



Immigration’s lost social licence: How to restore it

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Introduction

From its inception in 1945, distinct national-interest features and values underpinned the social licence for Australia's immigration program. Australia has presented itself as one of if not *the* best-practice country of migration and (later on) multiculturalism. Since a policy shift in 2001, the traditional annual migration program has been overwhelmed by mass student-driven immigration. The scale and type of immigration over the last two decades is outside previous Australian experience, and polling shows that the public does not accept it. The pact or bargain between government and the Australian people on immigration, whereby annual intakes would be accepted so long as they were planned and managed in the national interest, has been broken.

Australia's best-practice image as a country of managed migration and multiculturalism was finally, and catastrophically, shattered at the Opera House on 9 October 2023¹ and on Bondi Beach on 14 December 2025.² Public trust in government capacity or willingness to manage immigration in the national interest has eroded. A radical rethink of immigration, not reform around current settings, is now needed.

World's best practice

Arthur Calwell, Australia's first immigration minister (1945-49) set out the original 'populate or perish' rationale for a migration program: Australia's population (around 7.4 million in 1945) needed to grow for reasons of national defence and economic expansion and development. The Chifley Government (1945-49) set a goal of population growth rate, assisted by immigration, of two percent. This was based on the capacity of the country in any year to absorb numbers of newcomers.

The importance of maintaining public confidence that the immigration program was in the national interest, that it accorded with national values, and that it was planned and managed with integrity, was recognised from the outset. The tone and nature of the migration program was set down from the beginning: the numbers and types of migrants had to be such that they could be welcomed and absorbed into society. Minister Calwell spoke of the government's recognition that '(a)ny immigration plan can succeed only if it has behind it the support and the goodwill of the Australia people'. To this end, he emphasised the necessity to plan to house and accommodate 'new Australians'. He emphasised the need to ensure that immigrants quickly assimilated into mainstream life and culture, and that they 'shared all the benefits and obligations of common citizenship'.

In 1966 Arthur Calwell described Labor's immigration policy as 'based on the need to strengthen and protect Australia's national and economic security; to safeguard the welfare and promote the integration of all its citizens; to preserve our democratic system and the balanced development of our nation; and to avoid the introduction into Australia, of the

difficult social and economic problems which will follow from an influx of people having different standards of living, traditions and cultures'. He further described the policy as 'based on the belief that assimilation and absorption is the only sensible policy for Australia to pursue'.³

Times changed. The 'White Australia' policy was dismantled from the late 1960s and source countries and regions diversified from the UK and Europe to include Asia, Turkey and the Middle East. In the 1970s the goal of assimilation gave way to 'integration' and, under the Whitlam and Fraser governments, to 'multiculturalism'. Under this social policy immigrants have been encouraged to maintain their homeland languages and cultures, while still participating in the Australian economy and society. Also in the 1970s, a separate humanitarian stream was established for refugees and humanitarian migrants. The rationales for the migration program shifted, from defence and population-building to acquiring skills needed in the economy, reuniting families in Australia and assisting the international refugee effort through humanitarian resettlement.

Immigration's best-practice features and national-interest values expanded over the decades, but it was generally understood that they remained the underpinning of the migration program. Politicians gave voice to them in speeches and in parliament, for five decades. Philip Ruddock, immigration minister in the Howard government (1996-2003), spoke often of government recognition that, to maintain public confidence in the migration program, annual intakes had to be demonstrably in the national economic interest. (While humanitarian intakes are demonstrably not in the national economic interest, Ruddock argued that the economic gains from skilled migration were such as to cover the costs.) He also spoke often of the importance of government managing and being seen to manage the migration and humanitarian streams 'with integrity'. To this end, it was important to control and to be seen to control entry and 'the borders'.⁴

The best-practice and national-interest features and values that underpinned the traditional program have of course been understood by the public as the principled *idea* of Australian immigration, rather than the lived reality. (Governments used immigration and multiculturalism to curry favour with ethnic electorates, while some migrants abused visa conditions and brought ancient hatreds into the country.) They nevertheless provided the basis for what was understood as the pact or bargain between the people and their government: the public would accept annual intakes so long as they were logical, absorbable, managed and in the national economic interest. These features and values were:

- The size of annual intakes would be planned in accordance with labour market conditions and the absorptive capacity of the existing population and infrastructure, including housing.
- The overall immigration intake would be demonstrably in the national economic interest. Migrants would be selected on an individual basis, based on their possession of skills to grow the economy.
- Immigration would be for permanent settlement and immigrants would have equal pay and absolute equality of civic rights in all areas of life.

- ‘Post-arrival’ settlement services, including English language tuition, would be provided to assist immigrants to participate in mainstream economic and social life as soon as possible.
- Temporary ‘guest-worker’ programs as run in some European countries, whereby workers from poorer countries were brought in to do ‘3D’ (dirty, dangerous or demeaning) jobs would be eschewed.
- Immigrants would become Australians and citizenship would be encouraged.
- Migrants would bring their spouses and children with them into Australia. Australians with non-Australian partners or dependent children would be reunited in Australia.
- Separate ethnic ‘enclaves’ would be discouraged.
- Migrants would be expected to leave homeland conflicts and ancient hatreds behind them, not bring them into Australia.
- (From the 1970s) The immigration program would be non-discriminatory in terms of race, religion, colour or ethnicity.
- (From the 1970s) Australia would contribute to the international refugee effort through the resettlement of refugees through a separate humanitarian migration stream. Applicants would be screened by Australian immigration officers, overseas, for character (criminal) and security risk, and capacity to settle in Australia.
- The government would manage the movement of people across the borders in an orderly and efficient manner. Illegal entry and stay would not be tolerated.

Net overseas migration (NOM)⁵ figures up to the 2010s show the sizes of annual intakes under the migration program over the first five decades, and the beginning of mass migration in the 2010s.

Average annual NOM by decade 1950 to 2020⁶

- | | |
|---------|---------|
| • 1950s | 89,000 |
| • 1960s | 91,000 |
| • 1970s | 69,000 |
| • 1980s | 94,000 |
| • 1990s | 73,000 |
| • 2000s | 160,000 |
| • 2010s | 215,000 |

Public attitudes

Public opinion polls have shown that it was only in the early decades, the 1950s and 60s (when migrants came from the UK and European countries and were expected to assimilate) that there was clear majority public support for the immigration program. During these decades, more people considered the annual number ‘too few’ than ‘too many’. From the 1970s, these preferences have been reversed, with more people considering the number ‘too many’ than ‘too few’.⁷ (In the 1970s, source countries and regions diversified from Britain

and Europe to Asia and the Middle East, humanitarian migration intakes expanded, and multiculturalism was adopted as official government policy.) From this time, in terms of category preferences, skilled migrants have consistently been the most favoured by the public, followed by family reunion, with humanitarian migrants the least favoured.⁸

In the early 1990s, when the migration program was heavily weighted towards family reunion, a high proportion of respondents to attitude surveys, around 70 per cent, indicated that they considered the overall intake ‘too many’. In the late 1990s, the balance was adjusted to favour skilled migrants over family migrants. By the early 2000s opposition to migration had eased. A study of the view of ‘policy insiders’ regarding Australia’s response to the ‘boat people’ asylum seekers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, observed: ‘polling shows that support for immigration increases with more efficacious administration of the migration program’.⁹

Polling has indicated a clear and continuing public preference for immigrants with skills (based on genuine shortages) who are willing and able to assimilate or integrate into the general community. It has shown that these majority attitudes are shared by migrants.¹⁰

Regarding official multiculturalism, attitude surveys have reflected longstanding public confusion as to what the policy was and what it meant in practice. When people, including migrants, have taken it to mean appreciation of the ethnically diverse nature of Australian society, and non-discrimination in the selection of individual migrants, they have supported it. When people have taken it to mean directing taxpayer funds to different language or ethnic groups for cultural maintenance, or for ‘cultural diversity’, they have rejected it.¹¹

Australian multiculturalism (and public attitudes and responses to it), is explored in an earlier TAPRI research paper, *Did Australian multiculturalism die on the steps of the opera house?* April/May 2025.¹²

Losing immigration’s social licence

The ‘mass immigration’ in Australia of recent years is a radical departure from traditional planned intakes under the immigration program. It is different in both scale and type. It is driven by the ‘temporary’ immigration of overseas ‘students’ (primarily from India and China, also from Nepal, the Philippines, and Vietnam). These people have work rights and, since 2001, pathways to permanent residence. Most overseas students see their student visas as a pathway to extended work in Australia, ideally leading to permanent residency. The term ‘mass immigration’ denotes the level and type of immigration resulting. It has proved to be beyond the capacity of society to absorb and integrate and is therefore unnerving to the resident population.

Australia’s traditional immigration settings were upended, as noted, by regulation changes which came into effect on 1 July 2001. These changes allowed overseas students to apply for permanent residence onshore and gave them a clear advantage in the points test. As a result,

Australia has the fastest growing population in the developed world: over thirty percent of Australian residents are now overseas born.

The changes to Australia's immigration system and universities were rapid. The motivations of students and educators have been obvious. Australia is a wealthy, high-income country; people from poorer countries can earn more here and they now have a pathway to extended work in Australia even if as temporary visa holders they are vulnerable to exploitation. Surveys have shown that work rights, and the prospect of staying permanently, motivated the choice of 70-80 percent of international students to come to Australia. Overseas students have provided a lucrative income stream for Australian universities, which charge international students 'full' fees (from around \$35,000 to over \$50,000 a year for undergraduate studies). They pay many times more than domestic students pay. These fees are too high, especially in universities catering for a sub-continent of India market, so earnings within Australia are essential. Nevertheless 'overseas students' are now deemed to be a significant 'export' industry.¹³

The NOM numbers are more important than permanent migration numbers when it comes to the impact of immigration on the economy and the resident population. NOM numbers after the Covid shutdown in 2020-21 reflect the rapid rise in student visas in recent decades. They show how, since the regulation changes in 2001, 'immigration levels go largely where student visa policy goes'.¹⁴ Since Labor came to power in May 2022, NOM has exploded. It has averaged 400,000 a year.

NOM by year from 2020

- 2020-21 -85,000 (net loss due to Covid restrictions)
- 2021-22 171,000
- 2022-23 538,000
- 2023-24 446,000
- 2024-25 306,000

The Treasury has forecast NOM to drop to 260,000 in 2025-26, and to 'settle' at 225,000 in 2026-27 and subsequent years. Previous government NOM forecasts, however, have been wrong – in 2022-23 the NOM forecast in the Budget was 400,000; in 2023-24 it was 395,000. The Labor Government is assuring voters that the recent trend down to 306,000 will continue. It will to a degree because the number of visas issued for vocational education has been cut. But the Labor Government has promised universities that they will be able to take on new overseas students near the record level of 2023. As a result, NOM will continue at well over 200,000 a year. Mass migration will continue.

Here's why. There are 185,000 places in the permanent migration program. From a traditional point of view this is a high number. About 60 percent, 111,000 places, will go to overseas students or former overseas students already here in Australia. There are well over a million overseas students, former student temporary graduate visa holders, and former students on bridging visas, already here in Australia. (Temporary graduate visas enable students to stay and work in Australia after finishing their studies. Bridging visas are issued to non-citizens in

Australia whose visas have expired. They allow the holders to stay while they appeal a decision to refuse a visa, or they apply for another substantive (temporary or permanent) visa.)

In comments, surveys, letters, on social media, members of the public have repeatedly expressed their concerns about recent immigration. They have identified those aspects (besides its 'mass' nature) and impacts that have particularly disillusioned or dismayed them.

- Mass immigration has been used by governments to keep their budgets out of deficit: they have 'grown' the economy sheerly through immigration-driven population growth. This has benefited businesses by increasing the pool of consumers and (cheap) workers, and it has made universities profitable. However, at a time of flat productivity, declining living standards, city congestion, eroding standards of services, housing shortages and rising rentals, it has further immiserated existing residents. It has therefore not been in the national economic interest. The 'skills shortage' rationale for mass migration has become less credible over time; little explanation has been provided as to why Australian residents cannot be trained or retrained. Issuing hundreds of thousands of student visas each year has done little to address seemingly perpetual shortages.
- Temporary residents, no matter how long they live here, are not entitled to government income support payments or settlement assistance. Overseas students pay steep course costs, and accommodation expenses. They take up low-paid work and are vulnerable to exploitation. They are doing work Australians won't do, at least at the pay level and conditions temporary migrants are prepared to accept. Bob Birrell, Katharine Betts and Ernest Healy in a recent TAPRI research paper describe the rapid emergence of a 'semi-permanent temporary entry underclass' in Australia.¹⁵ This has never been part of the people's immigration bargain with government.
- Overseas students motivated by work opportunities enrol in a variety of often unconnected and 'easy' courses. Most do not end up working in their field of study; they are not interested or their qualifications do not equip them with the required competencies, including English language. They are assisted to graduate through notorious 'group assignments' in which workloads are carried by domestic students. Universities have prioritised revenue generation and proved unwilling to fail those who pay over a hundred thousand dollars for a degree. Education standards have declined, university degrees are being devalued, and domestic students are getting a dumbed-down, inferior university experience.¹⁶
- Immigrants from Islamic, jihadi-producing places are not being adequately screened for their ability and willingness to settle peacefully and assimilate into a modern, Western democracy. Three thousand 'visitor' Gazans have been welcomed into Australia by Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke. The Gazan population is notorious for its support for Hamas and its antisemitism, and these attributes were not preclusive in the issuing of visas. Everyone knows these 'visitors' will not return to Gaza. Such immigration is reckless; it may be in the electoral interest of some politicians with significantly Muslim electorates, but it is not in the national interest.

- The shock of the Opera House on 9 October 2023 and Bondi Beach on 14 December 2025 have exposed concerning levels of complacency, incapacity and unwillingness amongst political leaders, including past leaders, to control and manage migration and ‘multiculturalism’ in the interests of national security and social cohesion. At the Opera House, about a thousand Australian residents or citizens of Middle Eastern and Arab background celebrated the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, in a threatening and ugly display of antisemitism and failed integration. They shouted ‘gas the Jews’ and/or ‘where’s the Jews’. On Bondi Beach 15 Jewish Australians were killed by a jihadi father who had come from India on a student visa in the 1990s, and his son who was born here, in a further, tragic display of unwanted immigration and unassimilated multiculturalism.

Political salience

Despite public awareness of the obvious - and catastrophic - failures of migration and multiculturalism over the last few years, elite opinion in Australia appears to have been that immigration would not become as politically salient here as in the UK and some other European countries. This view appeared to be based on Australia’s different (preferential and mandatory voting) electoral system as well as assumptions arising from Australia’s traditional accommodation of immigration. The recent immigration has, however, been different in scope and scale from the migration that ‘built Australia’. It is no longer underpinned by best-practice principles and values, and it is not seen by the voting public as in the national interest.

Mass migration has for some years been a politically salient issue in the UK and other Western countries. Net migration into the UK (population 70 million) in the year to March 2023 was 944,000. Net migration into Australia (population 27 million) in 2022-23 was 538,000. Net migration into the UK in the year to June 2025 was 204,000; into Australia in 2024-25 it was 306,000. Recent immigration into Australia has not been illegal but, on a per capita basis, it is more ‘mass’ than in the UK, and it has not been managed or controlled or underpinned by ‘best-practice’ values and principles as it was in earlier eras. Immigration has now rapidly moved up the list of politically salient issues in this country.

A Sky News Pulse - YouGov poll of voting intentions conducted over the week January 20-27, 2026, put One Nation at 25 per cent of the primary vote, ahead of the Coalition on 20 per cent, with Labor on 31 per cent. Immigration has been a central concern of One Nation, which has also long expressed a clear message of intolerance of radical Islam. The poll found that ‘the feeling of voters on immigration is emphatic’: 64 per cent of those polled wanted a decrease in immigration, including 43 per cent who wanted ‘a big decrease’.¹⁷

A Redbridge Accent poll published in the Australian Financial Review on Sunday 1 February 2026 put support for One Nation at 26 per cent of the primary vote. It put the Coalition at 19 per cent, and Labor at 34 per cent.¹⁸

A Newspoll survey conducted 5-8 February 2026 has put One Nation at 27 per cent of the primary vote, with the Coalition at 18 per cent, and Labor at 33 per cent.¹⁹

Restoring integrity

In comments and letters to editors, in surveys and on social media, the voting public has identified measures, besides reducing the numbers, they believe necessary to restore integrity to Australian immigration.

- Decouple student visas from working in and migrating to Australia. Require overseas students to leave the country when they finish their courses, and lodge applications offshore for any further visas. The overseas student industry is based on a lie. Most students are purchasing the promise of a migration outcome, not education.
- Interrogate the desirability or appropriateness of relying on population growth through immigration to grow the economy, rather than addressing issues of economic reform and productivity.
- Interrogate the demographic arguments for mass student-driven migration: immigration cannot, over time, significantly slow population ageing unless ever-increasing and unfeasibly large numbers are involved. Develop policies to accommodate demographic change and/or encourage family formation.
- Require ‘skilled’ migrants to have productivity-enhancing level skills in areas of genuine shortage, or to meet specific job vacancies for which pay is set above the median level, for example \$85,000 per annum.
- Publicly debate the ethical questions arising from the situation where over a million overseas students and former students from poorer countries are doing low-skilled, low-paid work in Australia, while over a million Australian citizens and permanent residents are on welfare. Having so many temporary residents doing jobs Australians will not do, does not reflect the national character this country has previously presented to itself and to the world. If low-paid, low-skilled migration is the only way to meet worker needs in, for example, care industries, address this through open and honest policy development.
- Ditch multiculturalism in favour of a ‘multi-race with shared values’ policy or redefine multiculturalism to insist on assimilation and integration.
- Prevent politicians from using immigration for political (electoral) gain. Prevent temporary residents from abusing the immigration system by lodging unmeritorious visa claims and non-genuine asylum or partner visa applications, to buy time in Australia.
- Withdraw from the refugee convention. The 75-year-old international asylum system no longer has public credibility anywhere in the world.²⁰ In Australia asylum seeking is an open joke; it is used by visitors and temporary residents to extend their stay.
- Rethink the permanent resettlement on the advisement of the UNHCR, of large groups of refugee and humanitarian immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. These groups have not settled or integrated well: historically, they have had a

lower overall labour market participation rate (55 per cent) than other groups, and a higher unemployment rate (a long-term average (2014-2017) of 11 per cent, compared to 5 per cent for Australia-born citizens).²¹

- Stringent testing should be applied to visa applicants, with those unwilling or unable to adopt and accept Australian values, identity and way of life being screened out.
- Make permanent residence conditional on adherence to Australian laws and values and extend the waiting period for citizenship to 10 years. Deny entry to citizens of countries who will not accept their return.
- Assert national political leadership and confidence and address directly the scourge of radical Islam in Australia. Make it clear that hate preaching and teaching will not be tolerated. Require certification for Islamic preachers; set and monitor standards for Islamic schools; require sermons and lessons to be taped.

Australia's voting public are immigrants and the sons and daughters and grandchildren of immigrants. They are not against immigration; they want immigration cut, and they want integrity restored to immigration policy and planning. They can see where and how and why immigration has gone wrong. Cautious changes around the edges proffered by politicians fearful of backlash from business organisations, or universities, or the 'migration industry', will not suffice to restore its social licence. A new approach to immigration, based on national-interest best-practice features and values, is needed.

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