



## Unions and business groups unite to oppose cuts to immigration

**NSW premier says states should have a say in federal policy on migration levels**

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Business groups and Australia's union movement have joined forces to oppose any plans to reduce immigration levels, promoting a "migration compact" to keep permanent immigration at its current level of about 190,000 a year.

But the premier of New South Wales, Gladys Berejiklian, while supporting Australia's current immigration level, has warned that state governments - which bear the brunt of the infrastructure pressures brought by increased populations - must have a seat at the table in guiding migration.

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In a rare alliance, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the Australian Industry Group and a suite of national peak bodies have said they collectively "affirm that Australia's permanent migration program is essential to Australian society and economy and do not support any reduction to the scheme".

"Our permanent migration program has been central to Australia's economic and social development and will be critical to Australia's future as a productive and globally integrated economy and society."

Australia has an annual permanent migration intake of about 190,000, divided, roughly, into about two-thirds skilled, and one-third family reunion visas.

This is exclusive of its humanitarian program, which is 16,250 this year.

In recent months, renewed public and political debate has opened up around the size and nature of the country's immigration program, with arguments that infrastructure and housing development in cities - where migrants overwhelmingly settle - are failing to keep pace.

The disconnect in Australian policymaking has been between the federal government, which sets immigration levels based largely on macro-economic factors, and state governments, which largely bear the responsibility for building the infrastructure needed by growing communities.

Joint research by the Treasury and the Department of Home Affairs, released last month, cites International Monetary Fund estimates showing Australia's migration program will add up to 1% to annual average GDP growth from 2020 to 2050 because it focuses on skilled migrants of working age, which limits the economic impact of Australia's ageing population.

But, speaking in Sydney on Thursday night, Berejiklian said that while she believed Australia's current immigration level "is about right ... we cannot ignore the reality that communities are feeling growing pressures on local services and infrastructure".

"Within our federation, it is states that are on the frontline of delivering the infrastructure and services that our communities and our economies need," she said.

"I am therefore proposing that an entire meeting of Coag next year should be dedicated solely to the issue of immigration and planning. And this should not just be a once-off discussion, but revisited every few years. We need to be focused and disciplined when planning for the future."

Senior federal Coalition figures have publicly and privately canvassed reducing Australia's immigrant intake. The former prime minister Tony Abbott has called for a cut in immigration levels to about 110,000, and the home affairs minister, Peter Dutton, has raised the prospect with his cabinet colleagues of cutting the rate by 20,000.

On Friday, the finance minister, Mathias Cormann, said the government had no plans to change the permanent migration figure of 190,000 people a year.

"We have made it very clear we're not proposing to reduce that 190,000 number but it is a ceiling, it's not a target."

However, government language on migration has changed subtly, but significantly, in relation to the permanent migration figure.

Senior department figures have told Guardian Australia that the word "ceiling" has never been used in previous years: that the migration number had always been referred to as a "target".

And there appears to be a move to slow migration down, even without changing the target figure.

Every year before the previous one, the number of visas granted were very close to the target figure. However, last financial year, the migration intake was significantly below the target (190,000 last year) for the first time in a decade.

Australian parliamentary library analysis said: "Unlike previous years, the number of permanent visas granted in 2016-17 is substantially different from the planning figure. There were 183,608 permanent residency visas (non-humanitarian) granted, following a planning figure of 190,000. The discrepancy of 6,392 is four times larger than the entire difference across the previous decade."

Immigration to Australia has risen sharply over the past two decades, with great priority placed on skilled migration over family reunion. As well, temporary migration to the country has shot up, mainly via temporary skilled work visas as well as student visas.

There has also been a rise in 'two-step' migration, where people come to Australia on a temporary visa, before moving on to a permanent visa. About 50% of permanent visas are now granted to people already in Australia.

The source of Australia's migrants has shifted too. While the UK has historically been - and remains - a large source country, China and India are now, by far, the greatest sources.

#### Topics

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