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Dutton's own department just contradicted him on visa price hikes



Minister for Immigration Peter Dutton during Question Time at Parliament House in Canberra on Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2016. Source: AAP

The Immigration Minister has trouble explaining recent hikes in partnership visa fees - the price charged for Australians to bring their foreign partners home.

Updated Updated 10 June 2016

By Ben Winsor

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Last week [SBS reported](#) on the record-high cost of partnership visas in Australia.

The non-refundable application fee in Australia is \$6,865, more than double that of a similar visa in the UK and four times the price of a US partnership visa.

We asked the Immigration Minister for the reasons behind the price, and dramatic increases in recent years.

His office had an explanation - but his department had a different view.

Following our question to Peter Dutton's office, a government spokesperson pointed out that the visa fees had increased to \$2680/\$3975 under the previous Labor government - they then gave a justification for the coalition government's own hikes.

“Monies collected through visa application charges only partially offset the cost to the budget of the partner programme, noting that as permanent residents, partner visa recipients are entitled to a range of government services including Medicare and the Adult Migrant English Programme, and after a short qualifying period, other benefits such as employment assistance, welfare support, and access to the HELP/HECS scheme,” they said.

It's true that applicants are eligible for Medicare as soon as they apply, and a range of other services after a few years. But – and this is critical – visa recipients can also work and pay taxes, contributing to government revenue.

We asked the Department of Immigration and Border Protection if there had ever been any studies done to confirm whether partnership visa recipients were actually a drag on the budget.

“Analysis conducted by Access Economics on behalf of the Department in 2008 showed that partner migrants had a positive impact on the Commonwealth budget,” a spokesperson told *The Feed*.

From their very first year, partnership visa recipients give to the country more than they take, according to the department's report.

“The direct contribution to the Australian Government through the taxes they pay plus visa application charges exceeds the cost of Commonwealth services over the longer term, particularly as the labour force participation of this cohort grows,” a departmental

spokesperson told SBS.

The study is available on an [obscure Amazon web server](#).

The report shows that the government was effectively making a profit from the partnership visa program, even when visa fees were a fraction of the current price.

In 2008 fees were just \$1,390 for applications lodged overseas and \$2,060 for applications lodged in Australia.

The Minister's office initially indicated they didn't see a contradiction with the Department's position, because the net impact occurs over a longer period. But they are yet to respond to the chart above, which demonstrates a positive impact from the first year of residence.

Despite requests to clarify the contradictory information, the Minister's office has not provided any evidence that the high fees were justified by costs to the budget, or that the fees "only partially offset the cost to the budget of the partner programme."

The 2008 report notes that the "partners and others" category is typically a younger cohort. Their contribution to taxes and the budget bottom line "is also solid throughout," it says.

SBS asked both the Department and immigration lawyers whether the price hike could be explained by a change in the services do which applicants are eligible. The department was unable to advise us on whether changes had been made as it was outside their portfolio, but immigration lawyers said they don't remember there being any significant changes to the benefits since 2008.

The most recent price increase was announced as a [savings/revenue measure](#) in December 2014 under the Abbott government when Scott Morrison was Immigration Minister. The revenue raised from the fees does not go to the Immigration Department but rather to general government revenue.

The human cost of the price hike

After our original story, people shared their experience and frustration with the high cost and the extensive visa process, which can take more than 12 months. The application fee is non-refundable in the event that an application fails, and many applicants have complained of not being kept updated of the process for many months.

For a family including two children, the cost of moving to Australia can exceed \$25,000 once airfares, lawyer's fees and additional visa fees for children are taken into account.

In over 400 comments on our original article on Facebook, people shared their anger and frustration.

"My Canadian partner and I had begun this process, but decided it would be smarter to use our savings to build a better life elsewhere. We're unlikely to return to Australia to live now. For young people just getting started in their careers, it can be prohibitive," Carl Hamilton wrote.

"My partner and I are students," Liza Stringer wrote. "We just paid. It was our whole life savings. We paid them at the expense of being able to see his family in Canada. I could write so much on this topic but to be honest, we are just exhausted."

"It feels like we are just waiting to be allowed to begin our real lives and are being penalised for wanting to do so," she said.

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