

Challenges confronting Asian-Australians

The Roundtable was opened by Mr Jason Yeap, Chairman of the National Gallery of Victoria Foundation and University of Melbourne Believe Campaign Board Member. Mr Yeap highlighted one of the key issues driving his interest in, and support of, the Asian-Australian Public Policy Research Project, namely the under-representation of Asian-Australians in Australian public life. Reflecting on this issue, Mr Yeap commented that while racism and discrimination are factors that affect equal opportunity outcomes, cultural diversity within Asian-Australians communities could play a crucial role in fostering or hindering the participation of Asian-Australians in the public sphere. Indicating that strategies were required to encourage and facilitate Asian-Australian participation, Mr Yeap suggested that an element of risk-taking was necessary. Local, state and federal government should take leadership in policy matters, grant more opportunities to Asian-Australians, and take more risks when hiring new staff. Mr Yeap suggested that the University of Melbourne had the opportunity to play a major role by building a research base so strong as to become a required frame of reference for politicians and policymakers. He concluded by suggesting that a leap of faith in each other's abilities is necessary to enable us all to chart a new and more inclusive way forward, one that produces tangible results.

Asian-Australians: A Profile from the 2011 Census

Professor Pookong Kee, Director of the Asia Institute, presented the key findings from an analysis of the latest census on Asian-Australians (with assistance from Ms Angela Merriam). The census, conducted in 2011, counted some 1,733, 000 residents born in Asia, constituting 8% of Australia's total population of 21.5 million. Around 27% of the overseas-born were from Asia, including East, Southeast and South Asia. The census statistics do not distinguish between permanent residents and residents on student or other temporary visas. Nearly 14% of the Asian-born were university, other tertiary, or TAFE students. The top sources of the Asian-born were China, India, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, South Korea, Indonesia and Singapore.

While 1.7 million people in Australia were born in Asia, around 2.4 million self-identified themselves as having Asian ancestry. This amounted to just over one in ten, or 11% of the total population. The two largest ancestry groups were Chinese and Indian, representing 4% and 1.8% of the total population respectively. In comparison, 71% of the population were of European or part-European ancestry.

Some 80% of the population spoke English only at home, but among the 20% who spoke a language other than English, most were Asian language speakers. Chinese speakers accounted for 3.4% and Indo-Aryan languages 2% of total speakers, overtaking the previously large Italian (1.4%) and Greek (1.2%) language groups.

While 15% of all residents in Australia had a tertiary degree, close to half of the India-born and Malaysia-born were university graduates, followed by the Mainland Chinese, Filipinos, and Sri Lankans who recorded a third of university-educated among their members. Even the Vietnam-born, who first arrived as refugees in the late 1970s, registered a slightly higher percentage of tertiary education than the general population.

The census analysis shows that the occupational profiles of the Australia-born and overseas-born were, in the main, quite similar. However, a closer examination reveals a very high concentration (31%) of the second generation Asian-Australians (persons born in Australia to immigrant parent(s) from Asia) in the professional occupations, relative to the first generation Asian-Australians (15%) and total population (22%). There was a decline in the proportion of professionals by the third generation (i.e. grandchildren of Asian

immigrants) at which point the occupation profile began to resemble that of the population at large. This convergence, across generations, of socio-economic profiles is widely observed in other plural societies.

The analysis indicates that Australia is a close second to Canada in the representation of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the general population. Around 13% of Canadians traced an Asian ancestry, compared with 11% in Australia, 9.6% in New Zealand, and 5.6% in the United States. Statistics also suggest that settlers from Asia predominate among migrants to Canada, accounting for 64.1 % of the nation's immigration program, compared with 26.5% in Australia, 23.4% in New Zealand, and 19.3% in the United States.

The public policy implications of these findings were discussed during the Roundtable and will form part of the research agenda of the Asian-Australia Public Policy Research Project at the Asia Institute.

New Zealand, Canadian and American Perspectives

Professor Manying Ip presented an overview of Asian migration to New Zealand, comparing Asian-New Zealander migration and integration with Australia's experience. According to Professor Ip, a key characteristic of the Asian-New Zealander population is that 70 per cent of Asians in the country are foreign-born. Therefore, despite a long history of Asian migration, there is a sizeable segment of 'new' Asian New Zealanders in comparison to Australia. Professor Ip suggested that New Zealand's influx of Asian-born migrants does not present any major problems within the communities in which they have tended to settle.

Professor Henry Yu illustrated 'The New Canada' where one in six is a minority, and 96% of visible minorities (people of non-Caucasian background) live in metropolitan regions, and 84% of migrants come from a country outside Europe. Professor Yu explained that Asian Canadians are not a particularly diverse group with South Asians and ethnic Chinese making up half (50%) of Canada's visible minority migrants. Professor Yu briefly explored academic advancement, noting that at the University of British Columbia, there are no Asian Canadians in leadership positions above the level of Dean.

The third international speaker, the pioneer of Asian-American Studies, Professor Don Nakanishi gave an in-depth overview of the Asian population in the USA over time and political representation. Noting that the Asian population in the US was 18.5 million in 2013, Professor Nakanishi suggested that as a group, Asian-Americans are considerably more diverse than Asian-Australians and Asian-Canadians. Professor Nakanishi highlighted the differences experienced amongst Asian-American communities, including substantial income inequality. He commented on the successes, as well as continued challenges, for Asian-Americans, with an emphasis on election to public office. In past decades, politics was an area with very little Asian-American representation. However, in the last ten years there has been a dramatic increase in elected officials who are Asian-American.

Asian-Australians in the University Sector

The Roundtable afternoon highlights included an address by former University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Professor Kwong Lee Dow on Asian-Australian representation and engagement in leadership within academia. Professor Lee Dow shared his informal findings that out of 449 full professors employed at the University of Melbourne, only 31 appeared (judged by their names) to be of Asian origin. This indicates that the high Asian student numbers are not reflected in the profile of the teaching staff at the University.

In similar vein to Professor Yu's talk earlier in the day, the question debated in the afternoon was how leadership and balanced representation are to be encouraged without the need to introduce quotas. Professor Yu pointed out that recruitment companies hiring for universities, and for the private sector, are not always diverse and that search firms may not have the capacity to recruit beyond the local talent pool. Professor Nakanishi suggested that one way forward would be the establishment of a task force to focus on these important issues.

Asian-Australians in the Professions

Chair of the World Medical Association, Dr Mukesh Haikerwal AO, made an important contribution to the Roundtable in his discussion of Asian-Australian leadership in the professions. He addressed the notion of "why would I bother?" with reference to participation in public life. Dr Haikerwal stated that for him, it was a matter of assertion. Mentoring was recommended as an important tool in creating incentives for Asian-Australians to step up to leadership in the public sphere. Dr Haikerwal suggested that we need to encourage others and in doing so we must feel supported. In terms of moving the issues discussed at the Roundtable forward, Dr Haikerwal commented that whilst 'squeaky wheels' are often heard, action need not always be brought about by the same minds and methods. He suggested that when it comes to hiring Asian-Australians, risk-taking should not be of paramount concern, since this group is generally highly competent. It is more a matter of creating opportunities for Asian-Australians to 'give it a go'. Granting Asian-Australians equal opportunities is also about capacity building within our region. Mr Shabbir Wahid, former President of the Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria and Consul-General and Trade Commissioner, Australian Consulate, Mumbai, welcomed the appointments of Asian-Australians by the federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, including its Department Head, Mr Peter Varghese, who is Kenya-born and of Indian descent. He suggested that having Asian-Australians representing Australia in Asia produces a difference in outcomes.

Asian-Australian Political Participation

The final presentation of the Roundtable was delivered by Dr Jen Tsen Kwok. Dr Kwok addressed political representation and participation and discussed what greater representation actually means. He pointed out the limited number of Asian Australian representatives since the end of White Australia Policy, but more importantly the relative absence of community associations focused on civic education and political socialisation, such as in relation to the Australian electoral system, the political rights and responsibilities of citizens and the nature of Australian political culture.

In this final session Professor Nakanishi acknowledged the potential Australia had to move policy forward 10 years ago. However, whilst America has made continued progress, in the last decade Australia seems to have slowed down in relation to Asian Australian participation in politics and representing multicultural and ethnically very diverse constituencies. Councillor for the City of Monash Jieh-Yung Lo added that in the 2013 Federal Government's Asian Century White Paper, the role of Asian-Australians was completely missing. Professor Nakanishi responded to this with the suggestion that the Roundtable forum write its own White Paper with key points arising from the discussion.

Future Directions and Projects

Projects coming out of the Roundtable, which received the broad backing of participants, were:

* Political Almanac

Professor Nakanishi provided examples of how information on Asian-Australians' engagement in leadership and politics can be gathered. He suggested a Political Almanac, similar to the initiative he started in the United States.

* Government White Paper

An addition to the official government White Paper on the role Asian-Australians do, and could, play in public life and regional integration and knowledge transfer

* Task Force

The establishment of a task force focussing on Asian-Australians and equality of opportunity

* Academia

Emphasis on Asian-Australian representation and leadership opportunities within academia

Professor Pookong Kee announced the establishment of a website for the Asian-Australian Public Policy Research Project. This will facilitate the sharing of knowledge as well as contacts for networking purposes, and allow for further collaboration on the issues and projects outlined above.

Feedback from Participants

Following the Roundtable, feedback from participants has included:

"Participation in the Asian-Australian Public Policy Project Roundtable was much appreciated. Congratulations to Professor Kee, yourself and the Institute for such a successful event". (Mark Wang, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese Museum)

"Enjoyed the day, stimulated by the content and excited by the possibilities." (Dr Mukesh Haikerwal AO, Chair of the World Medical Association)

"Thank you for organising the Roundtable and for continuing to keep us networking". (Ms Marion Lau OAM, Commissioner, Victorian Multicultural Commission and Deputy Chair, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria)

"I found the day especially stimulating, and learned much from our international visitors. Thank you." (Professor Kwong Lee Dow AO, former Vice-Chancellor, Chair of the Australian Multicultural Foundation)

"Thank you again for having me at the Roundtable today. Well Done." (Ms Gladys Liu, Special Adviser to the Premier of Victoria)