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Immigration Reports to Date

There is a plethora of official literature relating to migration that has been issued over the past century. Critical among these are Parliamentary debates on migration issues that have resulted in relevant legislation. However, it is worthy of note that there have been no Commonwealth Royal Commissions with immigration as their brief, although there have been recent calls and petitions for a Royal Commission into the treatment of asylum-seekers. There have, though, been some state government Royal Commissions that may be relevant. For example:

- 1925, Royal Commission to Investigate the Social and Economic Effect of the Increase in the Number of Aliens in North Queensland, known as the Ferry Report (Queensland Parliamentary Papers, vol. 3).

If Commissions were to be established at a Federal level and reported they could lead to a change in government policy, or require a referendum to change the Constitution. There are means of changing the law and the Constitution but they are not easy. For a referendum item to succeed it needs to have the support of the majority of states and the majority of voters in each state. As mentioned previously, since Federation in 1901 there have been 44 referendums: of that number only eight have been successful. Obviously the view of the populace has been, historically, a conservative one.

The Dovey Reports

In the early 1950s the Immigration Advisory Council set up a committee to report to the Australian Federal Government on the conduct of
migrants. The committee consisted of four members and was under the chairmanship of the Hon. Mr Justice Dovey. Altogether, three reports were presented to the Minister for Immigration, in 1952, 1955 and 1957. The terms of reference of the committee were to investigate the conduct of migrants brought to Australia under the Commonwealth government’s post-war migration scheme. It considered in some detail the problem of the incidence of crime among migrants and of the relationship between this and crime in the rest of the community. With the exception of these reports almost nothing was known of migrant crime in Australia, at least in the public domain. In this chapter these reports are discussed as a preliminary to a time-extended analysis (1901–66) aimed at showing the time context of the findings of the Dovey Committee (Dovey, 1952, 1955, 1957).

The Dovey Reports dealt with migrant crime rates at a time when the two largest groups of migrants (from the United Kingdom and Europe) both occupied crime rank positions that were below the median. In 1954, the European-born ranked 9/9 and the United Kingdom-born 5/9. The Dovey Committee dealt with crime rates on a Commonwealth-wide basis and at more than one stage of the judicial process. Offenders who committed the most serious crimes – most costly to the state, as well as socially costly – were dealt with in the prison system; therefore it seems not unreasonable to use prison as a criterion.

As a general conclusion, the 1952 report indicated that the incidence of serious crime among migrants was appreciably lower than in the community generally. (One would be surprised if this were not so since migrants are a biased group, as their acceptance into the country is based on not having a serious criminal record). Further features of the report can be noted:

- the statistics include offences by seamen and other transients;
- a large number of migrants came before the present careful screening process; and
- male twenty to thirty-five-year-olds, a high-risk group, are over-represented (41.5 per cent amongst migrants compared to 23.7 per cent in the Australian population).

For the twelve-month period ended November 1951, the crime rate (higher court offences) was 30.84 per 100,000 adult aliens and 47.10 for the Australian adult population. If one added the more serious of the offences dealt with in magistrates’ courts, the rates were 285.7 per