

## FROM MEXICO TO AUSTRALIA: A FEASIBLE CHANGE IN MEXICAN MIGRATION PATTERN?

*De México a Australia: ¿Un cambio factible en el patrón de la migración mexicana?*

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### Abstract

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During the last 60 years, Mexico has become one of the countries with more nationals living overseas. Unlike African and some Asian immigration which mainly results from political persecution, strong political instability, civil wars, racial discrimination or even genocide; Mexican migration is a complex phenomenon mostly triggered by economic issues. On one hand, the harsh conditions and low incomes in agricultural areas resulting in a bigger within Mexican society motivates most of rural migration. On the other hand, the lack of jobs and competitiveness, are increasing the “incentives” for skilled urban population to move out of the country (brain drain). The traditional destination was the United States of America; but in recent years, as the motives and the migration composition changed, so did the international context. With more global interaction, more academic exchange opportunities, and in order to avoid the tough security measures and restrictive immigration policies, people is looking for new options, from Spain to Australia. Thus, the following article analyses the change in Mexico’s traditional migration pattern, focusing on Australia as a new destination.

**Key words:** Mexican migration to United States and Australia.

### Resumen:

*Durante los últimos 60 años, México se ha convertido en uno de los países con mayor número de nacionales viviendo en el exterior. A diferencia de la migración africana y asiática cuyos motivos incluyen persecución política, guerras civiles, inestabilidad, discriminación social e incluso genocidio; la migración mexicana es un complejo*

*fenómeno principalmente motivado por factores económicos. Por un lado, las arduas condiciones y bajos salarios en áreas rurales generan una mayor polarización social, motivando la migración de campesinos, por otro, la falta de empleos y de competitividad, están aumentando los incentivos para la 'fuga de cerebros'. El destino tradicional era los Estados Unidos de América, pero en años recientes, han cambiado no sólo los motivos y la composición migratoria, sino también el contexto internacional. Con mayor interacción a nivel global, mayores oportunidades de intercambio académico, y con el fin de evadir las altas medidas de seguridad y restrictivas políticas migratorias se buscan nuevas opciones que van de España a Australia. Por lo tanto, el siguiente ensayo, analiza el cambio en el patrón migratorio tradicional mexicano, enfocándose en Australia como un nuevo destino para los migrantes.*

**Palabras clave:** *Migración mexicana a Estados Unidos y Australia.*

***To migrate or not migrate, that is the question...***

Migration is an integral part of human history, perhaps even part of human nature. At the beginning of times humans migrated from place to place fleeing natural disasters, in search of food and shelter; essentially early homo sapiens migrated just so survive. As societies developed, new needs appeared and people continued migrating in order to find more suitable conditions for their lives. Eventually, people started migrating not only to find a better quality of life, but to find a place to pursue the loftier ideals, rather than just survival, but to seek freedom, in all its forms, freedom of religion, speech and the ability to democratically elect a government. Nowadays, migration can be the result of different causes, from political persecution to financial reasons; however, most of the times its linked to a combination of circumstances in the home country, such as the lack of social and economic opportunities and the perception of opportunity in the receiving country. (ICRC, 2009)

Consequently, in the Mexican case, the limited success in creating well paid jobs, lack of opportunities, insecurity, the growing violence and the war between the government and the drug cartels, and the increasing polarization in society, are some of the factors that motivate thousands of Mexicans to leave their country and migrate to find a 'better way of life'. Making that decision is not simple at all. People want to dream of a better future, but they are very aware that the 'journey' will not be an easy

one. Leaving their families, jobs, traditions, culture, food and friends are just the beginning. After facing all the risks of crossing the border in the case of moving to the United States of America, or being the potential target of racism or discrimination moving to any country, immigrants have to struggle while settling down, finding a new place to live in, getting a job, dealing with new traditions and eventually live with an identity crisis that may last forever.

### ***Traditional Mexican migration pattern***

Due to geographic, economic and historical factors, the traditional destination for Mexican immigrants is the United States of America. As its largest continental neighbour and being the biggest economy and most powerful country in the world, the USA annually attracts thousands of Mexican immigrants, who are willing to cross the over 3,100 km of border line, jeopardizing their lives just to pursue a better life.

Since the rise of the United States of America as a major player in the international arena and its fast consolidation as an industrial nation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the USA had made use of migrant Mexican labour, particularly in its agricultural sector, developing what I call the first Mexican migration pattern. This first pattern consisted in seasonal guest workers program based on quotas, which legally allowed Mexican workers to work in the US and then return back to Mexico in winter.

That migratory and seasonal Mexican labour, changed as a direct result of the USA involvement in World War II, creating the second Mexican migration pattern. The American participation in the Second World War produced a vacuum of skilled labour in all sectors of the economy due to the massive enrolment in the armed forces which required a change in the immigration policy for the United States that resulted in the development of the *Bracero* Program in conjunction with Mexico. The Bracero Program was a guest worker program that ran between the years of 1942 and 1964 and sponsored some 4.5 million border crossings of guest workers from Mexico during its duration (INEGI, 2009). This second pattern lasted until the 1970's and was mainly composed by young single males, mostly from rural background that were employed in

agricultural activities and after the harvest will go back to Mexico, creating a circular migration flux (INEGI, 2009).

The third migration pattern emerged after 1980, within an international context characterized by globalization, liberalism and a fast technological development, mainly in information technology (IT). While the demand for IT labourers increased in the USA Mexican immigrants remained to some extent under qualified. The main change in the pattern was the group composition. This time, Mexican immigrants included women and children; whole families staying in the USA for good, and entering America to seek all kind of undocumented jobs, not only agricultural areas, but expanding to bigger cities such as Chicago, New York, etc; working as cleaners, gardeners, or maids. According to information published by the Pew Hispanic Center: “the flow of immigrants from Mexico to the United States has declined sharply since mid-decade, but there is no evidence of an increase in Mexican-born migrants returning home from the U.S.” (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009).

The though immigration security policies adopted by the American government, the increasing discrimination and the “brain drain” factors, triggered a new pattern which emphasizes a major diversification. In this fourth pattern, the diversification is multiple; there is diversification in the composition of groups migrating, diversification of the destination chosen, from Canada, to Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and diversification in skills and socio economic backgrounds of the immigrants. The more appealing countries to Mexican immigrants after the USA are Canada, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan, China, Chile, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.

### ***Australia VS United States***

After several conversations with students and friends in Mexico, I came across the general perception that migrating to Australia seem to be easier than migrating to the USA. Based on the fact that Australia is roughly the same size of continental US but has only 21 million habitants, people in Mexico assume that the small amount of population means a bigger demand for imported labour. However, that rationale is only partially true. As a Mexican immigrant to Australia myself, I have had the chance to

research, but also to experience first hand the complexity involved in migrating to an ‘untraditional’ destination.

Perhaps the main difference between Australia and the United States of America is their self perception within the international arena. While the US has a longstanding tradition of pursuing supremacy, Australia focuses only on its immediate neighbours and does not demonstrate major imperialists’ ambitions. As John Langmore, an Australian politician stated “Americans maintain their sense of being God’s own country with a manifest destiny to lead the world to freedom and democracy. Australia has no global ambitions, and those related to the region are for stability and economic advancement rather than dominance” (Langmore, 2009).

People think that migrating to both Australia and the US is always feasible due to the constant demand of labour. However, while this first argument is true, and there is indeed a demand for labour in both countries, Australia has basically already covered that need with the immigrants coming from its own sphere of influence: the Pacific Islands, South East Asia and even Africa. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia receives a new immigrant every 1 minute and 53 seconds (ABS.gov, 2009).

The second argument is that of Australia as a multicultural nation, always welcoming diversity. Nevertheless, people would be surprised of how restrictive and discriminating Australian immigration policy has been, and how slowly it has changed. The immigration Restriction Act of 1901, commonly known as the *White Australia Policy (WAP)*; is a black mark on the Australian psyche and constant shameful reminder of political thinking in the past. At its inception, the WAP was targeted at potential Chinese and Japanese immigrants. They were viewed as the *yellow peril* and were believed that if allowed to immigrate en-mass they would overrun the Australian way of life.<sup>1</sup> After World War II there was a relaxing of the WAP, but there was still prejudice against Asians, preferring immigration from those with European ascent. The WAP was officially repealed in 1973, and the Racial Discrimination act of 1975 officially made illegal racial criteria for any purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian government, 2009, *White Australia policy*, Department of immigration and citizenship <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm>

Today, Australian immigration policy is certainly more open than 30 years ago, but there are still various restraining criteria that have to be met. Then again its main focus is on the Pacific Islands and Asia, favouring the admission of skilled immigrants. In Australia, applicants for permanent residence are selected on the basis of a point system that assigns higher scores to persons with degrees or diplomas recognized in Australia and at least three years of work experience; there are also working holiday programmes that allow young citizens of selected countries to travel and work within Australia for periods that can last for one or two years. However, according to the United Nations International Migration Report 2006, most of these people, can only find low-skilled occupations (UN, 2006)

A third argument has to do with safety and financial issues. Unlike America, Australia is one of the safest countries in the world, relatively non polluted and more engaged in international cooperation. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Australia currently has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest life expectancy rate of 81.63 years, with America in 50<sup>th</sup> place and Mexico in 71<sup>st</sup> (CIA World Factbook, 2009). Furthermore, according to the latest United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report in 2009, Australia is the second best place in the world to live in, only after Norway (UNDP, 2009). Also, in recent economic reviews, Australia seems to be one of the strongest economies in the world after the financial crisis, according to the survey published by the World Economic Forum on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, “Australia has overtaken the US as a top global financial centre”.

As a developed/first world nation, Australia has high living standards, with strong working unions that achieved relative high incomes and working rights. However the trade off to high income levels usually involves a higher cost of living. On the other hand, the health system is much better and cheaper in Australia than in the US. Australia only spends 9.3% of Gross domestic product on healthcare,<sup>2</sup> and manages to have a world class universal health care system as well as Pharmaceutical Benefit System (PBS). The PBS is a co-payment system where for important life saving and disease preventing drugs, an individual only pays \$32.90 for most prescriptions; and a concession holder, such as low-income earners, welfare recipients, only pay \$5.30, for

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<sup>2</sup> Medicare Australia, 2009, *Australian Health System*,  
<http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/about/whatwedo/health-system/index.jsp>

the prescription, the government pays the rest (Australian Department of Health and Aging, 2009). The World Health Organisation reports that America spends 16% of their Gross domestic product, and fails to have an effective or affordable universal health care system.

In economic terms, “the interconnectedness of the Mexican and US economies is well known and based on four important economic channels: trade, remittances, investment, and financial channels” (DFAT, 2009). Although Mexico has signed and ratified 12 free trade agreements, which in theory should benefit Mexican trade with at least 40 countries, Mexican international trade is extremely dependent on America, “with 85 per cent of all Mexican exports destined for sale in the American domestic market. Remittances from the United States accounted for US\$25 billion in 2008 making it the country’s second largest source of foreign exchange, and half of Mexican foreign direct investment flowing from US-based investors” (DFAT, 2009).

According to *Mexicanos en el exterior* almost 80% of Mexicans living in the USA were employed before the international financial crisis of 2008; 20.4% working in the construction industry, 21.7% in production; 32.1% earns between \$200 and \$299 USD a week, 27.3% between 300 and 399, and 27.4% earns \$400 USD or more. In Australia salaries are very similar to those in the US, but in average an immigrant working seven hours a day, five days a week under the lowest wage, earns around \$450 AUD a week.

In terms of international law and treaties, Mexico has over a few hundreds of bilateral agreements with the US which range from sharing water, to delimiting borders, to economic, financial and technical cooperation, to the sophisticated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); it only has six Treaties signed with Australia: Technical and Scientific cooperation, extradition, judicial assistance, pacific use of nuclear energy, tariffs and investment protection. (SRE, 2009) And even though both countries could deepen their economic and financial cooperation under the World Trade Organization (WTO) umbrella, the reality is that Australia is more interested in negotiating and increasing its partner and relationship with Asian Pacific countries than with Latin America.

Finally, in terms of education, the USA has been the traditional destination for Mexican students, to practice English or to undertake exchange or full undergraduate or

postgraduate programmes. There are various scholarships offer to Mexican students from the government and foundations, like Comission Mexico-US (COMEXUS), the Fulbright Robles Scholarship, Rowe fund, Ford Scholarship, Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT), etc... However, as Australia keeps rising as a major destination for foreign students after the Government's decision in the late 1980s to deregulate the educational sector, assist higher education institutions in establishing and marketing courses for overseas students, and easing visa restrictions for paying foreign students (UN, 2003), and after 2002 when Australian authorities simplified further the admission procedures for foreign students; more and more Mexican students are interested in studying in Australia, particularly, because even without an scholarship, education prices in Australia are lower than in the US. In addition studying in Australia provides a broader outlook of the world, and emphasizes the importance of South East Asia and the Pacific region, rather than maintain the mainstream American perspective.

According to *The Advertiser*' the future of Australian financial system depends on these international students migrating, as the baby boomers begin to enter retirement, the number of taxable Australians is declining leading to a potential funding crisis for government services. However, approximately only 10 percent of the international students in Australia decide to migrate (October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009). Most of them deciding to stay in the biggest cities like Melbourne and Sydney, as places like Adelaide or Tasmania do not offer professional development or appealing opportunities to skilled immigrants. Recent surveys demonstrate that immigrants living in Sydney and Melbourne seem to have more opportunities than immigrants arriving to Adelaide. (*The Advertiser*, 2009: 4)

### ***Mexico australian bilateral relationship***

The bilateral relation between Mexico and Australia has improved in recent years. Their cooperation has increased in multilateral organisations and also in the bilateral level, from parliamentary meetings, to education and first level meetings. For example, in November 2008, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Smith visited Mexico



and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Education to investigate ways to deepen educational ties between the two countries. A visit by President Calderón to Australia for the September 2007, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit underscored our mutual interest in strengthening bilateral trade, investment, political and people-to-people links. In the multilateral level, cooperation between Australia and Mexico is remarkable in a variety of areas, including international climate change negotiations, APEC, the International Whaling Commission, the G20 and the United Nations, global energy and environment issues, disarmament and non-proliferation and human rights amongst other issues (DFAT, 2009).

The latest Australian Census (in 2006) revealed that there were around 1,800 Mexican-born persons resident in Australia at that time. (DFAT; 2009) Whereas in the US, are at least 12 million Mexicans of first generation, and 25 million more that have gained double nationality or are direct descendants of Mexicans born in the USA (Mexicanos en el Exterior, 2009).

Regarding tourism, in 2006, around 25,000 Australians travelled to Mexico whilst nearly 7,000 Mexican nationals visited Australia (DFAT, 2009). However, despite the increasing number of Australians visiting Mexico, the true is that during the last 10 years, 90% of international tourism in Mexico has been from the USA (Mexicanos en el Exterior, 2009).

### ***Conclusions***

According to the 2009 Human Development Report published by the United Nations Program (UNPD), “migration has the potential to increase people’s freedom and improve the lives of millions around the world” (UNPD, 2009). Because the world is still far from achieving the Millenium Development Goals, and because inequality and poverty are still impeding a sustained development in many countries, migration will be a major element in our globalised 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the particular case of Mexico, migration is likely to remain as an option for the millions of Mexicans living in poverty. As long as the government disagrees and on the structural reforms, Mexico's competitiveness will fall, increasing the concerns about the country's ability to attract foreign direct investment; and considering the "comparatively high costs of labour, capital, and services and relatively poor infrastructure within Mexico" (DFAT; 2009), the incentives to migrate to America or other developed regions will rise. As stated by Steven Camarota from the USA Center for Immigration Studies (2009):

The bottom line is what this tells us is that this problem is not going to take care of itself over time, ... Either we work to reduce the scale of Mexican migration to the United States by seriously enforcing our laws or we accept the fact that millions of people are going to relocate from México to the United States (Camarota: 2009)

The immigration to the US has been sustained during the last century due to the proximity between the countries and the extension of their border line, which makes it virtually impossible to maintain effective controls covering the whole area. The cheap costs of flying to America, and the development of border mafias treating with people *polleros* also influence the costs of crossing the Mexican border, including physical costs (dehydration, sunburns, deported by the border patrol, the possibility of being shot by a ranger "minutemen", or dying alone in the middle of a desert). For instance, in 2009, from the number of Mexicans that attempt to cross the border, a 10% died (Otero, *El Universal*, 2009).

On the other hand, the fact that migration to the US tends to be supported and sponsored by relatives living in America, provides incentives to keep migrating, as they can keep their familiar ties while entire Mexican communities living together (at least 86% have relatives living in the same town or city), sharing a language, history, difficulties, food and cultural heritage. This also relates to language, since only 66 percent of the Mexicans living in the US speak English, having and knowing that everyday more and more American citizens speak or at least understand basic Spanish is a major 'advantage' (Mexicanos en el Exterior, 2009)

Thus, America has and will remain the main migratory destination for Mexicans due to its locality, cheaper travel costs between Mexico and America, and the ability to maintain strong cultural bonds. Migrating to Australia imply different but equally

challenging aspects. While in Australia the demand for manual labour jobs is usually met by immigrants from Pacific Islands, and South East Asia, there remains the potential for skilled immigrants. Currently there is great demand in Australia for skilled engineers, doctors and nurses. Unlike America where many people understand Spanish, many Australians do not. Therefore good command of the English language is essential. If one was to immigrate to Australia then try to find a job, it can be a difficult and daunting task. But if a job is arranged before arriving in Australia there is the potential for a successful career and family life. With Australia's safe neighbourhoods, excellent health care system, and welfare system for permanent residents and Australian citizens; Australia is an enticing prospect to emigrate to. That being said, one must contend with the long distances from home, small cultural support base and difficulties sending remittances home.

In summary, Australia will not be a viable destination for immigrants from Mexico seeking manual labour jobs; the immigration department penalizes those who are classed as unskilled. On the other hand Australia is growing into a potential destination for skilled migrants provided one can deal with the long immigration process and cultural separation.

Nevertheless, if Mexicans are interested in improving their English skills, understanding a different culture, getting a broader perspective of the international arena, expanding their knowledge regarding the Pacific and Asia, and interacting with a friendly, down to earth and kind society, Australia is a great option. Mexican students are the third largest foreign student body in Australia. There were over 1000 Mexicans who commenced studies at Australian educational institutions in 2008 (DFAT, 2009).

#### ***Acronyms:***

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

COMEXUS: Commission - Mexico United States

CONACYT: Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología

DFAT: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

INEGI: Instituto Nacional de Geografía, Estadística e Informática

IT: Information Technology

NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement

PBS: Pharmaceutical Benefit System

SRE: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores

UN: United Nations

UNDP: United Nations Development Program

US(A): United States of America

WAP: White Australia Policy

WHO: World Health Organisation

WTO: World Trade Organisation

WWII: Second World War

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