

# Capturing the soul of a nation

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## **Despite John Howard's rejection of the "m" word, Australia remains diverse, write Dewi Cooke and Barney Zwartz.**

THERE are now two more countries to officially add to Australia's diverse collection of prospective nation-builders: China and India. Results from the 2006 census show significant increases in the number of people born in China and India living in Australia, and commensurate rises in the number of those who speak the languages of each country.

Cantonese, in fact, is mounting a challenge to the traditional language groups established by Australia's postwar Italian and Greek migrants. With Arabic, it ties third for the most common language other than English spoken at home and, when combined with the increasing numbers of Mandarin speakers now living in Australia, Chinese dialects outstrip them all.

Chinese languages are spoken by more than 500,000 people. This represents an increase of nearly 100,000 since the 2001 census, compared with Italian (317,893) and Greek (252,222), which have both been in decline since 1996.

Mandarin and Hindi experienced the greatest proportional growth of all languages - more than doubling since 1996 - and there are now more than 147,000 Indian-born people living in Australia, compared with more than 77,000 in 1996.

But while the dominant cultural paradigm remains with those of European descent - British, Italian and German are still the key non-Australian ancestries claimed - the Australian National University's James Jupp said the postwar face of Australian migration was likely to continue through its metamorphosis.

"The mainstream (in Australia) is this sort of British-Australian Christian. However, it's getting down to about two-thirds of the population," he said. "The mainstream is not the huge river that it was before the Second World War . . . that'll never come back. We have these myths like Gallipoli and the outback and Ned Kelly and all those things . . . so there's a big lag between what is held up as Australia and what life's really like."

This census also recorded a 29 per cent increase in people identifying as of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent since the 1996 census. Indigenous people now make up 2.3 per cent of the population or 455,026 people, compared with 352,970 a decade ago.

Data showed that large numbers of Australia's recent arrivals were born in countries affected by war and political unrest - an indication of the recent focus of Australia's humanitarian programs. More than 73 per cent of Australia's modest Sudanese population arrived in 2001 or later, as did at least 34 per cent of those born in Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The impact of all these emerging communities and their juxtaposition to Australia's largely European identity is more of the inescapable "m" word, Dr Jupp said.

"Australia is multicultural, whatever the Prime Minister may say. He doesn't like the word but he's stuck with it; there are no trends strong enough to reverse that. I think it will remain certainly as multicultural as it is now in every sense, whether it's religion or language, whether it's colour of skin or food or what the heck, it's just we'll shift from Europe to Asia and to a lesser extent South Asia and the Middle East."

Yet despite such increases in our cultural and linguistic diversity, the census showed that on the whole Australia is still a society of mostly Anglo-Celtic Christians. And the average Australian? A woman, aged 37 years old.

Such women now outnumber men - from ages 27 to 57, there are more women than men and the gap is widest at age 35 when there are more than 9000 (6.1 per cent) more women than men.

Amid these shifting sands of age and sex is the ever-present spectre of the ageing population.

Between the 1996 and 2006 censuses, people aged 50 to 59 years registered the biggest increase and now represent 13 per cent of the population, compared with 10 per cent a decade ago. By contrast, there has been a slight decline in young people aged 15 to 24, from 14.5 per cent of the population to 13.6 per cent.

The census also charted the continued decline in those who define themselves as Christian, with only 64 per cent identifying as belonging to some sort of Christian denomination, down 7 per cent from 10 years earlier. Non-Christian faiths, on the other hand, increased to 5.6 per cent of the population while those identifying with no religion rose from 16.6 to 18.7 per cent.

The biggest church remains the Roman Catholic, up 7 per cent over the decade to 5.13 million, followed by the Anglicans, down 4.7 per cent to 3.72 million. There were slightly more Anglicans than agnostics and atheists (3.7 million), with another 2.2 million not stating whether they had any religion or none.

The biggest loser was the Uniting Church, down 14.9 per cent to 1.13 million. But the Eastern Orthodox and Baptists both rose, by 9.5 per cent to 544,000 and 7.3 per cent to 317,000 respectively.

The results did not surprise Gary Bouma, professor of sociology of religion at Monash University. Anglicans and no-religion now meet at 18.7 per cent, but he had expected them to cross over earlier, he said. Anglicans "hung on in 2001 because of a low death rate".

Professor Bouma predicted the long-term trend would be a continued decline in the mainstream churches that were big in the 1950s, to which many belonged to be socially acceptable.

Noting the rise in those who did not answer the question on faith, he suggested many of these were Muslims who were wary after 2001, as well as many Jews and others who belonged to religions that disapproved of the census. The data showed particular growth in non-Christian

faiths: Hinduism more than doubled since 1996 to 148,000; Buddhism was up 109 per cent to 419,000; and Islam, up 69 per cent to 340,000.

## THE NATION

POPULATION: 19,855,288

MEDIAN AGE: 37 years

RELIGION: 64% of population Christian - mostly Catholic (26%) and Anglican (19%). Overall decline in Anglicans, Presbyterians and Reformed churches; growth in Pentecostals by (26%).

Buddhism (2.1%), Islam (1.7%) and Hinduism (0.7%) most common non- Christian faiths. 3.7 million people of "no religion".

ANCESTRIES: more than 250.

LANGUAGES: nearly 400 spoken in homes; Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) most common foreign language, replacing Italian and Greek

BIRTHS: average Australian woman has given birth to two children.

PERSONS BORN OVERSEAS: 4,416,037

AGEING POPULATION: number of people aged 65 years and over increased from 12.1% to 13.3% since 1996; children aged 0-14 years decreased from 21.6% to 19.8% in same period.