The Department of Immigration: from building the nation to managing the border

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On 1 July 2015 the Australian Border Force (ABF) will commence operations within the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, which will formally merge with the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service on the same date. This will be the culmination of an integration process begun by the Abbott Government almost immediately upon taking office, when responsibility for customs and border protection was moved from the Attorney–General’s portfolio to the Immigration portfolio. The creation of the ABF, which was announced in the 2014–15 Budget, also marks a key milestone in the process of change which has seen the Department of immigration shift its focus from nation building and migrant settlement, towards a greater emphasis on border security.

The Department of Immigration was created in 1945 to implement the Chifley Government’s post–war migration agenda, which came to be colloquially known as ‘populate or perish'. Australia’s first Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, said in his first ministerial speech to Parliament ‘If Australians have learned one lesson from the Pacific War now moving to a successful conclusion, it is surely that we cannot continue to hold our island continent for ourselves and our dependants, unless we greatly increase our numbers.’

The Department moved quickly to establish migration agreements with several European countries. By the late 1970s, following the dismantling of the White Australia Policy, it was managing the settlement into Australia of people from all over the world. In the 70 years since the Department was established, it has facilitated the permanent settlement of over seven million migrants to Australia, and the entry of many millions of visitors and temporary residents. While it has had several name changes throughout its history, the Department’s core functions have always been to manage the entry and settlement of migrants into Australia.

Today, the stated purpose of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection remains ‘build[ing] Australia's future through the well–managed entry and settlement of people’. Yet recent years have seen a noticeable shift in both the rhetoric surrounding the Department’s purpose, and its actual functions. In Machinery of Government changes implemented by the Abbott Government in 2013, responsibility for settlement services for migrants and refugees
was moved out of the immigration portfolio (to the social services portfolio) while responsibility for customs and border protection was moved in.

The shift towards a greater emphasis on border security is also reflected in the appointment of former Customs CEO Michael Pezzullo as Secretary of the Department in October 2014. At the time of this appointment, the then Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Scott Morrison, highlighted Mr Pezzullo’s experience in border security and commented that 'the evolution of our border functions is critical. We must manage the integrity of our border, and contribute to the prosperity and protection of the economy and, of course, the Australian community.'

Since taking on the role of Secretary, Mr Pezzullo has spoken freely about the Department’s changing focus. In one of his first speeches as Secretary, Mr Pezzullo spoke of Australia’s shift from a period of 'settlement' to a period of 'engagement', and what this would mean for the future of the Department:

Yes settlement will be an ongoing element, but the mission of mass migration that was set for us in 1945 is long accomplished and should be declared so. More than settlement, we should look to become Australia's gateway to the world, and the world's gateway to Australia. On occasions, at times of heightened threat such as caused by terrorism or pandemics, we will need to act as the gatekeepers and as necessary man the ramparts and protect our borders.

This cultural shift in the Department has not been universally welcomed. Commentators have expressed concern about ‘the militarisation of our borders’, and argued that there has not been adequate public discussion of this significant conceptual shift in the Department’s purpose. Disquiet is also evident within the Department. Mr Pezzullo recently explained the movement of some senior executives out of the Department as the result of some officers feeling uncomfortable with the Department’s new direction:

I know several officers have confided in me … 'I joined the department X number of years ago … and we had a particular remit, we had a particular approach that we took. This is all changing. I was thinking of the next phase of my life and my career in any event. I think it's time for me to move on to other things.'
Concerns about the potential refocusing of the Department towards a greater emphasis on border security were also expressed when this possibility was considered by the previous Labor Government. The creation of a unified border agency was rejected by a 2008 Review of Homeland and Border Security which noted that ‘for a number of the agencies concerned national security considerations are embedded with a broad range of other service delivery, policy, program and regulatory functions which could be jeopardised by restructuring them around their security roles.’

Whether or not concerns about the Department’s future direction prove to be well founded, it is worth noting that on 1 July 2015 the Department of Immigration will undergo the biggest transformation in its 70 year history. It remains to be seen what the Department’s role as the gateway between Australia and the world will mean in practice, and what further changes this newly defined role may herald for the Department.