In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (http://aussa.anu.edu.au/). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor ‘About AuSSA’.

Expanded Immigration Program More Welcome in South Australia

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Compared with the rest of Australia, South Australians are more divided—and more positive—about immigration levels. South Australians are almost evenly divided on the question of whether Australia should have more immigrants, fewer immigrants or about the same number as it currently attracts. The proportion favouring Australia having fewer immigrants is almost matched by a similar proportion preferring more immigrants. The balance of opinion in the rest of Australia is more strongly against an increase in immigration numbers.

Debating the Numbers

Immigration has sometimes been a controversial and divisive issue in Australia. This should not be surprising because, according to opinion polls and social surveys over many years, Australia’s immigration program brings in more people than is evidently preferred by a majority of Australians. These polls and surveys report a consistent finding that Australians are much more likely to want fewer immigrants than more immigrants—though, importantly, the gap between the ‘too many immigrants’ and ‘not enough immigrants’ camps has narrowed noticeably in recent years.

Data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) are based on a sample of 1,019 SA respondents (including a special over-sample) and 3,550 respondents from the rest of Australia (a total of 4,569 respondents). This allows a robust comparison between South Australia and the rest of Australia on the standard survey question:

‘Do you think the number of immigrants to Australia nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, be reduced a little or be reduced a lot?’.
In Diagram 1 the categories have been combined to compare the proportion of AuSSA respondents favouring an increase, a maintenance or a decrease in current immigration numbers.

Diagram 1: Preferred number of immigrants to Australia

According to the AuSSA data, about 29% of South Australians, compared with just 22.5% in the rest of Australia, favour more immigrants. Just over 30% of South Australians, compared with almost 40% in the rest of the country, favour fewer immigrants. Thus South Australians—unlike their interstate counterparts—appear almost evenly divided on this issue, with a stronger support for increased immigration levels than is evident in the rest of the country.

While a majority is yet to be convinced, it is interesting to ponder why support for the immigration program is increasing nationwide and why support is, in relative terms, stronger in South Australia.

The Howard government has explicitly linked some of its tougher border-control policies, such as the detention of asylum-seekers, with the need to bolster public support for the wider immigration program. There has indeed been increasing public support over the period of the Howard government for higher levels of immigration, though whether tougher policies have produced this support is a matter for conjecture. The generally strong national economy over the same period, producing lower levels of anxiety about employment and job competition, may also help to explain the trend.

**Colleagues and Neighbours**

Why is support for increased immigration relatively stronger in South Australia than elsewhere in the country? Perhaps Adelaide features fewer of the well publicised tensions among different cultural groups that have been prominent in some other Australian cities, and this helps to bolster SA support for the immigration program that has produced a more culturally diverse Australia.
As in the rest of Australia, the South Australians who support increased levels of immigration tend to have attained higher levels of formal educational qualifications, tend to have higher incomes and are more likely to be working in a professional job. Among the SA university graduates questioned in the AuSSA survey, 45% think the number of immigrants to Australia should be increased compared with just 13% who think it should be decreased. Likewise, 44% of the AuSSA survey respondents in the highest income group ($78,000 or more in annual income in 2005) favour increased immigration levels, more than double the proportion (20%) that wants the numbers reduced.

Increasingly, Australia’s immigration program— with its growing emphasis on business skills and professional qualifications—is targeting entrants who themselves have achieved high levels of education, who are likely to be earning higher incomes and who are seeking professional or business employment. It would hardly be surprising if the new immigrant professionals and business entrepreneurs themselves continued to favour higher immigration levels. Why are non-immigrant professionals and business entrepreneurs, who are likely to encounter the new entrants as work colleagues, neighbours, business associates and/or competitors, also likely to support higher immigration levels? Perhaps access to more years of formal education encourages the development of attitudes more favourable to social change and cultural diversity. Perhaps these Australians also feel more secure and perceive greater gains than their less advantaged compatriots from the cosmopolitan, internationally-oriented society and economy that immigration continues to create.

All data from this publication is sourced from: