

Let's unite on immigration, Shorten tells Morrison



Opposition Leader Bill Shorten. Picture: AAP exclusive

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Bill Shorten has written to Scott Morrison calling for a joint-party population blueprint to tackle future immigration rates, infrastructure shortfalls and quality-of-life concerns under a bigger Australia.

Placing population growth among the great policy challenges facing the nation, the Labor leader has signalled that he could support a new settlement policy that would redistribute population away from the congested capitals of Sydney and Melbourne. In his letter, sent to the Prime Minister yesterday and released to *The Weekend Australian*, Mr Shorten called on Mr Morrison to support a bipartisan expert taskforce to develop a new settlement program.

With Australia's population passing 25 million in July, two decades earlier than was forecast in the first intergenerational report delivered by the Howard government in 2002, Mr Shorten argues that it is now an issue too important to be hijacked by the politics of division.

He suggests the independent taskforce could be established under Treasury and comprise six members to be agreed upon by the government and opposition.

Both would then need to agree to a set of recommendations, which would set annual immigration rates, infrastructure needs and delivery of health and education services, and scrutinise the issuing of temporary work visas.

It marks a frontrunning tactic by the Opposition Leader, who is at risk of being sidelined on the issue with the Morrison government expected to release a major election policy on population growth before the end of the year.

The government is likely to dismiss the letter as a political stunt but the call for a redistribution of population growth and better managed migrant intake signals a subtle shift of policy for Labor under Mr Shorten's leadership.

The Rudd and Gillard governments had mandated record skilled permanent intake targets of 190,000 a year.

This year, that was cut to 163,000 through tighter vetting rules introduced under Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, bringing the annual intake back to levels of more than a decade ago at the end of the Howard government.

The Australian revealed in August that the Turnbull government was close to finalising a major population policy in response to increasing community concerns about urban congestion and declining quality of life. The policy would have set conditions on skilled migrants to settle in regional areas or cities other than Melbourne and Sydney for a minimum five years.

The then citizenship minister, Alan Tudge, revealed that almost 90 per cent of new permanent arrivals to Australia were settling in Sydney or Melbourne, which was, he said, unsustainable.

In his letter to Mr Morrison, Mr Shorten says: "As you would be aware, there is no single policy lever — a multifaceted approach is needed that ensures we maintain our standard of living. "More important is a consistent approach that will last well beyond the political cycle and that requires the support of both major political parties. "Population policy runs the risk of being politicised by those seeking to divide Australia, and (who) see political opportunity in polarising opinion in the community. The best way to ensure enduring policy settings is for a bipartisan approach — one that sets overarching principles to guide policy development, regardless of the party in government. "This would give the community and business comfort that the national interest is driving government policy. "I am therefore asking you to join Labor in the

establishment of an independent and expert population taskforce that would provide recommendations that both parties could accept and use to underpin population policy development.”

Both the Labor caucus and the Coalition partyroom are divided over the migration question, while One Nation leader Pauline Hanson has signalled that she intends to make a lower immigration rate a hot-button election issue

Mr Morrison is believed to be seeking further work on the policy. As treasurer, he had not supported calls for dramatic cuts to the skilled migrant and family intake, saying cutting it back by as much as 80,000 — as had been suggested by former prime minister Tony Abbott — would have a significant economic cost.

A recent report by Treasury and the Department of Home Affairs estimated the immigration program added 1 per cent to GDP a year.

Mr Shorten said the work of the taskforce would be to review the permanent and temporary migration levels, provide greater scrutiny of temporary work visas and infrastructure investment, and to consider a potential redesign of service delivery to align with community needs.

Addressing his union base, Mr Shorten said there needed to be better labour-market analysis and planning as well as a “settlement policy” to better distribute future population growth. “Population policy is vitally important to the future success of Australia, and I firmly believe it should be above politics,” he said.

A new regional settlement timeframe of five years was to have been discussed by cabinet before the leadership coup that led to the resignation of Malcolm Turnbull.

Mr Abbott first raised the issue of population management earlier this year, sparking a debate within the Coalition partyroom. He claimed a declining quality of life in Sydney required the immigrant intake to be cut in half until infrastructure caught up. Mr Morrison rejected the idea, saying the consequent slowdown in economic growth would cost the budget about \$4 billion to \$5bn over the next four years.

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