

Populate or perish: destroying the village to save it from perishing?

[John Stone](#)



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Greg Sheridan's article "[Great leaders knew immigration truth: populate or perish](#)" from Saturday's Weekend Australian assails "the decisive turn by conservatives and some of their icons against a substantial immigration program". "Destroying our immigration program", he says, "would be a step ... to national suicide". These are serious charges, and Sheridan is a serious journalist (his riotously funny book, "When We Were Young and Foolish", notwithstanding), with whose foreign affairs and defence views I almost invariably concur. But as I read, I pondered an emerging paradox: how could an article, with so much of whose contents on national security I agreed, nevertheless be so plainly wrong in its central criticism?

The answer is because, in a 1,700-word article assessing our immigration program(s), the words "culture" and "compatibility" (i.e., willingness to fit in) are conspicuously absent. So in fulminating against those "icons" (why does the unspoken name Tony Abbott come to mind?) criticizing our current immigration rate, Sheridan is missing the mounting criticism of its cultural/ethnic composition. Yet make no mistake, it is that rising tide that, if

still ignored, will inexorably swamp the whole program; and that, as we would both agree, would be a tragedy.

In a much shorter piece it is hard to address satisfactorily the demerits of an article two-and-a-half times as long. Moreover, although I admit to being both a (trigger warning!) conservative and a long-time critic of our present immigration arrangements (such as in [Quadrant, September 2010](#)), even to the extent of sometimes becoming “bad –tempered” about them, Sheridan can hardly have had me in mind when leveling his guns at “Australia’s bad-tempered, out-of-government conservatives ...” driving us towards “national suicide”. Nevertheless, let me essay this response.

Sheridan’s first sin is one of misrepresentation. I know of no “conservative” arguing against a “substantial” immigration program. Abbott’s recent speech certainly did not do so, nor did I in [subsequently defending him in The Australian](#). A 110,000 per annum permanent immigration program, which Abbott specifically proposed, is less than Sheridan thinks appropriate, but it remains substantial – all the more so considering all those immigrants whom that program does not cover, namely: the refugee and humanitarian program (currently 16,250 and rising), almost all of whose beneficiaries become permanent residents; the 457 visa program, recently tweaked but still substantial, many of whose participants gain permanent residence; freely entering Kiwis, many of whom stay on permanently; the huge student visa program, of whom Sheridan says “most” go home, but where the remainder gaining permanent residence is still significant; and the backpacker and working holiday visa programs, each of which duly contributes its mite to the total permanent resident intake.

Similarly, I know of no “conservative” commentators (as distinct from a few “ruthless populists”) whose response to our infrastructure difficulties (clearly exacerbated though they are by our currently excessive immigration level) is “to blame migrants”. They do, rightly, blame our governments, and particularly Canberra, for allowing such excess, but that is not blaming immigrants, understandably taking advantage of Canberra’s failures. So that’s another misrepresentation, and a particularly regrettable one.

Surprisingly also, Sheridan rejects the overwhelmingly well-tried conclusion of almost all economists who have examined the issue, that almost all per capita income benefits from immigration accrue to the immigrants, not the resident

population. To support this curious view he quotes Glenn Withers (ANU) as having pointed him to “a more sophisticated model”. Two comments: Withers, like most ANU academics, should get out more, and if I have to choose between his economic competence and (say) Judith Sloan’s, I unhesitatingly choose hers. As for Sheridan’s own “empirical” evidence (sic), the less said about that, the better for his otherwise valuable reputation.

The bottom line is this: Sheridan is right in saying that Australians “have always understood ... that population and immigration are matters of national security”; but by failing to face up to the criticisms inherent in those two words “culture” and “compatibility” he can fairly be said to be proposing to destroy our village in order to save it from “perishing”.

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