

## **Welcome to Australia - and here is your shovel**

Michael Wesley  
Daily Telegraph  
8 June 2012

Paul Howes needs to take a Bex and have a lie down.

Most Australians would have watched the Australian Workers' Union leader's rant against the decision to allow 1715 temporary skilled migrants visas to work on the Roy Hill mining project with bemusement.

Despite being treated like idiots by politicians and shock jocks, Australians have long had sophisticated views on migration.

This was shown in the Lowy Institute's annual opinion poll on Australians' attitudes toward the world. We asked Australians whether they supported allowing skilled workers on short-term visas into Australia to fill labour shortages, and 62 per cent said yes, compared to 37 per cent who said no. Two years ago, we asked Australians whether they were comfortable with Australia's population growing to more than our current 22 million, and 72 per cent said yes.

These results show a broad understanding that Australia has a long history of regulating its rate of immigration according to the fortunes of our economy.

For nearly 200 years, our immigration rate has closely followed the growth rate of our economy. Australia has always allowed higher rates of migration when the economy is growing strongly, and cut back those immigration rates when the economy weakens.

Great national projects such as the Snowy Mountains scheme, which everyone knows would have been impossible without the thousands of immigrants who worked on it, have registered a strong understanding that our national prosperity needs to attract people from other countries in order to stay prosperous.

Once again, this broad understanding comes across in this year's Lowy Institute poll. We asked people what criteria Australia should use to determine who should be allowed to migrate to Australia. The most common criteria was "work skills" (nominated by 65 per cent), followed by "English language skills" (60 per cent), "having similar values to Australians" (57 per cent) and "education" (47 per cent). Just 15 per cent said "religion" was important, and "race" was the least common criteria chosen, with just 10 per cent saying this was important.

An interesting result of the Lowy Institute Poll, however, is that older Australians are more likely to think race, values, and religion are more important than younger Australians. Australians over 60 are three times more likely to say race is a very important immigration criterion and twice as likely to think values and religions are important than those aged between 18 and 29.

These results show Australians are very aware of immigration and its importance to Australia's economic health. They also show that Australians watch the criteria used by the government to determine who is allowed to settle in Australia closely.

Older Australians remember that a generation ago, race and values were important government considerations, while younger Australians know that the key requirements these days are skills and education.

What's also important about this year's poll is that Australians are starting to focus on the importance of Asia to Australia.

When we ask people what was the factor that brought us through the GFC without going into recession they say it was China rather than anything that we did domestically. We also asked people about whether they thought it was important for Australia to have a good strong solid image in Asia and 68 per cent of people said yes.

We also asked people what they thought Australia should be doing to further improve its relations with the Asian region. Eighty per cent said Australia should be trying to do more to be included in Asian diplomatic forums and a similar number said Australia should be doing more to teach its children Asian languages. So we've got quite a strong response and belief that Asia is important to Australia and we should be doing more and we should be trying harder in the Asian region.

Australia is one of the only stable, developed countries in the world that is still growing economically. That means we'll be much more prominent as skilled young people in other countries look to move overseas to find work.

This is a real opportunity for Australia, to welcome the best and the brightest from around the world to come and live here and help make this country more prosperous, more creative, and more dynamic. But we'll lose this opportunity if we allow our attitudes towards immigration to be dominated by people who are just looking to score short-term political points.

Michael Wesley is executive director of the Lowy Institute. The 2012 Lowy Institute Poll can be downloaded from [lowyinstitute.org](http://lowyinstitute.org).