame onto migrants and refugees. This is a dangerous trend if we keep in mind the violence that has taken place overseas.



*Far-right sentiments during an anti-mosque campaign in Bendigo*

Photo: AAP

For example, the Norway attacks in 2011 involved a mass shooting by a far-right, anti-Muslim extremist: Anders Breivik. They are said to have been caused by intolerant, racist and anti-Muslim sentiments within the UK and broader Europe. Breivik justified the attacks in the name of “saving Europe” and combatting what he perceived as the “Muslim colonisation” of Europe.

Other tragedies borne from similar sentiments have included various gun crimes in places like Canada. For example, the attacks against

Muslims in the Quebec City mosque involved a deadly mass shooting that left 6 people dead and 19 injured. The perpetrator in this case was also known to hold anti-Muslim, far-right sentiments. Mainstream discourses have already contributed to fissures locally in Australia. For example, in Bendigo, an anti-mosque campaign was spearheaded by those belonging to anti-Islam lobby groups and leaning towards far-right politics.

The grievances -- real or perceived -- surrounding such tragedies need to be dealt with in order to avoid similar incidents elsewhere. The tensions surrounding such events result in social discord, hostility, racial discrimination and distrust between various groups.

Such tragedies not only impact the (obviously) social, but extend to the economic. Social tension and disharmony affects economic progress, making it difficult for governments to deal with pressing economic issues. Attempts to deal with existing inequality become wound up in populist arguments. These include that migrants and refugees are supposedly “favoured” at the expense of local populations. The rise of populist political players pandering to these sentiments, and seeking to leverage them, sow further wedges between ethnic groups. This in turn fuels discrimination and alienation, further feeding the vicious cycle which only spirals as a result.

## **5. DO MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES REALLY “CHOOSE” WHETHER THEY WORK?**

The notion that migrants and refugees “choose” to work (or not) is a contentious one. It is one on which many myths and tropes are premised. To reduce their working capacity

to a matter of “choice” would ignore - in almost all cases - many underlying factors and circumstances. It is also important to distinguish between the different types of migrants and refugees, and between the two as different categories of people seeking to live in Australia.

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**Firstly, approximately 70% of Australia’s migrant intake comprises of skilled migrants.**

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*Refugees undergo extreme hardship and difficult experiences*

Photo via @ManusIsland

This figure is important to note. It is a stark reminder of the fact that most migrants are in fact the very opposite of “lazy” or “unskilled”. Skilled migrants’ very entrance into Australian society is, from the onset, dependent upon eligibility criteria that assesses their capacity for contribution to society. That is, the decision to select who can stay in Australia in such cases is based on a skills assessment that determines their suitability for particular occupations. The implication of this is then that the status quo of the majority of migrants as workers in Australia is chosen for them. It is

a function of their talents to begin with. Their qualifications and working capacity are what enabled their entry into Australia from the onset.

As for humanitarian migrants and refugees who are granted asylum, their capacity for “choosing” to work is necessarily limited. It is determined by circumstances most often well beyond their control (see part 6 of this essay). Unlike those who enter Australia on the basis of skills, humanitarian migrants and refugees usually move to Australia fleeing persecution and war. Thus, their entry into Australia is not decided on their capacity to work in certain occupations, but in seeking refuge and security.

As for those individuals who genuinely end up being out of work post-migration or post-refugee arrival: the idea that these people “choose” not to work is a mischaracterisation for many reasons. Firstly, in the case of non-skilled migrants, there are a combination of factors which contribute to their inability to obtain work. A few of these factors are as follows: a lack of education, lack of opportunity, underprivileged backgrounds, oppressive political settings and difficult socio-economic conditions in the country they arrived from. These inhibit both their capacity for choice and work. Likewise, with existing skilled migrants, there are also factors which result in their unemployment, lack of experience and obstacles to future employment. These include: overqualification, outdated skills that may no longer match the focus of Australia’s new policies and growing industries, age and illness or racial discrimination. Thus, the notion that people simply “choose” not to work is an inaccurate caricature at the very best.

## 6. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “WORK HARD”?

In Australia, the concept of “working hard” is generally understood as the value placed on working diligently and productively during work hours. It is also understood as studying conscientiously towards the completion of a particular level of education or qualification that prepares one for the workplace. Such values are appealed to at both mainstream and political levels. For example, in the political sphere, the “work till you drop” mantra was invoked in former Australian Treasurer Peter Costello’s employment policies concerning older people working. In the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s election campaign speech in 2011, the concept of rising early to work hard was extolled by referring to those who “set their alarm clocks early”. This is in contrast to the category of people who rise late and are perceived as not “working hard” and contributing to the productivity and participation of the workforce.

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**It is nonsensical to extend such definitions of “working hard” to those who have fled their lives in fear of persecution or war with little to no education or industry experience.**

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The concept of “working hard” for such people takes on a very different meaning: the ability to survive, live through persecution and to make one’s way to a new and foreign place that one is not accustomed to. From having to meet the demands of everyday communication in a new language to being alienated and far from their families, “hard work” begins there for many newly arrived humanitarian migrants and refugees. Before they can even

access employment, they must learn new skills and the basics of communication which are required by such jobs and are genuinely “hard work” by any fair measure.



*Underlying anxieties about migrants taking jobs*

Hence, there is ample “hard work” involved for such people who arrive in Australia with inadequate to non-existent financial capital, “human capital” (formal education or skills), “social capital” (connections in the community) and language (they struggled with English). The refugee experience is full of rupture. The presumed caricatures mentioned must be reassessed on account of how challenging it is in reality to begin a new life in a new place in the aftermath of phenomena such as war and persecution.

## 7. AUSTRALIA: A HISTORY OF MIGRATION

A closer analysis of Australia’s migration history reveals that, overall, migration has contributed significantly in advancing the development and growth of Australia, generally, and its economy, specifically. However, time and time again, politically fraught debates concerning migration and asylum policies grip society. They lead to tension about security measures and border politics (parts 2 and 3 of this essay). These debates are underpinned by misrepresented and propagandized information about migrants, asylum seekers

and refugees. Such misrepresentations concentrate on unfounded angst over supposed low-skilled migrants placing pressure on resources. Besides the claim that Australia is “too full” and that migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have poor work ethic and drain the country’s resources, there are fears that migrants steal jobs. Hence, they are perceived as a threat to employment opportunities.

**A proper exploration of Australia’s migrant history shows that the Australian economy has greatly benefitted from the skills and resources of migrants over time, and has in fact depended on them.**

We need to reframe such debates on migration and asylum issues in a more honest fashion. They must address the realities of Australia’s economic development throughout history to highlight that: (a) migrants have not burdened the economy but boosted it; (b) other than Indigenous Australians, every group of people to have set foot on this land has either been a colonizer, a migrant or refugee.

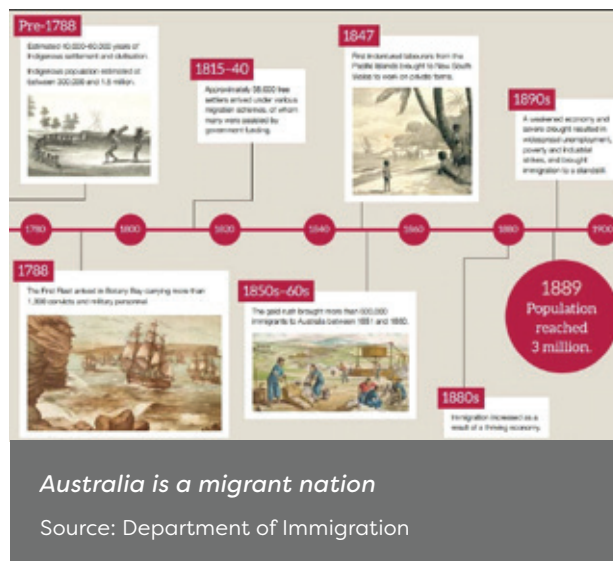
The 1800s marked the beginning of modern migration history. From amongst the earliest migrants in Australia were the British and Irish. They were mostly convicts who had

been involuntarily taken to the British colony of New South Wales, established as a penal colony in 1788. Thereafter, in 1851, gold was discovered near Orange in New South Wales. This led to a gold rush that altered the face of migration. Over 600,000 migrants rushed to take part in it between 1851 to 1860. While these migrants were mostly from the United Kingdom, 10% migrated from other European countries and 7% came from China. Thus, the history of migration from places other than the UK and Ireland extends back to the 1800s. It is based on different events that transpired in Australia or overseas. In the late 1840s, Ireland faced a potato famine which saw approximately 30,000 Irish migrating to Australia. The late 1800s also witnessed around 50,000 individuals from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, mostly comprised of

men taken against their will. These migrants included those travelling to Australia to work as indentured labourers in Queensland’s primary industries. Several of these individuals settled in Australia and formed communities themselves. This also goes to show that non-white migrants settled into Australia

from the earlier days of Australia’s modern history, contrary to common knowledge.

Then came *The Immigration Restriction Act* in 1901, aimed at restricting non-white migration. It is also known as the White Australia Policy. The First World War also meant that migration came to a halt. However, over 340,000





migrants landed in Australia during the 1920s, including several from Britain. Some were also from Greece, Italy and Yugoslavia. Due to the Great Depression in 1929, the 1930s saw a decline in migration.

However, the Second World War saw 15,000 European Jewish people find refuge in Australia, including 5,000 in 1939. In the post-World War II era, the Australian government decided the nation must “populate or perish” in the face of labour shortages. This led to the establishment of The Department of Immigration in 1945. Subsequently, migrants from over 30 European countries were accepted into the country including Spain and West Germany. Besides the UK, the leading countries from which migration took place included Italy and Greece. This continued up to the early 1970s. The year 1949 witnessed increased diversity in migrants as over 100,000 migrants from 30 different nations contributed to the Snowy Hydro Project which lasted 25 years after its inception in 1949.

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**When the White Australia Policy ended in the 1950s with the abolition of the dictation test in 1938, 9% of Australia’s population were of non-British background.**

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As various non-European migration policies were relaxed, migration began to increase until it could be said that 1 in 3 people in Australia were either migrants or the child of a migrant by 1971. With discrimination being legislated against in 1975 and humanitarian intakes during the 1970s, the diversity of migrants rose with Lebanese and Cypriot people entering the country in the earlier parts of the 1970s and over 2,000 Indochinese people arriving in the late 1970s. This was

followed by the 1980s which focused on skills-based migrants as required by Australia’s industries. Finally, from the late 1990s and onwards, Australia has witnessed asylum seekers from as far as the Middle East to Sri Lanka and in between.

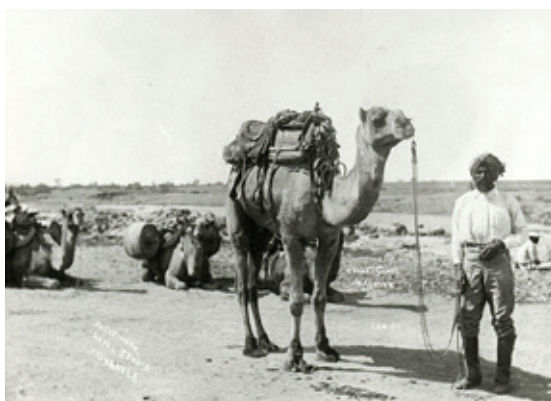
## **8. MIGRANTS’ CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA’S ECONOMY**

Migrants have made a substantial and positive contribution to Australia’s economy and social framework over time. As shown, the history of migration extends beyond the contemporary timeframe most Australians are more familiar with. Rather, it includes significant periods during which waves of migration occurred from various places across the globe (part 7).

A significant example of migrant contributions towards Australia’s economy is the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme in south-east Australia. It was one of Australia’s most significant post-war infrastructure projects. This project spanned for 25 years, from 1949 to 1974. It involved a labour force of 100,000 people. 65% of those workers were migrants from approximately 30 countries, and also refugees who were displaced from their original countries.

An earlier example of migrant contributions includes the work of cameleers from places such as Afghanistan and India. They made significant explorations inland, pioneered Australia’s emerging travel routes and provided support for the development of Australia’s regional centres. In particular, they played a central role in the construction of the Overland Telegraph between Darwin and Adelaide. They also helped to build The Ghan railway between Alice Springs and Adelaide. Since camels possess excellent endurance, they were able to

transport heavy materials over long distances which existing transport means such as horses were unable to do. Without the cameleers' contributions, building outback routes would have been virtually impossible task. The earliest cameleers arrived in the early 1800s. This demonstrates the duration of migrants' central contribution to Australia's lived history and economy.



*Bejah Dervish at Mullewa, WA, leaving for the Calvert Expedition, 1896.*

Photo: State Library of South Australia

In more modern times, migrants have helped build the backbone of Australia's competitiveness in the global market. Migrants' skills and social networks have increased interconnectedness between Australia and key trade partners. This has brought untold economic benefit, innovation and competitiveness on an international scale. Migrants' skills - particularly in technology-based industries - have seen companies plug key skills shortages through their expertise. Further, there are industries where the skills and training migrants receive in their home countries prior to arrival in Australia are leagues ahead of Australia's education system. STEM-based disciplines are a pertinent example. Some countries, such as those in Asia, are adept at producing graduates equipped with advanced STEM skills. This allows them

to excel in industries such as IT, engineering, digital marketing, etc. These very same industries are the ones facing skills shortages in Australia presently. Recent migration patterns bear testament to the significant impact migrants have thus had. Migrants have helped to plug these gaping holes in Australia's economy: the latest in a history of positive impact migrants have had on Australian society and its economic well-being.

## 9. AUSTRALIA NEEDS MIGRANTS - FOR ECONOMIC AND OTHER REASONS

In principle, there is a need to refine the discourse around this issue. It does not make sense to speak of an Australia without migrants (as outlined above). The Australian nation is a migrant nation subsequent to the colonisation by the first Europeans. Since the arrival of the First Fleet and its convicts (itself a migrant enterprise), each successive major migration wave has involved people entering Australia from different countries. Aside from Indigenous populations, every group of people including the First Fleet and convicts have come from elsewhere. Hence, it is important to dispel prevailing notions about the negative impacts of migration on the economy, which is set against a backdrop of white Europeans as the initial inhabitants of Australia.

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**As a nation of migrants, with approximately half of all Australians be either children of migrants or migrants themselves, the contention that migrants burden the economy could not be further from the truth.**

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This is especially so when their contributions are taken into consideration. For example, in 2013, the Australian Bureau of Statistics stated that the labour participation rate of migrants who have acquired Australian citizenship has been 77 percent. This is a value above the national average of approximately 65 percent. Such data deliberates against presumptions about migrants as collectively dependent on the welfare system. It dispels the notion that they burden the Australian economy. As we have seen, there is ample evidence pointing to the opposite. Quite clearly, migrants are extremely valuable members of society, economically (as we've seen in this essay), as well as socially (as we shall see in other themes of this project).



Existing arguments about the negative impacts of migration also do not consider, for example, the crucial factor of Australia's replacement level and its relationship to the economy. Although Australia's total fertility rate (TFR) is considered fairly stable with 1.77 children per woman in 2017, Australia's replacement level has been lower than its TFR since 1976. This means that Australia requires a sufficient sub-replacement fertility rate. That is, the TFR needs to rise or the country's borders need to be opened to migrants whose

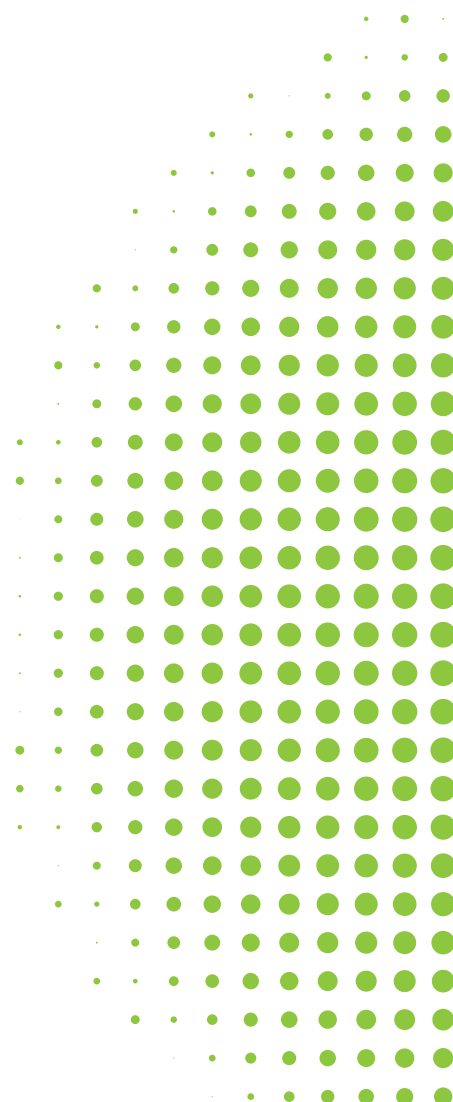
working contribution will improve Australia's labour participation rates and productivity levels. Hence, population overcrowding is not a sufficient argument against migration. Australia requires an adequate migrant intake to meet present and future demands for growth in order to compete at both domestic and international levels.

Furthermore, "productive diversity" as an economic strategy benefits communities and businesses within the context of increasing globalisation and competition. It builds social and economic benefits. Australia owes its cosmopolitanism and global connectedness to migration. Migrants have bought networks, skills, cultures and relationships that Australia would never have otherwise had access to.

Hence, these factors involving participation, productivity and population are vital for the continuation of Australia's economic growth and social development. This is especially the case in a fast-paced, changing world that is constantly embracing new innovations, and requiring new knowledge and skills. Migrants' experiences and skills help to enhance knowledge about international business markets by introducing ideas that may not have previously been known at a local level. Migrants' participation adds to the productivity of Australia's various industries and helps to reduce skills shortages. This is done while offsetting the rising challenges of population ageing and demands for population growth, such that Australia can maintain a competitive edge in the global economy.

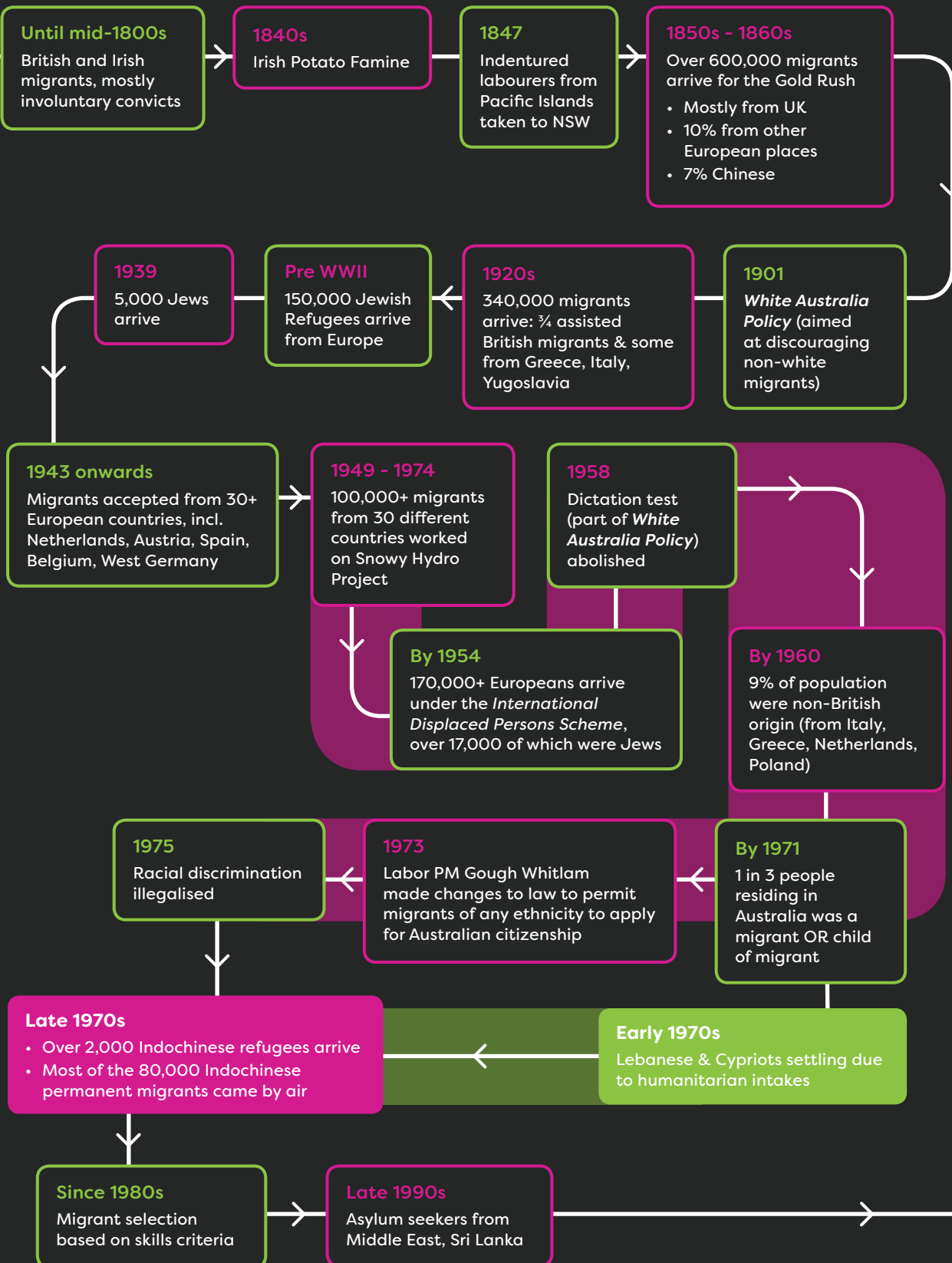
If Australia is to be consistent with its purported, democratic, foundational values such as that of "fairness", then it is crucial to not exclude and discredit migrants. It is vital to acknowledge their integral role in building

Australia's past, present and future. Failing to ensure such will contribute to a lack of social cohesion. It would prevent Australia from further developing economically and socially. Given all the above, migrants -- as a source of both economic and social "value" -- are simply indispensable to Australia: it makes *no sense* to speak of an Australia *without them*.



# INFOGRAPHIC: MIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA

Below is a brief outline on how migrants have made substantial and positive contributions to Australia's economy and social framework over time.



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