



Speech by

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POPULATION POLICY; IMMIGRATION

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (12 p.m.): Today I would like to inform honourable members of the critical need to develop a national population policy. Recently, the Commonwealth Government tabled a response to a report prepared by a House of Representatives Standing Committee. The report, titled Australia's Population "Carrying Capacity": One Nation—Two Ecologies, made a series of recommendations to the Government regarding a population policy. The Commonwealth Government has rejected most of the report's recommendations and clearly intends to continue along its current path of ad hoc population policy.

As a result of the current administrative arrangements, the nation's population policy amounts to little more than a reactionary policy without vision, driven by immigration targets set on an annual basis. The range of other factors that should be considered in the context of developing a population policy, such as environmental management practices, fertility and mortality rates, the state of the economy, regional development and technological changes, is not considered by the Commonwealth Government in the context of population issues. The complex nature of population policy is noted explicitly in the Queensland Position Statement on Immigration endorsed by the Government on 25 October this year. The statement notes—

"Overseas migration is just one of the components of population growth. It is important that national population policy is recognised as a separate policy issue from immigration, although the two issues are related. In addition to immigration, population policy must incorporate issues such as the environment, demography, regional development, infrastructure and economic conditions."

With a clear national population policy we could develop long-range planning in areas such as infrastructure, service delivery, regional development, immigration and social support mechanisms. With long-range immigration targets we would have some degree of certainty for investors, business, major projects and planners alike, which would offer clear economic benefit for Queensland.

The Federal Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Kim Beazley, MP, has announced that a Federal Labor Government would establish an office of population to advise on Australia's optimal population target and the necessary support policies to achieve it. That would include a broad focus on both immigration and family-friendly policies designed to boost our national birthrate. This marks an important departure from the current narrow approach to population policy in this country, which is determined by default through immigration intakes.

There are many compelling reasons why we should develop a clear population policy, not the least of which is the greying of Australia, that is, the ageing of the population. The ageing of the population is generally regarded as an inevitable consequence of social change, improved quality of life and medical advances. However, Governments do have some capacity to retard the ageing of the population through the implementation of family support mechanisms that make it easier for people to balance work and family responsibilities and through strategic management of the immigration program. Such mechanisms might include tax relief for working families, improved child-care services, social security support, improved equal employment opportunities and encouraging employers to adopt

family-friendly policies. Such measures will become increasingly important if we are to maintain a young dynamic nation with a sizeable labour force able to support older Australians.

In the context of a population policy, I wish to alert honourable members to the immense benefits that immigration has had, and continues to have, for Queensland. Firstly, immigration has been one component of population growth in Queensland, along with interstate migration and fertility rates. Population growth expands the domestic market for locally produced goods and services, both in the short and long term. In turn, this increases employment, income and economic growth. As a result of the rapid population growth that occurred in Queensland over the past decade, private consumption expenditure accounted for almost 70% of Queensland's economic growth over this period, which was substantially more than its 61% share of gross State product. However, one of the key drivers of population growth in Queensland this decade was large-scale interstate migration. This is now declining. In fact, in 1998-99 the net overseas migration intake exceeded the net interstate migration intake for the first time this century. Furthermore, Queensland may well lose some of its New Zealand-born population due to calls for New Zealand expatriates to return home, combined with the introduction of the two-year waiting period for social security benefits now imposed on New Zealand entrants. If these trends continue, overseas migration will play an increasingly important role in maintaining Queensland's population growth and its attendant economic benefits.

Recent research undertaken by ACIL Consulting found that the current size and mix of migration and humanitarian programs has a net positive impact on the Commonwealth Budget from the first year of arrival, and this rises from then on. This is due in large part to the current emphasis on skilled and business migration. Currently, Queensland attracts a reasonable share of the national skilled and business intake. One example of the innovative entrepreneurial spirit of Queensland migrants is the success story of Asian Foods Pty Ltd, an Asian foods company based in Cairns. In 1998 Ms Sim Hayward, originally from Malaysia and of Chinese descent, saw the potential for a niche market opportunity in Asian food. Since then Asian Foods has grown to include two Cairns retail outlets and wholesale and manufacturing divisions employing 16 staff. The company's products include import replacement pastes and sauces and use local fruit produced on the tablelands to replace imported Asian fruit products. This is just one example of the regional business opportunities that can result from immigration, not to mention the local employment opportunities which result from such enterprises.

However, the Commonwealth's current approach to skilled immigration policy places a high premium on the selection process, including a long set of rigid criteria. This is what my Federal colleague Mr Con Sciacca, MP, calls the bureaucratic process of people choosing. Conversely, there is less emphasis on what is on the ground to assist in productive settlement. The Federal Opposition has declared its commitment to attracting skilled migrants to regional areas by focusing on the provision of long-term incentives to migrants, local infrastructure projects, financial and fiscal incentives for new activities and ethnic-friendly services. This is in stark contrast to the current Commonwealth policies, which are based on high selection standards without commensurate support services and incentives at the final destination of entrants. My Federal colleagues are also advocating long-range planning of immigration intakes, suggesting that targets should be set over at least a five-year period. This is in accord with the Queensland Position Statement on Immigration, which advocates long-range planning and consistency in the migration program.

I wish to conclude by informing honourable members of the key principles underpinning Queensland's position on immigration, as outlined in the position statement. It states—

"Queensland is committed to an immigration policy which is non-discriminatory with respect to race, religion, country of origin or gender. Queensland supports a migration program which remains flexible and able to respond to changing circumstances and needs.

A policy which balances skilled, regional, family and humanitarian immigration will ensure that Australia's social and economic welfare is accorded a high priority, while also showing sufficient regard to Australia's humanitarian obligations."

The position statement explicitly recognises the economic benefits of temporary, skilled, business and talented migration, and also recognises the social benefits of family migration, which ensures social cohesion and builds communities. The position statement also recognises the importance of our humanitarian program, which flows from Australia's membership of the world community. A balanced immigration program planned strategically over a number of years can offer enormous social and economic benefits to Queensland. Furthermore, long-range planning of immigration would complement a formal national population policy, which is vital to ensuring sound planning and the optimal use of this country's resources.
