

## Government senator Dean Smith urges national debate about population

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Liberal senator Dean Smith has called for a national debate about Australia's population, as it hits the 25 million mark.

Smith, from Western Australia, said on Sunday that population issues were broader than just immigration, and included such questions as a lack of population growth in regional communities as well as congestion and infrastructure gaps in the biggest cities.

His comments are a wider take on what has become a highly charged political row, with former prime minister Tony Abbott pressing for a big cut to immigration and Pauline Hanson making advocacy of a lower migrant intake one of her signature pitches.

Smith, speaking to the ABC, pointed to the need to forecast population growth much better – previous predictions have substantially underestimated the actual speed of growth - so “we can prepare and plan better, and importantly maintain that very strong sense of public endorsement that is necessary for all of our population matters.”

He said as a senator from Perth, which had a much smaller population, “I’m interested that we get the benefits of population growth without having to pay the high price [that] perhaps Melbourne or Sydney commuters are having to pay”.

He wanted “to make sure that other cities are immune from some of the negative consequences of unbridled population growth – population growth that has been poorly predicted ... poorly planned for”.

The call comes as latest figures show the annual permanent migrant intake fell to 162,400 last financial year – compared with a 190,000 planning level.

Speaking on Sky, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton sought to set up immigration as an election issue, and contrast the government's approach and that of Labor.

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“At the next election Bill Shorten will be promising to migrate more people to Australia than what this government is prepared to do,” he said.

“Labor got themselves into a position where at the end of the financial year they were ticking and flicking applications to get to the 190,000 target. We’ve treated the 190,000 not as a target, but as a ceiling and that’s why it has come in at 162,000 this last financial year”.

Dutton said the government was putting integrity into the program by making sure those applying through the skilled stream had the qualifications they claimed, and were not travelling on fraudulent documents. “We’ve applied a greater level of scrutiny than Labor ever did”.

“We’re not talking about the refugee and humanitarian program here.

"We’re talking about people who are coming here under the skilled program and under the family settlement, predominantly the partner visa stream. These are people that are claiming that they’re in a relationship. We’re finding cases where they’re not legitimate relationships.

"We’re finding cases where people don’t have the qualifications that they claimed that they had or the work experience that they claimed they had. If you’re bringing those people in, well clearly that is not a productive outcome for our economy.”

Smith said “moderation” of the intake was important. “We need to 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. Importantly, to make sure the infrastructure spending and public confidence is maintained”.

He said there were several ways of leading the debate he advocated – such as by an “audit commission approach” or by a parliamentary inquiry.

The “tone” of such a discussion was very important. “We’ve seen in previous debates that you

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can have a civilised national discussion around difficult or sensitive issues if parliamentarians, if commentators get the tone right”.

Smith was one of the Liberals MPs at the forefront of the push for same- sex marriage, and he is making it clear he would like to play a prominent role on the population issue.

Citing the [2018 Lowy Institute poll](#) , he said community sentiment was changing around population debates in a negative direction.

The poll found that for the first time, a majority of Australians (54%) oppose the current rate of immigration. This is up 14 points on last year.

“Australians also appear to be questioning the impact of immigration on the national identity,” Lowy said. It found while 54% said “Australia’s openness to people from all over the world is essential to who we are as a nation”, a substantial 41% said “if Australia is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing out identity as a nation.”

### POSTSCRIPT

The Coalition continues to trail Labor 49-51% in two-party terms but Malcolm Turnbull has increased his [Newspoll](#) lead over Bill Shorten as better prime minister to his widest margin since before the 2016 election.

The poll, in Monday’s Australian, is the 36th consecutive Newspoll the government has lost. It comes a fortnight ahead of the July 28 Super Saturday of five byelections, with two of them – Longman and Braddon – tough contests for Labor and considered important for Shorten’s leadership.

Turnbull has a 19 point lead over Shorten as better PM - 48%-29%. Turnbull’s rating rose by 2 points; Shorten’s fell 2 points,

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But on satisfaction, Turnbull lost a point, to 41%, while his dissatisfaction rating rose a point to 49%. Satisfaction with Shorten was steady on 32%, while his dissatisfaction fell a point to 56%.

Both Coalition and Labor lost a point in their primary votes. The Coalition is on 38% to Labor's 36%. The Greens (10%) were up a point, as was One Nation (7%).

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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