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Special Problems: Some Basic Facts

To give some idea of the magnitude of migration these data, from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) website (www.iom.int), give both facts and commentary. In 2009 the IOM noted that:

- There are more than 200 million migrants in the world today, about 3 per cent of the world's population.
- That number, if in a single sovereign state, would constitute the world’s fifth most populous nation.
- There are an estimated 20 to 30 million illegal migrants in the world today, comprising between 15 and 20 per cent of all migrant stock.
- In 2007 there were an estimated 26 million internally displaced peoples in the world in at least 52 countries – the result of conflict.
- In 2007 the estimated number of refugees reached 11.4 million people.

The IOM website does not seem to list more recent data but UNHCR does. In 2012 it listed 45.2 million displaced persons. It also noted that during the year the twin issues of conflict and of persecution forced an average of 23,000 persons per day to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere, either within the borders of their countries or in other countries. It also noted that developing countries host over 80 per cent of the world’s refugees, compared to 70 per cent ten years ago (see Displaced persons in the References). For the ratio of immigrants to native born the CIA website contains useful data (see Ratio of migrants by nation in the References).

The magnitude of such a problem is intimately related to the capacity to absorb incomers. Since World War II, Australia has demonstrated a substantial capacity to absorb a large number of different national
groups with commendable ease, and this is made yet more remarkable considering the proportion of these whose mother tongue is one other than English.

The physical realm of Australia

The Australian land-mass itself is 7,686,850 square kilometres and, if one includes maritime waters and the Antarctic territories, that encompasses a yet larger percentage of the world’s area. To give a sense of perspective it is to be noted that Russia has over 17 million square kilometres and has the largest land area of any country; second is Canada; third is the United States of America; fourth is China; fifth is Brazil, with Australia coming in sixth. Australia is also the largest island in the world. With the relative ease of international travel Australia’s isolation is no longer a major issue. With this goes development of international cooperation, of supranational counter organisations and of comprehensive computer databases.

Physical population capacity

The proposition that Australia has a limited capacity for intake is unquestionable, as is the notion that the government has an obligation to promulgate policies that will maintain and enhance the quality of life of its citizens. With this in mind, there is a clear need to have strategies and tactics in place as a firm guide, but there also needs to be both an orderly method of processing applications, and of considering cases that seem to be exceptional. Notwithstanding, the notion that no sympathy should be given to ‘queue jumpers’ is not readily sustainable: some countries do not have embassies (or centres) where aspirants may apply.

Government spending on immigration issues

Each year the Commonwealth of Australia spends a considerable sum on immigration issues, on border protection and in dealing internally and overseas with migration. In the year 2009–10 the budget-listed item for the Attorney-General’s portfolio included ‘Customs and Border Protection’ as an item. Although the Attorney-General’s Department covers Federal courts and the like it also includes security of air passengers and freight throughout the country. The amount spent comprises about two-thirds of that spent on new broadband communications and