EXCLUSIVE The nation is deeply divided about Muslim migration, with research revealing widespread concern that immigrants from Islamic countries will not integrate into mainstream society and hold beliefs that are incompatible with Australian culture. Underscoring the challenge Malcolm Turnbull faces as he seeks to promote “mutual respect” among different cultural and religious groups, a survey on migration attitudes has indicated that almost one in two voters believes an increase in Muslim migrants has been “bad” or “very bad” for the nation. This compares with 8 per cent who think it has been “good” or “very good”, and 42 per cent who are neutral. The survey findings from a Brisbane-based think tank, the Australian Institute of Progress, emerged as the Prime Minister today joins other political leaders to meet Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders to launch a “national day of unity” promoting community and interfaith harmony. At pains to limit an anti-Muslim backlash in the wake of the Parramatta shooting of a police worker and seeking to reset relations with the Islamic community, Mr Turnbull said yesterday the actions of extremists were undermining “the most successful multicultural society in the world”. While the AIP research paper finds Australians are overwhelmingly supportive of current or even higher levels of immigration, the survey identifies “deep-rooted” concern in some sections of the population about the cultural impact of Islamic migration. Sixty-nine per cent of respondents included in the Australian Attitudes to Immigration report were in favour of continued migration at current or higher levels, compared with 27 per cent who wanted to see fewer migrants. The findings
mirror those of a Scanlon Foundation Social Cohesion survey from last year, which recorded a low level of concern about immigration, with 35 per cent believing the immigration intake to Australia was “too high” while 58 per cent agreed it was “about right” or “too low”. The Scanlon survey also gauged community attitudes to various religious groups, finding less than 5 per cent were negative towards Christian and Buddhist faiths, but 25 per cent had expressed negative attitudes towards Muslims.

The hostility to Islamic migrants identified in the AIP research is most strongly felt among Liberal voters (75 per cent) and those who support minor parties other than the Greens (69 per cent). Among Labor and Greens voters, most respondents took a neutral position, but about 20 per cent said Islamic migration had been negative, and 15 per cent believed it to be positive.

AIP executive director Graham Young, a former campaign chairman for the Queensland Liberal Party, said he had been surprised at the depth of feeling uncovered in the survey. “There is a genuine level of concern,” Mr Young said. “People are in favour of immigration, so this is not, per se, xenophobia towards someone who does not have a European or Anglo-Saxon background. This is a specific group that we are specifically worried about.”

The qualitative survey, derived from questionnaires of almost 1400 people last November, cited concerns about a potential “clash of cultures” based on Islamic migrants holding beliefs that were not in line with widespread Australian values. Examples given from across the political spectrum included the perceived treatment of women and homosexuals, the wearing of the burka or niqab, and sharia law being incompatible with Australia’s legal system. “There is a very strong feeling that immigrants from Islamic countries are part of a culture war pitting their way of life and beliefs against ours,” the report says. Mr Young said the findings of the survey, undertaken before the Lindt cafe shooting in Sydney’s Martin Place, were not a knee-jerk reaction to recent events.

He said Muslim groups should view the research findings as an indication that more needed to be done to demonstrate that Islam could successfully coexist with other religions groups and secular society. “They need to understand this is not just something that pops up when there is an incidence of violence; it is something that is strongly held in a large segment of the community,” he said. The report also finds that Labor and Green voters view migration policy measures through the prism of refugee policy, compared with right-wing voters who view it in terms of its economic benefit. Voters least enthusiastic about immigration were those who supported minor parties other than the Greens, including the Palmer United Party, the Christian Democrats and Family First. Among these “other” minor parties, 43 per cent of respondents wanted migration reduced a little or a lot, compared with 31 per cent who wanted it increased.

The AIP survey reported that 84 per cent of Labor voters favoured current or higher levels, with only 13 per cent favouring lower levels. Liberal voters were divided, with 40 per cent wanting an increase, 34 per cent believing it should remain unchanged, and 23 per cent believing it should increase.