



### W. D. Borrie Lecture

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State Lecture Theatre, State Library of South Australia

#### ***The Baby Boom in New Zealand and Other Western Developed Countries***

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With due gravitas, on January 1 2006 New Zealand's news media announced: "*The Baby Boomers have reached old age (60 years !!)*". This brought to the reader's attention the fact that the Baby Boom still has a great deal of significance for us even today, and thus my choice of topic. That said, the image the media conjured up was one of a single, huge, but short-lasting population wave of grey haired individuals, all demanding their pensions and instant hip-replacements at one moment, thereby creating the fiscal and social mayhem everyone had long feared. After all, New Zealand had justified its radical, neo-liberal restructuring on the incapacity of the state to pay for the health and other needs of aged Baby Boomers.

The notion of such a singulate mega-wave is merely one of many inaccurate perceptions about the Baby Boom. Arguably, this is the most analysed generation ever, yet it constitutes the quintessential urban myth. Its quasi-mythological features are probably better known than its reality, not just among people like advertisers, pop-psychologists, journalists and Treasury economists, but even among demographers who really should know better. To try to set the record straight, this paper will focus on three themes:

1. *Measuring the Baby Boom*: What were its defining demographic characteristics, (looking beyond the passé argument of marriage boom vs Baby Boom)? What was its real size? How long did it last? And is the Baby Boom really made up of only one generation?
2. *Interpreting the Baby Boom*: Was it aberrant? Or, were the periods before and since deviations from what Sir John Marshall (Prime Minister, 1972) called "New Zealand's Golden Age"? Were there antecedents for the Boom, especially in the Antipodes? To what degree was the Australasian and North American Baby Boom the same phenomenon as the European, even that of "Mother England"?
3. *Analysing the legacy of the Baby Boom*: What were its tangible effects -- its "echoes", such as the New Zealand Baby Blip, and its impact on population ageing (the phenomenon blamed mainly on the size of the Boomer generation, and less on current levels of reproduction)? What about intangibles, such as its impacts on value-systems, or on current policy environments?

Disclosure of Interest: Although a Baby Boom Parent, the Author is a Member of the Depression Generation

<sup>1</sup> Defined as all of Europe west of the Hajnal line, (Gdansk to Trieste), including Iceland and the Mediterranean peninsula countries (including Greece), and the neo-Europes (Anglo-America and Quebec; Australasia), plus Japan.