

## **MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN NEW ZEALAND: AN EDITED INTERVIEW WITH THE LATE TRISH DALEY**

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*In August 1998, Trish Daley was interviewed about research she had conducted on adult migrants in New Zealand. The following is an edited transcript, printed with permission of the family. The interviewer and editor of this piece is David Cooke of Unitec Institute of Technology.*

For a long time we've been aware that the New Zealand government has done little systematically to provide for adult new migrants. So I was really interested to see the background of migrants arriving in New Zealand and how the changes in policy over the last ten years especially impacted on them. I looked at the 1991 policy which instituted immigration in a general category according to a list of criteria which came to be known as an Autopass, targeting skilled migrants. I also looked to some extent at the business migrant category which was encouraging business investment.

I was targeting migrants who had been here four or five years, preferably those who had come soon after the policy change in 1991. I interviewed 22 people, about two-thirds of whom had been here four or five years, while the others had been here two to three years. Two-thirds were men, most of whom were the principal applicants, expected to have some sort of proficiency in English, although it wasn't formally tested. A lot of the women who came under that policy haven't had the opportunity to learn English and haven't developed the confidence, although some had also been career women and were keen to move into study and a career here as well.

The background is that from the 19th century through to 1974, migration was very much focused on British immigrants. In 1970 there was a big change, opening up to Pacific Islanders. In 1974, policy changed so that people from Britain were not as favoured as they had been before. The next major change was in 1986, when migration became possible from a wide range of countries that hadn't been included before, except through the occupational priorities list. And then there was 1991.

NZ's support for migrants seems to have been piecemeal. There has never been a planned programme either for English language education or supporting people to get work. During the 1970s, there were quite a few agencies, partly because Pacific Island migration was new and partly because the government had some responsibility for unskilled workers who came in on temporary permits and were supposed to go home after their work. This followed the great industrial development of the 1960s in New Zealand,

when the country needed people for work. Many came on work permits but then after getting established here, they wanted to stay. So, in the early 70s in Auckland, Wellington and Tokoroa there was a large number of Pacific Islanders who didn't necessarily have the skills to get jobs for themselves. So Vocational Training from Department of Labour and Department of Education looked at setting up programs - interestingly, both to help the migrants develop work skills and also to educate the managers on cross-cultural communication.

There were publications like *Understanding Pakehas*, *Understanding Samoans*, which I think were effective, and later *People like us*, on migration diversity in New Zealand. So the early 70s seemed to be a period of quite positive support for migrants, but that was overtaken by international events, the oil prices, currency problems for New Zealand, "think big" projects that weren't particularly successful. By the 80s, the refugees had begun to come, and the government set up an orientation programme for the quota refugees because of their international responsibilities to the UN.

In the 80s there was quite a lot of support through the Department of Education. And the refugee development was really the beginning of ESOL development on a large scale. There hadn't been a huge demand before that. The Pacific Island Education Resource Centre (PIERC) had been set up as a co-ordinator to meet the needs of Pacific Island people, and also the Multicultural Education Resource Centre, (MERC) in Wellington. That seems to be the main support for new adult migrants.

In 91, NZ introduced the point system, partly based on Australia's system, targeting people with high qualifications and/or with money to support themselves. The idea was to bring in investment funds and a more skilled workforce, because there was a lack of skills in New Zealand. Also throughout the 80s, apart from one or two years, there was a great continuing outflow of skilled New Zealanders to other countries, particularly Australia.

But immigration seems to have got out of control, because people were gaining points for high qualifications but without any links made to the opportunities in New Zealand for work. Numbers gradually increased, with a target of 20,000 a year initially, and there was a lot of tension between those who wanted to raise the target to 40,000 a year and others who wanted to reduce it. But because the Autopass had its own momentum and the statistics kept seemed to be very weak during the early 90s, nobody seemed to know really what the numbers were. And in 94-95, the inflow was something like 54,000, with the majority coming from Asian countries.

Now, there were more people coming in under the General category. The flaw in the policy in establishing the two categories of Business and General at that stage was that

anybody who could qualify as a Business migrant could probably also qualify under the General category. You weren't tied down as much under the General category as you were under the Business Migrant category, where you had to put up a certain amount of money before you came, you had to commit to establishing a business venture in New Zealand and you had to meet stricter conditions than through General categories. Business migration numbers were still comparatively low, but apparently there was increasing investment funding coming in, though not necessarily from those people living here. In other words, there was also the possibility of setting up your family here but actually going back to continue your business elsewhere, which created growing tension in society.

### **Lack of support services**

For the migrants in this period, there has been no coordinated support. It seems that most people rely on a friend or relation who's already here or on the services of an immigration consultant. Sometimes people have been here in advance of immigrating and made contact with real estate agents. Some people simply come and stay in a motel. A lot of people are very isolated when they first come because they are on their own. What's more, you couldn't be guaranteed a place in an English class in any of the public institutions. Even though there was English publicly provided, there wasn't enough to meet that demand. Another factor was that in the 90s, education was being restructured, and fees rose enormously. New migrants didn't know that the previous year it had been cheaper.

Support for reception only came through either immigration consultants or family. Their contact with the Immigration Department seemed to finish in their country of origin, once they'd been approved. There are publications like *A New Settlers Guide to New Zealand*, but no orientation programmes. It was basically left to community centres and ethnic associations to fill that gap. So migrants have stepped into a vacuum - no interpreting services or counsellors from different ethnic communities. That was particularly obvious in Business migration: there was very little done by the business community in New Zealand to help people understand the climate of business in New Zealand. A lot of the people that I have interviewed felt New Zealanders were keen to keep their businesses to themselves: if they gave anybody else knowledge about how things worked in New Zealand, that would be a threat to their own New Zealand businesses.

The Australian situation is different. It has a lot of government structures supporting migrant education. The Adult Migrant Education Service was actually established in the 1940's, so there's a history of expecting to provide language support, interpreting, telephone interpreting, migrant resource centres in different communities, promotion of

ethnic associations, teaching other languages. There was provision initially for 800 hours of English language tuition, which is reduced now to 500. It may be about to reduce further. In Canada, too, there are government structures and commitment to provide for people to settle.

The first year or two in particular is the time that people are more dependent. Although people in the new categories of migrant, Business and General, don't want to be dependent, they still have to have an orientation. If you haven't got any help at all, it's going to take you four or five years to adjust, whereas if it was provision on arrival, then people could quickly become much more fulfilled and engaged in society than is currently possible. I found that you needed to be here about four and a half to five years to be settled and to feel as though you could commit to living in New Zealand, although I felt some of the people were still uncertain about that. And I think there was a possibility that a number would ultimately return to their country of origin.

### Isolation

Migrants described being very much on their own, their experiences not meeting their expectations, coming with such huge excitement and feeling of opportunity, believing that somebody was rewarding them for their qualifications and work experience. But then they found that they were defeated by employers wanting New Zealand qualifications. And so the only way to go was back to university at their own expense to gain a higher qualification, even if they already had something high. People who were in the medical area faced huge barriers, because it was expensive and very difficult to register in New Zealand and they didn't know the registration rules before they came. They weren't aware of what they had to do to get recognised in their professions once in New Zealand. But there was an amazing acceptance of all of this, even though they had lost quite a lot it seemed, in this period - status, income, employment prospects, location and community. They are very isolated.

They find it difficult to meet Kiwis, though the people I interviewed certainly wanted to have more contact with New Zealanders. There are friendship societies in some of the communities, like Pakuranga and Howick, where there's a big Asian population. Those are usually started by Europeans. The people I interviewed in those societies were very positive about the fact they could meet as equals, whereas otherwise, it was really hard to find an area where you could meet as an equal and just talk person to person. In classes, there is an imbalance; and in work, they are often in jobs that are low status; so there are difficulties in just being seen for who you are.

They found it difficult to meet Kiwis because of language. They felt that if they didn't have fluent language, they were lacking in confidence themselves, and Kiwis were not very patient and tolerant of them.



On the question of getting a job, it's hard. Employers are justified in saying they've got to have people who are fluent in English. But is that an excuse for preferring to take a native speaker of English? You don't know, really, when employers lay these conditions down, how much it's actually an easy way out. It looks like a legitimate way to select an employee. I know a mining engineer who applied for 100 jobs in New Zealand and Australia. He finally decided to go and do a Masters. He'd been director of a mining institute in Croatia, and had very good English in my eyes.

Some of the recent history is relevant here. In 1995 there was a lot of publicity about overloading the systems with demands from migrants for education in primary and secondary school, and some concerns among New Zealanders that migrants were taking jobs. This led to a lot of media publicity and became an issue as we got closer to an election year. Then the number of immigrants reached 54,000, a figure that was met with horror by some. The government moved to introduce an English language test for Business migrants and General category migrants and they adopted IELTS.

There are problems with IELTS, because it's basically set up to screen people for further study. But at least it includes an interview and it does look at each major skill, so it's probably better than other international tests that are currently available.

The effect of IELTS screening on immigration was that from the end of 96 and then all through 97, numbers began to fall very dramatically. The government worries about the loss of investment funds, so in 97 they reduced the IELTS score needed by Business migrants, on the basis that such migrants didn't need the language particularly, because they were probably operating in their own communities or hiring interpreters.

Meanwhile, Winston Peters picked up on the issue, arguing for reduced numbers, and as always, with a complex character like Winston Peters, he had a point. But, through dramatizing it, he created a backlash against migrants, particularly against Asian migrants. In the lead-up to the 1996 election, he argued that numbers should be reduced to 12,000 per year. If the support services had been in place (or even if the accounting had been more accurate), there could have been appropriate adjustments. But, because the process of restructuring government and public institutions in New Zealand was hotting up at the same time as this immigration bulge, it didn't get serious treatment. In any case, policy was ad hoc. Even the population conference at the end of 1997 was problematic: the registration fee was about \$700, so it was pretty much targeted at those who supported the direction of the government. However, it did give a forum to express the need for planned migration and support services. In 97 government moved again to target particular countries like Hong Kong, Britain and Taiwan. As a cynic, you can say that's because obviously the Brits speak English, the Hong Kong Chinese are more likely to speak English and to know the culture, and the Taiwanese have made the biggest investments in New Zealand.

## Overview

Overall on migration, NZ has left migrants to sink or swim, which is negative for society generally. It sets up tensions that could have been avoided. The migrants' expectations are often dashed and they then have to decide whether there are good reasons for staying or for going back. If they go back, they lose out - their children can't fit back into the education systems very easily once they have been out of them. It's bad for New Zealand's international reputation in those countries where it's trying to make an impression and where it wants to be seen as part of the Asian-Pacific area. The positive side is that migration has created greater diversity in society and I think it has increased understanding of Asia in New Zealand, but it could have been done better, or it could have been done without as much antagonism as there has been.

I'd like to see three things. More in-country counselling before people actually make their decision to migrate. Then opportunities in their home countries to learn English that is appropriate to NZ. One of the major difficulties for people here is New Zealand English. They have learnt American English. So there's a question of accents and idioms. And finally, an orientation programme when they arrive. Not necessarily long because a lot of the people that I spoke to didn't want to be tied down for ages, they expected to be independent. But they need a start.

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