

Immigration – A commitment to Australia: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary of the Report of the Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policies

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Chapter One

Central Issues in Immigration Reform

Immigration, worldwide, is under pressure. At present, Australia's immigration policies are not managing the increasing demand. Without immediate reform, current selection mechanisms will deliver many tens of thousands of immigrants more than the planned immigration program.

Problems with current immigration policies are not limited to the numbers. Widespread mistrust and failing consensus threaten community support of immigration. The program is not identified in the public mind with the national interest, and must be given a convincing rationale.

Selection methods need a sharper economic focus, for the public to be convinced that the program is in Australia's interests. Without it, the core principles of current immigration policy, non-discrimination, and family immigration plus the need for opportunities for non-English speakers, are clearly at risk.

Improving the skills level of immigrants is critical if immigration is to contribute to enhanced economic performance and

improvements in living standards in the longer term.

Many Australians are not convinced that immigrants are making a commitment to their new country. Inevitable changes to their society, brought by immigration, trouble them. Poor rates for the taking up of citizenship disturb them.

The status of citizenship is seriously undervalued. One million immigrants have declined to take it. Citizenship should reflect a commitment to Australia and its institutions and principles.

Immigration must be a two-way commitment between the immigrant and Australian society. Key Australian principles and institutions must have the support of the immigrant, and citizenship must be a watershed in the immigrant experience.

Government should move to restrict the non-survival benefits and privileges available to non-citizens. Non-citizens should not be able to sponsor immigrants, except in certain compassionate circumstances.

Immigration policy is for all Australians, not for sectional interest groups. It must not be allowed to slide into the margins of government decision-making. It must be in the mainstream.

A coherent philosophy of immigration is needed. Such a philosophy should emphasise the Australian diverse, harmonious community.

Chapter Two

Community Views and Perspectives.

Australians want to be heard and to be informed on immigration matters. The Committee has

heard and read views representing hundreds of thousands of Australians, and commissioned three independent studies of community attitudes towards immigration. We have taken them into account in formulating the recommendations of this Report.

Major issues of concern to the community included immigration numbers, composition of the intake and the immigrant's role in changing Australian society. Race did not come through as a major concern, although the Committee recognised it as an issue attracting widespread publicity, and one requiring attention.

Economic issues underpinned much anxiety, as did the widespread belief that the community was not being consulted or informed about immigration policy. Great diversity, but also considerable consensus, of opinion emerged on the right balance of economic and social objectives in immigration.

Confusion and mistrust of multiculturalism, focussing on the suspicion that it drove immigration policy, was very broadly articulated. Many people, from a variety of occupational and cultural backgrounds, perceived it as divisive. The majority of these people also expressed concern about immigrants' commitment to Australia and to Australian principles and institutions.

English language emerged as another central issue of concern, many people arguing strongly for its inclusion in the immigration selection criteria, some others asserting that it should not be part of selection but should be the first priority of settlement facilitation.

Chapter Three

The Economic Focus and Population Issues

The sharper economic focus for which the Government has called is the most central issue in immigration reform. The composition of the immigration program, and of skill levels, are critical if immigration is to contribute to enhanced economic performance. The skills

profile of some groups of immigrants has fallen. The median age is rising.

Immigration can have a positive impact on economic growth and living standards, although it cannot work in isolation from other economic policies. Together with these policies, carefully formulated, it can contribute to improvement in the productivity of the work force and retarding of the ageing of the population.

The budget costs of immigration are relatively low.

But immigration alone cannot be seen as a solution to industry development and environmental problems, nor can it be engineered to decentralise population.

To realise its potential economic benefits to Australia, the immigration program needs a high proportion of skilled, entrepreneurial and youthful immigrants, with English and other language skills playing a part in selection. Procedures and barriers in the labour market, particularly non-recognition of qualifications, which discourage skilled immigrants from fulfilling their potential must be removed.

Selection of skilled immigrants cannot be at the expense of the obligation on employers and education authorities to provide training and re-training programs.

Chapter Four

Immigration and Society.

Immigration is not just about economics. Because it is about people, immigration policy must also be recognised as having a considered social dimension. For immigration to be successful, we need to ensure that we have both aspects right.

The social dimension of immigration requires a two-way commitment between Australia and the immigrant. A harmony of outcomes for both is the goal.

Although settlement philosophy is much more welcoming today than it was 40 years ago, the community is still not convinced we have it right. The philosophy of multiculturalism is not widely understood, and the uninformed ensuing debate is damaging the cause it seeks to serve.

Settlement facilitation on a day-to-day level must give overriding priority to English teaching, skills recognition and bridging and upgrading, support to immigrant women who are often isolated and discriminated against, and translation and interpreter services.

So that overseas-born Australians are not treated as exceptions for the rest of their lives, a line of distinction in the delivery of services must be drawn between the first two years following immigration and later government responsibilities, when DILGEA's responsibility should be handed over to other agencies.

The importance of the family and immigrant networks and communities in facilitating settlement is critical, and should be encouraged.

Although we have a more welcoming philosophy of immigration and better settlement facilitation services, discrimination and racism are still realities in the community and public structures. To supplement anti-discrimination legislation, we must extend affirmative action policy to combat discrimination against overseas-born Australians.

Australians have come a long way in their attitudes to immigration since the demise of the White Australia policy. It is no longer seen as respectable institutionally to espouse racist views. Racism is no basis for immigrant selection. But racism exists throughout the society and government must recognise it and provide leadership in combating it.

Australia's more welcoming stance on immigration is best illustrated in its support for the refugee program. This element of immigration is also our finest example of the two-way commitment between immigrant and society, and should provide a positive outlook

for Australia's capacity to absorb immigrants.

Chapter Five

The Size and Composition of the Immigration Program.

Immigration planning has been ad hoc, leading to unmanageable pressure on numbers control, services and infrastructure.

The program needs perspective planning in a 10 year timeframe. Annual program size targets for the first three years and indicative targets for the next seven years should be formulated in advance.

The annual target for the years 1988/89 to 1990/91 should be 150 000, beginning halfway through 1988/89. Targets for the following seven years will depend on social and economic conditions.

Chapter Six

Selection.

Selection in immigration is about rationing and choosing. That means limiting the numbers to available places annually and, in the appropriate immigration categories, choosing immigrants in Australia's national interests.

The current points test is serving neither of these objectives. The Committee's proposed system has three categories, Family Immigration, Refugee and Humanitarian and a new Open category. The proposed Family Immigration category has much the same qualifying criteria as the current category for close family reunion (ie. as distinct from extended family), with some loosening. The proposed Refugee and Special Humanitarian category is divided into two elements, one established for people identified by the Australian Government and the other for people identified by community organisations able to provide settlement support.

For the proposed new third category an Open

Immigration Selection System should be adopted, based on seven sets of criteria weighted in the following priority order: labour market skills, entrepreneurial and special talents, age, language capacity, including English, as an employability factor, kinship in Australia, other links with Australia and attributes of spouse.

The new system should adopt a global assessment of all applicants and select only the highest scorers, abandoning the present system whereby everyone who reaches a pass mark is eligible, irrespective of numbers, which has resulted in the current blowout in numbers and the creation of a queue. Under the Committee's proposals, extended family, in the kinship factor, continues to count, but only as secondary to skills, entrepreneurship, age and language, and only if the kinship is with an Australian citizen.

The separate Grant of Residence Status policy should be abandoned.

Chapter Seven

Administration.

Policy reform must be complemented by administrative reform. The new administration of DILGEA has this in hand but inherits a serious image problem.

Administrative reform is needed in the areas of selection and training of staff, consulting and planning mechanisms, research, public education and recognition of overseas qualifications.

Staff selection and training must be improved to create a more professional immigration service. Consulting and planning mechanisms must be related to broad national objectives and involve the whole community.

A Minister's Committee on Immigration should be established, with a substantive role in policy formulation, and a well-resourced Bureau of Immigration Research must be set up within DILGEA.

Fundamental to all aspects of reform is community education. The Australian public is demanding to be informed on immigration matters. Information distribution should not be limited to specific interest groups.

In developing its recommendations the Committee was conscious that there is a need to balance the long-term economic benefits of immigration against current budgetary constraints. Accordingly, the Committee believes its recommendations should be substantially implemented through the reallocation of existing resources or through the introduction or extension of user-pays arrangements.

However, we recognise that a number of recommendations could not be implemented without some additional costs to the budget, especially increased post arrival costs associated with program increases. On the advice of the Department and the Secretariat, it is estimated that the direct portfolio costs of the recommendations would be approximately \$11 million in 1988/89, \$8 million in 1989/90 and \$9 million in 1990/91.

Chapter Eight

Legislation.

A more positive foundation to immigration policy and administration has been constructed in the form of a new, model Bill.

The central pillars of the model Bill include the elimination of the distinction between entry permits and visas, the clear outlining of criteria for immigration decision making, the removal of enforcement procedures from DILGEA and provisions for review of most immigration decisions.

The model Bill also proposes an alternative to the Determination of Refugee Status (DORS) Committee, a commission, the head of which would have the status of a Federal Court judge and determinative powers.