



Liberal Dean Smith says lower immigration would give Australia 'time to breathe'

Smith says Australia has reached population of 25 million nine years earlier than Howard government forecast

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Mon 16 Jul 2018 04.00 AEST

The Western Australian Liberal Dean Smith says moderating the immigration intake would give Australia “time to breathe” and space to develop a population policy to allow proper planning while maintaining social cohesion.

The prominent government backbencher told the ABC’s National Wrap program that Australia would reach a population of 25 million in the first week of August, when the first intergenerational report produced by the Howard government forecast Australia hitting 25 million by 2027.

He said a population of 25 million was “a cause for celebration because a big country brings with it lots of benefits, lots of modernity, lots of different sorts of cultures and practices so there are some virtues to that”.

But he said the fact Australia had hit the 25 million mark well in advance of official population projections raised questions about whether population growth was lining up with service provision, with infrastructure planning and with the creation of employment opportunities.

Smith said it was critical that governments “maintain public confidence and public endorsement in our population growth benefits”, and moderating current immigration levels would “perhaps give ourselves some time to breathe, some time to pause and reflect, to make sure the predictions are the best they can be and, if they’re not, let’s correct that”.

“I think what we need to do here is take some time to accumulate the evidence,” he said.

Smith said governments needed to focus not only on population size but also population distribution, ensuring the growth was not concentrated in only Sydney and Melbourne.

He said it was possible to have a “civilised national discussion” about population without stoking xenophobia and without politicians dog-whistling, citing the same-sex marriage debate in which he played a prominent public role.

Tony Abbott has been arguing for a couple of years that the government should reduce the immigration rate, a campaign that has triggered public clashes between the former prime minister and the treasurer, Scott Morrison.

Abbott in February advocated a target of 110,000 migrants a year, down from 190,000. It was revealed last week that 162,417 people permanently migrated to Australia in 2017-18 - well under the 190,000 cap and down from 183,608 the year before.

Morrison warned early this year that Abbott’s proposal to slash migration by 80,000 people would cost the budget \$4bn to \$5bn over four years.

But asked on Sunday about the economic impact of reducing the intake by about 20,000 in a year, the home affairs minister, Peter Dutton, contended it was positive.

He told Sky News “if we’re bringing more productive people in, then there’s more economic benefit for our country and there’s also greater societal benefit as well”.

Morrison said in February: “If you cut the level of permanent immigration to Australia by 80,000, that would cost the budget, that would hit the bottom line, the deficit, by \$4bn to \$5bn over the next four years.

“If you did what Tony Abbott suggests, then you would only reduce the proportion that was skilled migration and you’d have a bigger proportion which was family migration - which ultimately gets more dependent on welfare.”

Smith told the ABC the government should take the opportunity to get ahead of the population debate and establish a process to ensure better planning and coordination.

He said the government could use the milestone of hitting a population of 25m to set up a parliamentary committee to examine population policy, or establish a commission of audit-style process led by a prominent Australian to suggest some alternatives.

Business is wary of the government’s current posture on migration. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry expressed concern last week about the trend, arguing the Turnbull government is “effectively throttling back the rate of migration by stealth”.

The ACCI’s chief executive, James Pearson, said last week there were “plenty of studies ... which demonstrate that strong, well-planned and controlled migration drives economic growth”.

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