Reading 1

Broad social trends in Australia

Australia is a relatively new nation and society. Originally owned and occupied by Indigenous groups, it was invaded/settled in 1788 and became an independent nation in 1901. Its population has grown and changed greatly in nature, especially in the last 25 years.

Australia’s population had grown to be approximately 19,740,051 by September 2002. To check what the estimated population is as you read this, go to the Australian Bureau of Statistics web site [http://www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) and find the link to the Population clock. Apart from the changes in the makeup of the population with respect to languages spoken, religious background, education levels, cultural background and the distribution of the population, Australia’s population has changed in other ways.

Living in the city or the country

Australians have always seen their society as being connected to the bush. We have often identified *Australianess* with the outback. However, most of the population has always lived in cities and towns of more than 1,000 people. Even in 1911 only 43% of people lived in rural areas. In the last 100 years or so the balance between the numbers of people living in the country and the city has changed dramatically. There is a very strong concentration of the population in coastal strips, in the east and south-east, and in the south-west of Australia. Eighty-four percent of people live in 1% of our country. On the other hand, over half the country is occupied by only 0.3% of the population.

Having babies

Over the last 100 years, one of the greatest changes has been a steady decline in the birth rate and an increase in the life expectancy of the population. The number of children born per woman has declined in the last 100 years. In 1997 the birth rate was the lowest for 100 years with women having less than 1.8 children on average. The age of mothers has also increased to just below 30 years in 2001.

Living longer

Australians are now living longer than ever. But it has not always been like this. In 1901 Australians could expect to live to be 55 if they were men and 59 if they were women. Other countries have different life expectancy rates. China's rates are 68 for men and 72 for women. Papua New Guinea's are 56 for men and 59 for women. In Australia Indigenous people as a group have a much lower life expectancy than other Australians. There have been improvements in the treatment of disease and health care, resulting in an increase in life expectancy. The number of people living longer in Australia will increase in the future and this will have an effect on the economy, the workforce, and social services such as aged care.
Getting married – and divorced

Other important trends include social changes around marriage and divorce. Overall the number of people deciding to marry is declining. People are deciding to marry later in life. In 1974 men married at an average age of 23, while in 2001 the average age for marriage was 30 years. For women, the average age for marriage was 21 in 1974, but in 2001 this had increased to 28 years. The number of people getting married in a church had declined to 50% in 1997. Many more couples live together before marrying. In 1997 the percentage of couples living together before marrying was 65%. At the beginning of 2002 it was estimated that one in three marriages will end in divorce.

Coming from overseas

Many Australians were born overseas or have one parent born overseas. Since the coming of Europeans this has always been a significant number. In the last 10 years this number has increased markedly and this makes Australia different from many other countries. Up until the 1970s about 10% of Australians were born overseas. Australians born overseas are called first generation Australians. Children with one parent born overseas are called second generation Australians.

What makes a family?

Families and the structure of families have changed in Australia over the last 100 years. Over the last 25 years the nuclear family structure (husband, wife, two or three children living in one household) is no longer the way most Australians live together. Australians are increasingly living either alone, in a childless couple relationship, or in a single parent family.

Getting educated

Generally speaking over the last 100 years education levels have increased markedly. More students are completing Year 12 and then engaging in some sort of post-school training or tertiary education. The number of girls and women completing high school and enrolling in further and tertiary education is now significantly greater than for boys and men.

What religion are you?

Australians, as a whole people, practise different religions and different strands within religions. Some of the different Christian churches in Australia are Church of England; Baptist; Catholic; Churches of Christ; Jehovah’s Witness; Lutheran; Pentecostal; Presbyterian; Salvation Army; Uniting Church. Neighbouring countries have a different religious makeup. Indonesia is 88% Muslim. Papua New Guinea is made up of Indigenous religions 34%; Catholic 22%; Lutheran 16%.

Indigenous people

When Europeans invaded/settled Australia there were as many as 500 different groups of Indigenous people. Estimates of how many Indigenous people existed at that time number up to 1.5 million. In the last 210 years Indigenous peoples have suffered from the effects of invasion and harmful government policies. Today population and other social statistics show that there are great differences between the social experience of Indigenous people and other Australians.