

Morrison brings immigration centre stage with freeze on refugee intake

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison will seek to bring the debate over immigration and refugees to the centre of the election campaign, with an announcement that a Coalition government would freeze the humanitarian intake.

He will contrast this with Labor plans for an increase in the humanitarian component, claiming this would cost many billions of dollars and challenging Bill Shorten to produce more detail about the consequences.

So far immigration has not had a prominent place in the campaign. The border security issue went quiet when the expected large number of applications for transfer from Nauru and Manus after the medevac legislation failed to materialise.

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Morrison on Sunday will announce that the number of migrants coming to Australia as refugees will be frozen at 18,750.

He will appear at a rally with John Howard, who as prime minister was strongly associated with a tough border policy.

The government has already announced a cap on the migration program of 160,000. The previous cap was 190,000, although the actual intake had fallen to about 160,000.

It will contrast its freeze on the humanitarian intake with Labor's plan to increase it to 32,000 by 2025-26.

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Morrison will also outline the proposed makeup of the humanitarian program for the first time. This will include an overall target of 60% of the offshore component allocated to women. Women made up 50.8% in 2017-18.

The Coalition's Women at Risk program, as a proportion of the offshore component, would be increased from 14% in 2017-18 to 20% (3,500) in 2019-20.

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The government also plans to try to boost the number of refugees and humanitarian entrants settled in regional areas from a target of 30% to 40% in 2019-20. But it stresses that people would not be forced to areas that did not want them.

Some 27% of the humanitarian program will be reserved for Women at Risk and the Community Support Program, which is private sponsorship from church and community groups.

In comments ahead of the Sunday announcement, Morrison said: "We've got our borders and the budget under control. We make decisions about who comes here based on what's in Australia's interests.

"Australia isn't just about growing our population – it's about quality of life. We're capping and freezing our immigration growth so our government's record A\$100 billion congestion busting program for roads and rail can catch up and take the pressure off our cities."

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Morrison said the government had been upfront that it was reducing the migration intake cap and capping the number Australia let in under its humanitarian program – that was one of the most generous in the world.

“We are telling where we’ll be taking migrants from, who they will be, the skills we want them to have, and working with regions to settle people in towns that want and need more workers, skills and students.

“It’s time for Bill Shorten and Labor to front up and tell Australians about their \$6 billion plan to massively increase immigration and where they’re going to house thousands of extra people.

“Labor’s immigration bill is going to go through the roof and the only way they can pay for it is taking \$387 billion in higher taxes from Australians.”

The government some time ago put a costing of \$6 billion over the medium term on increasing the government-funded humanitarian intake from 17,750 to 27,000 by 2025-26.

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

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