

Social Attitudes in Australia's Cities: Perspectives for Darwin

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Introduction

The social and employment structures of large cities are an increasingly fascinating area for social researchers. Cities with liberal cultures, global connections and large educated populations have adapted well to changing economic circumstances. Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) is perhaps the best illustration of the economic benefits of a dynamic and well-educated population who benefit from the complex division of labour promoted by large-scale urban environments. In this paper, I look at some of the variations in social attitudes across Australia's major cities, and draw out some implications for their further development, and for the further social and economic development of Darwin.

Findings from the new Australian Survey of Social Attitudes

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA 2003) conducted by the Centre for Social Research at the ANU offers a new opportunity to explore the social attitudes of Australia's major cities. We are particularly interested in discovering:

- Whether there are systematic differences in differential social attitudes of major cities.
- The differences between inner and outer regions of the cities.
- If Sydney—as Australia's most global city—is Australia's most liberal city in Australia.
- What factors are shaping the social attitudes of the populations of major cities.

Data analysis

The first stage of this project has involved an analysis of the data collected in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes which was fielded as a mail survey by the Centre for Social Research between September and December 2003. The Survey contains useful information about respondent social attitudes and behaviour as well as the social demography of the sample.

The research so far has looked at the five cities with a population of over 1 million people in Australia: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. The Survey contains information about the attitudes and demography of residents of Australia's smaller capitals but we are unable to draw confident conclusions from this data even with an overall sample size of 4,270.

For each of these five cities, we divided respondents into Inner City and Outer City regions of capital cities according to their self-classification. This self-coded location has been cross-referenced with a coding frame used by the Australian Social Data Archives (who are situated within the Centre for Social Research) to place respondents according into urban and non-urban locales by their reported postcodes. This enables us to get a first approximation of their inner and outer city populations of these five cities. For more reliable findings, a more careful matching of postcodes to the Australian Electoral Commission's electoral classifications—which code electorates within cities into inner and outer-metropolitan groupings—will be undertaken. An initial assessment of this for Sydney indicates a high level of accuracy in respondent self-placement, which gives me confidence that our preliminary classifications tell a pertinent and reliable story.

We explore here the attitudes of the selected city populations on attitudes to recognising same-sex relationships, immigration, and crime. This gives us some idea of the overall social temperament of different cities and inner and outer areas of these cities. Respondents indicated their agreement with the following statements on 5-point scale [Strongly agree to Strongly disagree]:

- The law should recognise same-sex couples
- Immigrants improve Australian society
- Immigrants increase crime rates
- Australia should take stronger measures to exclude illegal immigrants
- The death penalty should be the punishment for murder
- People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

Table 1 provides the agree totals [Strongly agree and agree] for each of statements for the five cities.

Results

Some commentary on the main findings:

Recognising same-sex couples

When it comes to support for giving legal recognition to gay and lesbian couples, the most tolerant area in Australia is not Sydney but inner-Melbourne (with 49 percent agreement). In fact, Sydney is surprisingly conservative on this question with only 32 percent support for

recognition, with slightly higher levels of support in the inner city (36 percent). Melbourne is divided between its very liberal inner city and the outer city which is a little more conservative. The most liberal city overall is Perth.

Why should there be this much difference between the cities? It's very unlikely that the data collection process would yield substantially different samples for large cities for which hundreds of respondents sent back completed surveys. It turns out that there is some correlation between support for recognising same-sex couples and religious identification across cities. AuSSA findings reveal that Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide are less religious than Brisbane or Sydney (see also Bouma 2003). In fact, Sydney is the most religious of these cities with higher numbers of people of Islamic faith, Buddhists, and people who identify with 'Other religions'. Adelaide and Perth are the least religious. Since religious identification is a strong predictor of support for same-sex couples, it is not surprising that Sydney and Brisbane record lower support than the other cities. I have separately confirmed religious identification levels in the five cities using a 1 percent cross-sectional sample of selected 2001 Census data made available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (see Table 3).¹

The Sydney result is particularly surprising considering Sydney is considered a global city on cultural standards (see Sassen 1994; Abrahamson 2004) and it has the most visible gay and lesbian community, situated in the inner-east and inner-west of the city. Inner-Melbourne is relatively more liberal than Sydney: like all of Melbourne, it is a less religious area than inner-Sydney and inner-Melbourne is by far the most educated and professionally qualified area of the country. This large concentration of liberal, educated city dwellers who are tolerant of diversity challenges the traditional perception of Melbourne as a conservative city. It is now clearly the home of liberal culture and progressive politics in Australia. How this divergence reshapes the relative cultural understanding of Sydney and Melbourne over time and impacts on economics, social structures and city politics will be fascinating to watch over the coming decades.

Immigration and illegal immigrants

Immigration is a sensitive subject in Australia as it is in many European countries and increasingly in Asia. Australians affirm multiculturalism: most respondents here agreed that immigrants improve Australian society (see Table 1). But frequently—and without much attention to the facts—people blame immigration for crime and social conflict. The

¹AuSSA results record generally higher numbers of non-religious respondents than the 2001 Census. Some of this can be attributed to the biases in the raw AuSSA data that over-represent people with post-secondary qualifications who typically have lower levels of religious identification. Higher rates of non-religious identification in AuSSA can be attributed to the different ways AuSSA and the ABS ask about religion—AuSSA asks whether or not respondents have a religion before probing specific religious identity; this yields higher numbers of non-religious people. Also, ABS data must be corrected for the numbers of Australians who do not adequately specify their religion; without this correction, the number of non-religious Australians is understated somewhat.

perception that immigrants increase crime is in fact strongest in Sydney and in stark contrast to perceptions in Melbourne, despite the two cities having similar numbers of immigrants. Certainly, crime rates do not differ *enough* to explain such a strong distinction in city-wide perceptions. I'd suggest that a likely explanation is that suburban disharmonies in the Sydney metropolitan region, and a conservative public sphere, are having a real impact on perceptions and attitudes.

Table 1: Responses to questions on social attitudes, AuSSA 2003

Percent agree or strongly agree (of total)	Inner	Outer	Total-city
<i>The law should recognise same-sex couples</i>			
Sydney	36	31	32
Melbourne	49	36	40
Brisbane	39	26	30
Adelaide	33	38	37
Perth	46	47	45
<i>Immigrants increase crime rates</i>			
Sydney	39	41	41
Melbourne	13	31	24
Brisbane	32	34	31
Adelaide	32	32	31
Perth	23	27	28
<i>Immigrants improve Australian society</i>			
Sydney	82	73	76
Melbourne	88	74	79
Brisbane	76	66	69
Adelaide	86	74	81
Perth	81	78	79
<i>Australia should take stronger measures to exclude illegal immigrants</i>			
Sydney	70	70	71
Melbourne	51	72	64
Brisbane	64	72	71
Adelaide	73	71	71
Perth	68	73	72
<i>The death penalty should be the punishment for murder</i>			
Sydney	40	43	44
Melbourne	34	48	42
Brisbane	43	46	46
Adelaide	40	55	48
Perth	45	51	50
<i>People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences</i>			
Sydney	66	68	69
Melbourne	57	71	67
Brisbane	61	72	69
Adelaide	75	77	77
Perth	74	71	74

Source: AuSSA 2003

The standing of asylum seekers (frequently mislabeled ‘illegal immigrants’ which is another category) became a major election controversy in 2001: the strength of public opinion against asylum seekers advantaged the Coalition in the 2001 election and put Australia in the news around the world (see Wilson and Evans). There is little city-wide variation in support for tougher action against illegal immigration except for inner-Melbourne, which again stands out for its relative liberalism (about half this population supported the proposition—some 20 percentage points less than the outer parts of the five cities).

The death penalty and tougher sentences for criminals

AuSSA recorded support for the death penalty for murder at less than 50 percent and at about 50 percent after weighting for age and education. This is a relatively low figure and, unadjusted, is about 7 points lower than the Australian Election Study 2001 result. Curiously, while Sydney is surprisingly conservative when it comes to recognising same-sex couples, it shares with Melbourne lower support for the death penalty than the other cities. I am not sure why this is the case. Certainly, higher levels of religious identification in Sydney do little to push support for the death penalty. Catholic opinion, for instance, is as liberal on the death penalty as is the opinion of respondents without a religion. The difference probably lies in political ideology: those higher numbers of respondents in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth who are tough on law and order tend to be conservative-identifying voters.

We find a similar pattern when we look at support for stiffer sentences for law-breakers: only inner-Melbourne drops below 60 percent support for this proposition.

Green and Democrat Party identification

If liberal social attitudes are indicative of a pluralistic and tolerant society, do they translate in a meaningful way into politics? The two parties that probably best represent the politics of diversity now are the Democrats and the Greens. In most states, the Greens have replaced the Democrats as the parties of progressive protest and, in doing so, have created a successful political force in the inner cities. One indication of future trends was this year’s extraordinary defeat of the Labor Party in the local elections for the expanded City of Sydney Council and the success of the Greens and local independents like Clover Moore in these elections. In Table 2, we find the highest number of Greens in Inner Brisbane (12 percent) where the Greens achieved a high primary vote in early 2004 against a continuing strong performance by Beattie Labor. The strongest electorates for the Greens and Democrat voters are among the rising number of professionals and tertiary educated voters who continue to move into inner city areas. This will continue to pose an electoral threat to the Labor Party even though the electoral systems of most of Australia’s lower houses make it difficult for minority parties to achieve representation.

Attitudes to globalization and taxes and social services

I have not reported here on the attitudes of inner and outer city locales towards globalization, taxes and social services and economic policy. Again, inner Melbourne is most supportive of higher social spending over tax cuts (see also Wilson and Breusch 2004) and the city of Perth least supportive (Perth has the highest number of Liberal-National identifiers of the five cities, an electorate most likely to support tax cuts). Inner Melbourne and inner Perth are least likely to think that opening up the Australian economy has had a bad effect on job security. Generally, the inner cities are least supportive of the view that globalization has adversely affected job security; probably because a higher number of inner-city employees have benefited from international investment or hold more affirmative views of globalization because their relatively prosperous circumstances and communities are evidence of the global story.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of selected regions

	No religion	Green or Dem ID	Degree or higher	Profs and Managers
Inner Sydney, Eastern Suburbs (ABS)	22	—	23	21
Sydney (ABS)	12	—	14	14
Inner Sydney (AuSSA)	23	9	—	—
Outer Sydney (AuSSA)	21	4	—	—
Inner Melbourne (ABS)	22	—	32	27
Melbourne (ABS)	17	—	13	13
Inner Melbourne (AuSSA)	33	10	—	—
Melbourne (AuSSA)	32	7	—	—
Brisbane City Inner Ring (ABS)	18	—	23	20
Brisbane (ABS)	15	—	11	12
Inner Brisbane (AuSSA)	27	12	—	—
Brisbane (AuSSA)	32	4	—	—
Western, Eastern Adelaide (ABS)	19	—	13	15
Adelaide (ABS)	21	—	10	12
Inner Adelaide (AuSSA)	28	8	—	—
Adelaide (AuSSA)	32	4	—	—
Central Met Perth (ABS)	19	—	15	14
Perth (ABS)	20	—	11	12
Inner Perth (AuSSA)	34	11	—	—
Perth (AuSSA)	34	6	—	—

Sources: ABS 2001; AuSSA 2003.

Some conclusions

The most surprising finding is that Sydney is emerging as a quite conservative city, all things considered. Sydney is worried about immigrants and crime and isn't particularly liberal on same-sex relationships. It is a more religious city. All this contrasts with the increasing wealth and prosperity to be found in parts of the Sydney region. The city may be suffering from a cultural and social backlash as its population copes with its numerous infrastructure and social problems—the downside of its global success.

Inner Melbourne is a distinctly liberal locale in Australia. It will be interesting to see if Melbourne benefits from this socially and economically, attracting others for its diversity and tolerance and deploying its community resources to improve infrastructure.

If Sydney has a reputation as Australia's most liberal city, it is not apparent in the attitudes of its citizens. Other cities prove to be as liberal and sometimes more so. If liberal communities attract energy and creativity, there are opportunities for other cities to establish their credentials as progressive and open communities, cities which will be more attractive to the 'creative classes'. As Florida observes (2002, 269), 'people want diversity, low entry barriers and the ability to be themselves'.

Table 3

Religious affiliation * CITIES Crosstabulation

% within CITIES

		CITIES					Total
		Sydney	Melbourne	Brisbane	Adelaide	Perth	
Religious affiliation	Buddhism	3.9%	3.4%	1.6%	1.3%	2.0%	3.0%
	Anglican	19.3%	13.5%	21.7%	16.3%	21.3%	17.9%
	Baptist	1.6%	1.5%	2.5%	1.6%	1.5%	1.7%
	Catholic	29.6%	29.4%	25.3%	22.7%	25.4%	27.7%
	Lutheran	.5%	.7%	1.8%	3.1%	.6%	1.0%
	Greek Orthodox	2.9%	4.5%	.8%	3.3%	1.0%	2.9%
	Presbyterian	3.2%	2.7%	4.1%	1.3%	2.2%	2.9%
	Uniting Church	4.0%	4.5%	8.0%	9.3%	4.0%	5.2%
	Pentecostal	.9%	.7%	1.6%	1.2%	1.2%	1.0%
	Other Christian	5.0%	4.7%	5.0%	4.6%	5.8%	5.0%
	Islam	3.5%	2.6%	.6%	.7%	1.3%	2.3%
	Other Religions	2.6%	2.4%	.9%	.8%	1.3%	2.0%
	No Religion	11.6%	17.1%	15.4%	21.4%	19.8%	15.8%
	Religious belief n.f.d, Inadequately described, Not stated	11.4%	12.2%	10.6%	12.4%	12.5%	11.8%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

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