

Labor 'open to backing lower migrant intake'



Deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek.

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Labor has left the door open to supporting Scott Morrison's push to reduce the permanent migration intake by about 30,000 people a year as senior government figures admit the move will slash budget revenues.

Deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek labelled the Prime Minister's idea to reduce the permanent migration cap to about 160,000 a year as a "thought bubble", and slammed the government for failing to reduce temporary work visas.

But she said Labor would consider supporting the government's new population plan that would lower the overall intake and give more say to the states.

"We are always happy to work with the government on these big issues of national significance," she said yesterday. "What we need to see from the government is a little bit more detail and a few less slogans. We think this is very important to get right, for our economy and society."

In a speech in Sydney on Monday night, Mr Morrison floated the idea of reducing the permanent migration cap by about 30,000 people a year. This would bring the maximum permanent intake to the level to which it has fallen in the past year, despite the current cap being 190,000.

The population plan will be discussed at the next meeting between state and federal governments on December 12, with the states likely to get a greater say in how many migrants they take.

Tony Abbott, who has argued for halving the intake, backed Mr Morrison's speech. "It shows this is a government that gets it," he said.

Cities Minister Alan Tudge said reducing the migration figures — which Mr Morrison argued against when he was treasurer — would "of course" have an impact on the budget bottom line.

"Migration brings growth, it brings skills, it brings younger people to cater for the older generation. So it's very important we maintain a strong migration - intake," he told the ABC.

"But that's got to be balanced out with the population pressures, which particularly Sydney and Melbourne are feeling."

The government is yet to say how the intake would be cut.

Immigration Minister David Coleman cautioned against cutting the number of international students coming into Australia, despite calls to reduce the temporary migration program. About 600,000 international students are in Australia and Mr Morrison noted that temporary migrants often become permanent ones.

"In our temporary program, the biggest category are students. It is really important to understand how significant students are to our economy. Third largest export industry, \$31 billion a year to Australia," Mr Coleman told Sky News.

"Put that in perspective — beef exports per year are \$7bn. So this is a really big deal, the Australian education sector, and the income they generate is very substantial."

Permanent migration has fallen from 183,608 in the year to June 2017 to 162,417 this year, with Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton saying the change was because of stronger vetting.

The opposition immigration spokesman, Shayne Neumann, said the reduction in permanent immigration had been mitigated by a 40,000 increase in bridging visas over the same period.

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