A new report on social cohesion by the Scanlon Foundation presents some interesting findings concerning Australians’ attitudes to social cohesion, immigration and population issues. The survey is the only study of its kind in Australia, presenting comprehensive information on attitudes towards these issues over the last eight years.

Overall, the results of this survey, along with analysis of several international indicators, lead the researchers to the conclusion that ‘Australia remains a stable and highly cohesive society’. Interestingly, however, the survey indicates that while indicators of social cohesion have improved in 2015, they remain at lower levels than those recorded between 2009 and 2012. The researchers on this project have used results from the 2007 survey (the first in the series) as baseline data to develop the Scanlon–Monash Index of Social Cohesion. This is constructed around the five domains of belonging, worth, social justice and equity, participation, and acceptance and rejection. The 2015 survey finds that there has been upward movement in this index, with an increase of 3 points compared to 2014. While this is the largest upward movement since the beginning of the project, the Index remains at its third lowest point in the eight surveys, with this upward movement coming off the relatively low Index scores recorded in 2013 and 2014.
One of the key findings of the survey concerns attitudes towards asylum seekers arriving by boat, which remain relatively unchanged from 2014. Views on the most appropriate policy response to this issue are highly polarised, with 24 per cent supporting permanent residence in Australia, 31 per cent supporting temporary residence, 10 per cent supporting the detention and deportation of arrivals, and 33 per cent supporting turning back boats. The report notes that there has been a shift over the last five years towards the ‘strong negative’ responses to asylum seekers arriving by boat, with increased support for turning back boats in particular.

Interestingly however, the Scanlon project has found previously that Australians do not react negatively to refugees overall, with strong support recorded for refugee resettlement in surveys between 2010 and 2012. Thus the report concludes that the Australian public draws ‘... a sharp distinction between refugees assessed overseas and admitted for resettlement under the Humanitarian Program – and those arriving by boat.’ This is consistent with the findings of previous research on attitudes towards asylum seekers, which has consistently found support for refugee resettlement but not for asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Other key findings of the 2015 Scanlon survey include:

- Concern about levels of immigration remains the same as in 2014, and at the lowest level ever recorded by this survey, with 35 per cent of respondents believing that Australia’s immigration intake is too high. This is down from a high of 47 per cent in 2010.

- The survey found continuing high support for multiculturalism. Over the last three surveys, between 84 and 85 per cent of respondents have indicated they agree or strongly agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia. In 2015, 39 per cent of respondents indicated that multiculturalism is a two way process in which both immigrants and the Australian-born population should play an active role in changing their behaviour – for immigrants, in order to adapt to the Australian way of life, and for the Australian-born, in order to learn more about the culture and customs of migrant groups.

- Perhaps unsurprisingly, the survey found significant variations in attitudes towards immigration and cultural diversity based on age. Young adults are more supportive of immigration and cultural diversity than are middle aged and older people.

- Significant geographical variations were also recorded, with consistently lower levels of support for immigration and cultural diversity outside capital cities.

The results of the survey suggest that the Australian public is, on the whole, supportive of immigration, multiculturalism and cultural diversity. This is a
reassuring finding for a country that is frequently described as an ‘immigration nation’, in which around a quarter of the population was born overseas.

Tags:

immigration  multiculturalism