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Title:

Diaspora, diversity and dissent: turbulent times in New Zealand's demographic development

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New Zealand's recent national elections saw a surge in public support for a political party that campaigned on three issues: immigration, settlement of Maori grievances, and crime. The key messages about these issues all emphasised excesses: too many immigrants, a ballooning "Treaty industry", and too much crime. Winston Peters, leader of the "New Zealand First" party, capitalised on discontents that had been gaining increasing media attention. By bringing the three issues together in his major pre-election speeches he cleverly blurred the distinctions between immigration, Treaty issues and crime thus ensuring that his populist message would appeal to several audiences. His post-election promise to the Labour coalition government, which he was not invited to join, was that immigration would be made a major political issue over the next three years.

The politicisation of international migration into and out of New Zealand is, in large measure, a response to three major developments. Firstly, there is the growth of New Zealand's Pacific and Asian populations and the concentration of these populations in Auckland, especially. New Zealand has long been a major "node" in Polynesian diaspora; in recent years it has assumed increased significance in the Chinese diaspora. There has also been significant growth in the diaspora of New Zealanders, both Maori and non-Maori. By 2001 Australia was the place of residence of the equivalent of just over 10 percent of New Zealand's population. It is estimated that the equivalent of over 25 percent of the country's resident population was living overseas in 2001. Secondly there is the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of New Zealand's population stimulated in part by the abandoning of the traditional source country preference for immigrants in 1986, and in part by major shifts in the sources of refugees. Thirdly there is deepening disillusionment and discontent amongst Maori especially about the widening gap between their socio-economic circumstances and those of other ethnic groups in the population. Disadvantage in New Zealand has a strong ethnic dimension, and the measurement of ethnicity itself has become a highly contentious issue.

Diaspora, diversity and dissent are important dimensions of New Zealand's contemporary demography. They will become increasingly prominent themes within political and public discourse over the next 20 years as the dominant demographic driver shifts from natural increase to net migration. Accompanying this shift will be very different growth dynamics for different ethnic groups in New Zealand, as well as increasing competition for immigrants that are deemed to be "best" for stimulating growth in a knowledge economy. Rapid change in New Zealand's demographic landscape is creating considerable uncertainty and concern. There are turbulent times ahead for politicians, the public and population specialists. A much more enlightened discourse about contemporary demographic change is essential if New Zealand society is to negotiate the next 20 years with a vision that can accommodate an inevitable increase in ethnic diversity, cultural difference, and political dissent.