

## **Giving immigration a positive narrative – how governments can show leadership**

*The phenomenon of populist anti-immigration parties is not new. We have seen it before and we will see it again. Competent governments can show leadership and win community support for immigration and migrants in the face of these challenges.*

Populist anti-immigration parties prey on community fears and uncertainties. They prosper in unsettling times when community unease about internal and external events make societies susceptible to their arguments. They sell ideas and understandings which "sound right", but which are demonstrably "not right." Their influence ebbs and flows according to global and national events and government responses.

There are plenty of current events to feed anti-immigration populism. These range from adverse economic impacts of globalisation for some forms of employment, massive irregular flows of migrants and asylum seekers in some parts of the world and sensationalist media coverage of migration through to the threat of terrorism. When a populist party exploits these uncertainties and gains success, it encourages other populist parties around the world to feed on the same sentiment, giving the impression of a ground swell of support.

Australia has not been immune from these influences. 30 August 2016 saw the re-entry into the Australian Parliament of an overtly anti-immigration party for first time in 18 years. Amongst a grab bag of anti-globalisation policies, Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party advocate zero net immigration, cessation of Muslim immigration (including entry of Muslim refugees) and abolition of multiculturalism.

However, there is plenty that governments can do to win, and retain, community support for immigration in the face of these political challenges.

For a start, it helps if the government does unambiguously support the benefits of immigration, as opposed to seeing it only as an instrument to gaining political advantage. The government that takes a positive approach has many tools at its disposal to gain community backing.

The key ingredients for success are competent leadership backed by sound immigration policies and a sound immigration infrastructure.

### *Leadership and advocacy*

Starting with competent leadership, the Howard Government in Australia in the period 1996–2007 makes an interesting case study. Its period of office coincided

with the first appearance of the anti-immigration One Nation party in Federal and State parliaments.

The Australian Minister for Immigration at the time, Philip Ruddock, went to great lengths to actively promote the positive aspects of immigration, particularly the economic benefits. His advocacy may have been somewhat obscured by the divisive domestic debate about maritime asylum seeker policy, but it was nevertheless effective.

He travelled tirelessly around the country and held community consultations in capital cities and regional areas to explain personally how immigration worked beneficially for Australia, including the gains from resettlement of refugees. These consultations involved state governments, business, unions and interested community groups. Some public consultations were open to any member of the community, including critics, who wanted to turn up. Research on the economic benefits of immigration was widely disseminated to business and the media.

During the period of the Howard government, the size of the Australia's permanent immigration program nearly doubled and temporary entry programs burgeoned, without any loss of community support. The Howard government succeeded in creating a positive narrative about the immigration program. It made some concessions to fears generated by Pauline Hanson and her party, particularly in its tough approach to maritime asylum seekers, but it ultimately took a positive stand on the benefits immigration. The anti-immigration One Nation Party faded away - at least for 18 years.

### *Sound policies*

For the benefits of immigration to be credible to the community, rhetoric is not enough. Immigration policies and administration have to be sound. They have to work effectively.

From the outset, the policies have to be seen to be bringing into the host country the people who are most needed, or, in most need. Good quality research which is able to document these benefits is vital to convince opinion formers and the wider community.

When there is widespread illegality or "rorting" of the immigration rules, this quickly becomes evident to the community because people see it in the workplace, schools homes and on the streets. Visa overstayers working illegally, exploitation of temporary migrant workers, fake marriages for immigration purposes and wealthy migrants appearing to "buy" visas are all noticed. Quick and effective responses to any abuses of the system are vital to maintaining the believability of positive

advocacy by government. Failure to deal with them decisively plays into the hands of anti-immigration populists.

### *Infrastructure*

Effective immigration policies also needed to be supported by sound infrastructure. They don't implement themselves. At its best, Australia has had this infrastructure.

Active consultative processes in a federal system have been important to ensure that State governments, along with local governments, are fully informed about policy. Frank exchanges of opinion on how immigration policies are working are necessary to ensure they are dealing with local needs. Good channels of communication with business, unions and civil society are needed in parallel to government channels.

Post arrival settlement services for migrants, particularly refugees, play an important part in smoothing their entry into Australian society by ensuring that migrants and their families are connected with government services, given English language training where necessary and assisted with accommodation and employment.

Ultimately, successful immigration policy is supported by a welcoming environment. In Australia, active national multicultural policies, supported by complementary State government policies, have been effective in creating this environment. A pathway to citizenship without unnecessary barriers is vitally important to the success of a positive and inclusive immigration policy.

Because Australian governments have generally manifested good qualities of political leadership backed by sound policies and infrastructure, Australia has maintained a strong reservoir of community support for immigration. The Scanlon Foundation in its "Mapping Social Cohesion" surveys in the period 2013–16 has found a consistent 83%-86% level of agreement with the proposition that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia'. Its 2016 survey found continuing low level of concern about immigration with just 34% of those surveyed considering that Australia's immigration intake was 'too high'.<sup>1</sup>

However, Australia is now at a crossroads again. The current government's approach to immigration policy is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the Australian permanent migration program is running at record levels, in absolute numbers, of about 200,000 visas a year. In addition permanent humanitarian visas are being progressively ramped up to from 13,750 a year to 18,750 a year, supplemented by a one-off 12,000 permanent visas for Syrian refugees. Temporary entry programs are near record levels. There are over 1.2

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016-Mapping-Social-Cohesion-Report-FINAL-with-covers.pdf>

million people temporarily in Australia with some form of work rights (including working holiday makers, students and temporary skilled workers)

On the other hand, the government has traded heavily on a negative narrative for immigration and its claim to have stopped maritime asylum seekers. Since coming to power in 2013, it has re-positioned migration from an "opportunity" to a "threat", dismantled the Department of Immigration (removing settlement, adult migrant English and multicultural affairs programs to other portfolios) and rebuilt it as part of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, incorporating the uniformed Australian Border Force.

Ironically, Pauline Hanson and her resurgent One Nation Party may well feed off the government's negative narrative and use it to broaden anti-immigration sentiment which is currently limited.

If governments don't confront populist approaches competently, then they risk feeding the problem. It's not enough to keep a low profile or weakly excuse immigration. Equally, it is ineffective to "give ground" and introduce restrictive policies. This may simply embolden xenophobic parties that smell fear, claim validation and push governments even further.

A competent, positive, government-led narrative on immigration is necessary to maintain community support.

Peter Hughes PSM  
Visiting Fellow  
Crawford School of Public Policy  
Visitor  
School of Demography  
Australian National University, Canberra

15 February 2017