

Memo to PM: immigration cuts could be a vote-winner



Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Minister for Immigration David Coleman in Question Time.

Judith Sloan, Contributing Economics Editor, 12:00AM November 3, 2018

At the rate the Morrison government is going, it will need only two or three second-hand Taragos to ferry around the surviving Liberal parliamentarians after the next election.

For the life of me, I can't understand why Scott Morrison doesn't do something to avoid this outcome. But for a number of reasons — some fathomable, - others a complete mystery — the Coalition government is surely heading towards the rocks of electoral annihilation.

The most obvious thing to do is to cut the high rate of immigration with its associated high rate of population growth and the attendant urban pressures. Recall that immigration is contributing about two-thirds of population growth and the population is growing about 400,000 a year. The vast majority of new immigrants are crowding into Melbourne, Sydney and southeast Queensland.

Now, you might have thought that the Prime Minister and his newly appointed Immigration Minister, David Coleman, would be fully briefed on current attitudes to immigration.

But let me help: attitudes towards our high rate of immigration are now distinctly negative. Most people think the population has been allowed to

grow too quickly and the migrant intake should be curtailed. There is also a growing unease about the impact of immigration on our national identity.

I can be even more helpful by providing some details on Australians' attitudes towards immigration and how these are now changing. It would be fair to say that in the past most Australians have had a favourable view of immigration. The Roy Morgan poll, which goes back many years, shows that the majority of Australians have generally taken the view that the migrant intakes at the time have been about right or could be increased.

To be sure, there have been variations over time. Periods of rising unemployment have always been associated with declining support for immigration, for instance.

There has however been something of a structural break in attitudes to immigration over the past two or three years. According to a recent Newspoll, three-quarters of respondents favoured reducing the permanent migrant intake.

In this year's Lowy Poll, it was revealed that there had been a 14 percentage point jump from the previous year in the proportion of respondents who agreed that "the total number of migrants coming to Australia each year is too high". Most (54 per cent) now agree with this statement. **Additionally, 41 per cent agree that "if Australia is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation".**

A poll conducted by Essential Research in April this year found that 54 per cent of respondents thought Australia's population is growing too fast (only 4 per cent thought it was too slow) and **64 per cent expressed the view that the level of immigration has been too high over the past 10 years.** Thirty-seven per cent thought the level of immigration was "much too high".

The Morrison government should also take note of the fact that the views of Labor voters don't diverge greatly from those of Coalition voters when it comes to immigration. On the question of whether the level of immigration has been too high, 62 per cent of Labor voters held this view compared with 68 per cent of Coalition voters. Labor voters were more inclined to think that population growth is too fast than Coalition voters — 53 per cent compared with 50 per cent.

The electoral message for the Morrison government is clear: there are Labor voters who could be swayed to change sides by promoting a distinctive and well-defined population and immigration policy. It is interesting to note that in the Essential Research poll, nearly two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement that “our cities can’t cope with further population growth and we should reduce immigration until the infrastructure is in place”.

A fundamental question arises from this depiction of changing attitudes to population growth and immigration: Why have our political leaders failed to respond, by proposing to reduce the migrant intake, for instance?

This question has been discussed by Katharine Betts of Swinburne University and The Australian Population Research Institute. Last year TAPRI conducted a survey of voters. In line with other poll results, **it found that three-quarters of respondents thought that Australia did not need any more people.** Just over half wanted a reduction in immigration.

But as Betts notes: “Adverse public opinion has had little impact on policy.” According to her, there are two reasons for this: “political pressures on policy-makers applied by the growth lobby, Treasury and the Reserve Bank, and social pressures by cultural progressives (most of them university graduates)”.

On the first reason, I have written about this in the past. We know that the Treasury holds the jaundiced view that the only thing that counts is GDP growth and the assumed associated growth of tax revenue. But, of course, from the point of view of living standards the measure that counts is per capita GDP growth.

We also know that the GDP fails to take into account many aspects of daily living that matter to people — lack of congestion, access to affordable housing, education and health, cultural cohesiveness and the like.

When it comes to the growth lobby, it is obvious why certain commercial groups would favour high rates of immigration — think property development, building products, retailing and similar groups.

These pressures have led to some very bizarre comments from certain politicians. NSW Planning Minister Anthony Roberts, for instance, recently - declared that there is no such thing as overdevelopment. His solution is for

recalcitrant local governments and whingeing local citizens to get over their objection to rapid population growth.

In the context of the recent policy change by NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian to curb excessive population growth, these comments are extremely embarrassing. Just ask politicians about how many complaints they receive about overdevelopment — so many that it is simply referred to as OD.

On the social pressures applied by cultural progressives, Betts notes that the TAPRI survey found that nearly two-thirds of respondents thought people who question high immigration are sometimes thought of as racists. Around one-third who agreed with this statement actually thought these sceptical people were racists, with an overrepresentation of graduates in this group. The other, much larger group thought the accusation was unfair “because very few of them are racists”.

The overall conclusion that Betts draws is that people she refers to as “guardians” — they maintain that those who query high migrant intakes are racists and want an increase in immigration — **have a disproportionate sway in the media as well as influencing the policy positions of the political parties.**

So my advice to Morrison is to get the real message. **Your supporters are calling for a substantial reduction in the migrant intake.** You could even pick up some Labor votes. It is not racist to be concerned about the pressures - associated with excessive population growth. And forget half-baked proposals to send migrants to the regions — it will never work.

Above all, remember that the “guardians” are not your friends, even those associated with factional groups within the Liberal Party.