



13 July 2015

Migrant Intake
Productivity Commission
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Dear Commissioners

Submission to Migrant Intake into Australia Inquiry

The Australian Human Rights Commission makes this submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Migration Intake into Australia.

The Commission notes that this submission addresses the following issues: social cohesion in Australia; public acceptance of immigration; the impacts of immigration in Australia; and the relationship between temporary and permanent migration. Other issues referred to in the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper are beyond the scope of this submission.

Social cohesion in Australia

Australia is a multicultural society, reflecting the successive waves of immigration that have occurred since the end of the Second World War. Close to half of Australia's population is either born overseas or has a parent born overseas; about 20 per cent of Australian residents speak a language other than English at home.¹

Despite significant population growth and changes in the composition of the population since the end of the Second World War, Australia is a society that enjoys community cohesion. This is attributable to numerous factors. Among them is the bipartisan acceptance of multiculturalism as official policy since the early 1970s.

The official commitment to multiculturalism has allowed the expression of cultural diversity while encouraging immigrants and their children to participate fully in Australian society. The success of Australian immigration policy has been aided by public policy that allows for new arrivals to make the transition from foreigner to citizen.

Public acceptance of immigration

Since the 1970s, Australian immigration policy has been committed to a principle of racial non-discrimination. It is a reflection of Australia's success as a multicultural society that this has been maintained, and that there is strong public acceptance of immigration.

The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion report in 2014 found that about 59 per cent of respondents indicated the immigration intake was 'about right' or 'too low'.² In contrast, in many other western liberal democracies, there are increasingly negative attitudes about current levels of immigration.

Australian immigration policy has historically been supported by the rationale of nation-building. Immigration has been a means of building the economy and enriching the national identity. But there has also been a recognition that Australia has international obligations to accept humanitarian arrivals in light of it being a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. Australia is one of a number of countries that resettles refugees under the auspices of the UNHCR.

It is important to have public acceptance of an immigration policy that involves substantial numbers of new arrivals, based on both national interest and international humanitarian obligations.

An immigration change may have potential impacts on the character and legitimacy of Australia's immigration policy. It may make it easier for race to enter immigration debates, particularly if those who pay for permanent visas come primarily from certain countries or regions. Public acceptance of mass immigration is best secured when there is a long-term nation-building rationale to the migration intake. Where there is a perceived departure from such a rationale, it may, among other things, be more difficult to maintain a racially non-discriminatory immigration policy.

Measuring the impacts of immigration

The Commission notes that migrants make significant contributions to Australia's economy and society.

Estimates suggest that with annual net overseas migration of 180,000, the average Australian household would enjoy a real income of \$275,000 in today's dollars by 2050 (compared with \$86,000 in 2007-8). In contrast, a net overseas migration of 70,000 would lead to the equivalent of \$10,000 less in real annual income for the every household by 2050.³

Migration Council Australia forecasts that the current migration flows to Australia could result in a 21.9 per cent increase in wages for lower skilled workers from 2015 to 2050.⁴

There are also intangible positive impacts of immigration – for example, cultural benefits may be difficult to quantify. The time-frame used in assessing immigration's impact is also important: any such attempt should understand the generational nature of the issue.

Temporary and permanent immigration

The historical strength of Australia's immigration system lies in the foundational value of citizenship. Migrants have been provided with pathways to become full members of the Australian community – namely, as citizens.

Temporary immigration has been a relatively recent development in the Australian experience of migration. While temporary migration is necessary to respond to short-term labour shortages and serves other economic purposes in a global context of mobility, it requires close management. It should not be allowed to undermine social cohesion and public acceptance of mass immigration.

One potential issue with any regime of temporary migration is that it may create a class of 'permanently temporary' workers who contribute to Australian society and the economy but are unable to settle here permanently and become full members of the community.

The risks of this model are evident from the levels of social cohesion in other liberal democracies. In Germany, for example, immigrants were not historically welcomed as potential new citizens but as guest workers who were expected to return to their home countries. This has contributed to significant challenges in the integration of immigrants into wider German society.

Conclusions

Immigrants to Australia are welcomed to this country as future citizens and are offered the chance to contribute to the life of the nation. Immigration and settlement policy has been guided by a commitment to non-discrimination, multiculturalism and nation-building.

This has led to a socially cohesive society with generally high levels of support for current immigration levels. To maintain such cohesion and support, immigration and settlement policy must maintain their commitment to our liberal democratic values.

Recommendations

That the Australian government maintains a commitment to multiculturalism as official policy.

That non-discrimination remains a key part of Australian immigration policy.

That nation-building remains a central objective of Australian immigration policy.

That migrants are offered pathways to become full members of the Australian community through citizenship.

Yours sincerely

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Race Discrimination Commissioner

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural Diversity in Australia: Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census*. At: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013>

² A Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2013: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys National Report* (2014), p 39

³ Department of the Treasury, *Intergenerational Report* (2010)

⁴ Migration Council Australia, *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Migrant Intake into Australia*