

It's time for open discussion on how big is too big

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Australia has a history marked by uncertainty when it comes to population size. Even the Treasury's Intergenerational Report that caused so much recent controversy by forecasting Australia's population will rise to 36 million by 2050 is coy on the topic. Nowhere in its 164 pages does it set out the breakdown for the increase by births and migration. You get the distinct impression the omission was deliberate. But are we, as a nation, still not up for an open discussion about the role of migration and population?

The frenzy over asylum seekers arriving by boat provides a striking example of the sensitivity of this debate in Australia. Despite the small number of people arriving, the issue is clearly political dynamite.

But refugees arriving by boat are only a footnote in the population debate. Despite Treasury's coyness about population projections, regular migration will clearly be a major factor driving Australia's population growth (along with domestic births). The debate on this has been fierce in recent weeks. The Prime Minister came out early on in favour of a "big Australia" – but not everyone thought he was reading the Australian mood correctly.

Dick Smith wrote last week: "For the past three months I've been travelling all over the country talking to people about plans to rapidly increase our population. Nine out of 10 people I talk to oppose the idea." Former premier of NSW Bob Carr also sniffed a similar wind when he wrote: "Public opinion has moved — is moving — and I don't think the high-growth option will be entertained politically, by either side."

The shadow minister for immigration, Scott Morrison, seemed to agree, saying: "The Coalition is concerned that the level of net overseas migration currently running at an annualised average of 300,000 . . . is unsustainable." This response, in turn, led to a backlash from business groups concerned that reduced migration under a Coalition government would damage Australia's economic prospects.

The Lowy Institute conducted nationally representative opinion polling on the best population size for Australia by 2050 and found the response not particularly black or white.

Seventy-two per cent of Australians said they wanted a bigger population for Australia by 2050. The most popular response, chosen by 43 per cent of people, was for a population of 30 million, but 23 per cent chose 40 million and 6 per cent 50 million people or more.

Only 4 per cent of Australians wanted a smaller population than the current 22 million (22 per cent wanted about the same level).

While Australians might not be in full support of the 36 million projected by the government, they are, for the most part, in favour of an increase in population.

It was an interesting finding because when it comes to population debates — and in particular the role of migration — Australia has history.

From the time of Federation, Australia adopted a "white Australia" policy. Today, the speeches given at the time to justify the policy seem somewhat baffling. Take then attorney-general Alfred Deakin, who said in a speech in the House of Representatives in 1901: "I say that the Japanese require to be absolutely excluded. I contend that the Japanese require to be excluded because of their high abilities . . . It is not the bad qualities, but the good qualities of these alien races that make them dangerous to us. It is their inexhaustible energy, their

power of applying themselves to new tasks, their endurance and low standard of living that make them such competitors.”

It wasn't until 1949 that a Liberal-Country coalition allowed 800 non-European refugees to stay in Australia, as well as Japanese war brides to enter. From that point on the policy was gradually wound back until its abolition in 1973.

Continuing the uneasy association with migration, in the face of a rapidly advancing Japanese military in World War II the slogan “populate or perish” took on added meaning — the argument being that, without a big increase in population, Australia would not be able to defend its sparsely populated continent.

But is “populate or perish” still true? Lowy polling last year showed 41 per cent of Australians think it is likely China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years, so perhaps this still weighs on many Australians' minds.

Of course, there are obvious economic and business reasons for a bigger population — from creation of a larger domestic market to meeting skills shortages and generating economies of scale.

Maybe we just like the energy, intelligence and interest that migrants bring to Australia and wouldn't mind a few more of them around. Whatever the reason, there should be room for a mature and level-headed debate about population size in Australia.

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