



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Address on
‘Managing our shared future:
the use of the visa as a whole-of-government policy tool’

Mr Bob Correll PSM
Deputy Secretary,
Borders, Compliance, Detention and Technology Group

representing
Andrew Metcalfe
Secretary, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Government Policy Evolution Conference
Hyatt Hotel, Canberra
24 July 2007

Introduction

Today I will talk about a very interesting tool of government policy — the visa. As we will see, the government serves a number of government policy objectives, including whole-of-government policy objectives.

But first, some background. In Australia’s history, immigration has played a major role in shaping the nation we live in today. Successive governments have fine-tuned migration policy and programme settings in response to the complex social, economic and other changes impacting on Australia as a nation. The programme has operated on a non-discriminatory basis for around four decades, and the use of migration by governments as a tool to benefit Australia has been one of the great and enduring success stories of our history.

Out of our current population of just over 21 million, 44 per cent of us were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas.

Around 6.6 million people have arrived here to settle permanently since October 1945, including a humanitarian and refugee component of more than 675 000 people.

We now have historically high levels of immigration with planning targets for the 2007-08 year of around 153 000, including about 100 000 principal applicants and their families under the skilled categories and about 13 000 refugee and humanitarian entrants.

In this way, migration has provided a sizeable part of the human capital which has made the nation we live in today so successful as an economy, and as a diverse and cohesive society. Looking outward, our success in trade and our diplomatic influence has also been supported by our story as a migrant nation, with our culturally diverse workforce now providing great potential for trade expansion as markets continue to expand, for example, in China and India.

While the migration programme is running at historically high levels, we should also note that we are seeing considerable numbers of permanent departures from Australia — nearly 68 000 in 2005-2006.

When we look at the total settler arrivals of 131 600 in 2005-2006 and subtract the permanent departures, we have a net inflow of around 63 700 people.

This inflow and outflow strengthens our ability to build new economic and cultural relationships around the globe, as we have an increasing pool of people who are comfortable living and working in countries across our region and the rest of the world.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics calculates that we have a net gain of one international migrant approximately every five minutes.

And each year, another four million people enter Australia temporarily, either as tourists and students or under our skilled temporary migration programmes.

Australia has a universal visa system. People enter Australia lawfully using a visa granted using the powers delegated from the minister to my department.

By issuing a variety of visas, with different criteria and permissions associated with each class of visa, you can see we have a powerful policy tool to influence the attributes of the people who arrive here and to choose those who will provide a net benefit to Australia.

One of the clear challenges we have is to spread this leverage throughout the government, so that every relevant agency is using the visa to extract the maximum outcome and benefit for the nation as a whole.

Dr Peter Shergold AC, the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has noted the Prime Minister's view that whole-of-government collaboration is a key priority for the Australian Public Service in delivering seamless, quality services on behalf of the government.

To an extent, the visa sets the Department of Immigration and Citizenship apart in the Australian policy landscape. For instance, many Australian Government portfolios are working to achieve a range of impressive policy outcomes, through the usual methods of the Budget cycle, legislation, grants programmes and so on. Within my department, the visa gives a focus to a great deal of our work.

We can use the visa as a whole-of-government instrument to contribute to broader government policy objectives through the delivery of services on behalf of lead policy departments. The areas we can contribute to cross almost every aspect of the government's economic, security, social, cultural and international responsibilities. This can be done by the conditions attached to the visa. For example, access to health and welfare services and work rights.

In 80 locations around the globe, my officers will today receive around 12 000 or so applications for permanent residence in Australia. The receipt of an application starts a complex process of consideration of the merits of each individual who has applied and the benefits we can expect if they are invited to live here.

We can request and confirm details about their level of prior study, work experience, ability to speak English, financial status, health, any criminal record and so on.

On the basis of their answers we can choose people for further consideration who will be able to fill critical skill shortages in Australia such as in information technology and nursing. We can choose people who wish to undertake tertiary study here, paying a full fee to an Australian university and then either being offered a job here and seeking permanent residency or returning to their homeland with the possibility of building commercial and other links to Australia in the future.

For example, if you are a skilled migrant, you will receive extra points in the General Skilled Migration points test if you can prove you work in specific occupations. The Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) is reviewed twice a year to take into account existing and emerging skills shortages.

With MODL points, you will receive priority processing and will receive extra points if you have a job offer from a suitable Australian employer.

Bonus points are also available for one of the following factors:

- six months Australian work experience in a skilled occupation
- capital investment of at least \$100 000 in an approved government investment, and
- fluency in one of Australia's community languages (other than English).

This demonstrates how we can adjust the flow of people arriving in each visa class to very fine levels, such as through the recent government decision to increase the English language threshold for general skilled migration from 1 September.

While we can sharpen our policy tool indefinitely by increasing the number of visa classes, cost-effectiveness becomes an issue if relatively few visas are issued in a particular class each year. We currently have around more than 80 visa classes, with more than 140 visa sub-classes. We are commencing consideration of whether it is possible to simplify the visa structures, bringing efficiencies for both the department and our clients and improving our effectiveness to compete in a global labour market for scarce resources.

Otherwise, the possibilities for tuning this policy tool are limited only by our policy creativity and proper regard for community norms and expectations. For instance, the family stream of permanent migration is well established in Australia and there is likely to be an expectation in the community that this will continue for the future.

To illustrate some of the issues around achieving whole-of-government objectives through the visa, I would like to spend a few moments talking about setting the planning targets for the various permanent and temporary migration programmes each year.

In making decisions about this each year, the government considers a range of factors, including the economic and other benefits we can expect, continued community support for the level of migration, the cost of the programme to deliver and the ability of our service providers and the community to integrate and settle people quickly. The government also considers specific skill shortages and the possibility of filling these from the available pool of Australian workers, or through training Australians. One of the considerations that came into play in setting the 2007-2008 skilled migration programme target was the Welfare to Work reforms and new people coming in to the labour market through that channel.

The visa can also be highly responsive as a policy tool, as we have a strong platform and capability for flexibility and responsiveness as policies and priorities change in the future. This capability stems from the department's global network of 7000 skilled staff, increasingly robust and effective information technology systems under the *Systems for People* programme, electronic visa-processing systems which are the envy of other countries and past experience of more than 60 years including the approvals of millions of permanent and temporary visas.

This brings me to the benefits that we have seen over the past decades from the various visa programmes and policies in place.

With people residing here from around 200 countries, we have a rich cultural mix in our community. Furthermore, we have successfully integrated these different cultures around our framework of Australian values and English as the national language. This means, that to a large extent, we have avoided the tensions that affect people in some of the lands from which they have come. In a moment, I will explain how we are using the visa as a whole of government policy tool to improve these integration outcomes into the future.

The second major benefit of our visa programmes and policies has been the significant economic benefits that we have accrued.

My colleague, the Secretary of the Treasury, Dr Ken Henry AC has recently noted that the effects on the economy of the ageing of the Australian population will be significantly offset by immigration. Dr Henry said that work force participation is set to fall dramatically as a consequence of population ageing. But he went on to say that higher migrant numbers are expected to increase real GDP per person by about 0.75 per cent, and the change in the age composition of the migrant intake will add about 0.5 per cent to real per person GDP.

Even though these economic and cultural benefits are striking enough, we should recognise there are wider benefits. Sir James Gobbo recently addressed the Senior Executive Service Leadership group in the department. As Sir James detailed his migrant beginnings and then hinted at the enormous contribution he has made as a jurist, governor of Victoria, community leader and adviser to several governments, it was a remarkable insight into the enormous benefits the nation can receive from well-managed visa programmes. And while Sir James Gobbo is a 'unique and irreplaceable individual' in the words of Raimond Gaita, the well-known author, we can use the visa and our visa programmes as a tool to attract people of exceptional talent and potential from every country in the world.

While there are these benefits flowing from our migration programme, it would be wrong to leave you with the impression that this is easy! There is a complex policy and legal environment which underpins the visa system, with many hundreds of pages of legislation and regulation in place. You may or may not be surprised to know that the Minister for Immigration is one of the most litigated individuals in Australia — although I am pleased to note he is successful in more than 90 per cent of these cases.

We also issue around 13 000 visas each year to allow refugee and humanitarian applicants to settle here. As with all migrants, we are of course, concerned to ensure that the people who arrive under these programmes meet our health requirements and do not pose a security risk, but we do discriminate to an extent in the source countries for these entrants, with the priority being people in the greatest need. The government sets these priorities in consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and we are currently expecting a change in the intake from an emphasis on African refugees to people in North Asia and the Middle East.

I hope that gives you an overview of how we work to attract people who will provide a net benefit to Australia and the broad outcomes we can achieve from inviting healthy, law-abiding people who are likely to provide a net benefit to the economy and our society in the future.

But if the visa supports clear economic and cultural benefits for Australia, then it also plays a further vital role in our border security.

With the grant of a visa, the visa-holder has permission to enter the country. Our border security systems come into play here and we work closely with other agencies to manage the movement of people across our borders and prevent the entry of people who pose a security, criminal or health risk.

We work collaboratively with ASIO, the Australian Customs Service, the Australian Federal Police and other key agencies. The department also plays a role with respect to illegal foreign fishers, identity management, biometrics developments and war crimes screening.

Checking and screening starts well before a person reaches our physical border, and people traverse a layered system including visa checking, the Advance Passenger Processing operating at check-in counters overseas, Airport Liaison posts and then immigration, quarantine and customs processing at Australian airports.

The visa has a key role in this process, with applications being made at a diplomatic mission or electronically via an Electronic Travel Authority.

At the time of application there is a check against the Movement Alert List or MAL which is a database of persons and travel documents of concern.

As at 30 June 2005, there were around 386 000 people entries on MAL and approximately 2.3 million documents of concern. People entries had grown by 25 per cent compared to a year earlier, while document entries had increased by 33 per cent. There has been further growth since then.

The maintenance and use of the information in this system involves the interaction of a range of agencies and we are constantly working to improve our ability to identify people of concern and prevent their entry into Australia.

I mention border security particularly because our ability to verify identity and our other measures to achieve border security are critical to maintaining public confidence in our migration and visa programmes. My department's purpose is to 'enrich Australia through the well-managed entry and settlement of people' and the words 'well-managed' are very important in this context. We will only achieve our stated outcomes if we can assure the community that people are entering and leaving Australia lawfully. And we factor the need for community confidence and support into the design of future policies and programmes.

Beyond the fundamental permission to enter the country, we can use the visa as a means of providing access to a range of services or further permissions once the visa-holder has arrived.

For example, on our website, the department currently lists 'seven important things you should do as soon as possible after arriving in Australia':

1. Apply for a Tax File Number (TFN)
2. Register with Medicare
3. Open a bank account
4. Register with Centrelink

5. Register for English Classes

6. Enrol Your Children in School

7. Apply for a Driver's Licence

With the possible exception of enrolling children in school, registration with each of these services requires the presentation of a valid visa. In cases such as English language tuition, the type of visa held influences the nature and magnitude of the service available, with more hours available for young refugees and so on.

This demonstrates the very strong interaction with other government agencies that is launched by having a valid visa. There is considerable potential to use this interaction to obtain whole-of-government outcomes.

One of the high priority whole-of-government outcomes we seek is to assist permanent migrants and especially our refugee and humanitarian entrants in integrating and settling into their community as quickly as possible and as well as possible.

This means getting a job, learning English and accessing the mainstream and other services necessary to be fully supported and participating in community life. The quicker someone achieves these objectives, the more likely it is they will be productive and satisfied members of their community. Even though we experience very low levels of disharmony in Australia, the possibilities for community unrest are likely to be increased where people are marginalised through key factors such as lack of a job or inability to speak English.

We should not underestimate the priority the government places on maintaining a socially cohesive community. In the wake of the London bombings in July 2005, the Council of Australian Governments met and agreed on a number of initiatives to address issues of community cohesion and tolerance. There is a clear recognition across the Australian Government and across other jurisdictions of the advantages of integrating and settling new arrivals as quickly and effectively as we can.

This is why we encourage new arrivals to undertake the seven key steps I have outlined and provide significant additional support if required in the time after arrival.

For example, in the May Budget, the government announced a package worth more than \$200 million over four years to improve the settlement of refugee and humanitarian entrants. This package arose out of the considerations of a 16 agency Interdepartmental committee, meeting for more than a year. It delivers additional resources to six Australian Government agencies.

Through this funding, early integration will be promoted by providing greater encouragement and support to learn English, get a job, commit to Australian values and take part in mainstream activities. This includes rental and utility subsidies for the critical first month after arrival, as well as public transport fares.

We have also provided increased English language tuition in response to the fact that in 2005-06 around 42 per cent of humanitarian arrivals were of school age with only three years of education prior to arrival.

These measures represent a significant boost to the government's existing strategies to assist humanitarian entrants to settle and integrate into the Australian community. They demonstrate how we can use the visa to mobilise resources across the government to achieve a desirable outcome.

In the year that Australia is hosting APEC, we should also consider the APEC card. This scheme was developed in response to the need for business people to gain streamlined business visitor entry to the economies of the Asia-Pacific region to explore business opportunities, attend meetings and conduct trade and investment activities.

The card allows accredited business people to obtain multiple short-term business visitor entry to participating economies, without the need to apply for individual visas or entry permits. Cardholders may also use special 'APEC lanes' at major international airports which fast-track immigration processing on arrival and departure.

As of November last year, card-holders can use the fast-track air-crew lanes at international airports in the United States.

The APEC Card is an example of how we can use our visa-processing capability to deliver benefits for Australian business travellers in our region, through cooperation with other countries.

It's worth noting in passing that last week, marked the start of individual registrations for World Youth Day which will be held in Sydney in July next year. World Youth Day is a major international event organised by the Catholic Church and one of the largest events Australia has hosted for many decades. It is estimated that in the lead-up to World Youth Day the department will receive approximately 135 000 additional visa applications. All registered pilgrims will be eligible for an application-charge-free visa and a standard visa product allowing three-month stays and multiple entries.

Clearly, there are a range of cultural, social and economic benefits that Australia will gain from this event running smoothly. It's another example of how we can work with other agencies to produce beneficial outcomes.

Issues for reflection

The use of the visa as a policy tool also raises an interesting question as to the nature of my department and how we should approach our work.

I mentioned that if we look at other departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, my department clearly does all the same things in terms of developing policy and legislation, serving ministers and so on, but with the visa as an overlay. However the visa is such a central aspect of many of our programmes that it takes on an importance of its own.

And in making these remarks, I in no way want to downplay the important work of the department which does not involve visas, such as our work in community relations and multicultural affairs.

The options would seem to be that as a department our focus is:

- service delivery, but with significant policy drivers
- an integrated policy and service delivery organisation, or
- a vertically integrated organisation, where policy and service delivery are interacting and feeding back to each other at all levels.

The reason I raise this is that it affects not only how we do our own work but how we interact with our partners on whole-of-government issues.

One of the key reforms I have pursued in the past two years has been improved business planning, and we now have our second over-arching plan, known as the *DIAC Plan 2007-08*.

This document provides the high-level guidance that drives our business unit and workgroup planning across our globally and sometimes functionally dispersed organisation.

We describe the plan as providing ‘a service focus for integrating policy, programmes and delivery’. In this way, we are recognising the potential for some fragmentation around policy and service delivery, but drawing this together through our planning process.

This provides a pointer for how we can work with other organisations in a whole-of-government sense — recognising the potential for fragmentation around policy and service delivery, but using tools such as planning, risk management and strong communication to bring these pieces of the puzzle together.

Conclusion

In immigration today, the two big policy issues today are facilitating the movement of people to Australia and keeping the wrong people out. Australia’s universal visa system plays a vital role in whole-of-government solutions to this end. We are looking to the future at how our visa system can better achieve these two critical outcomes.

To do this, we need to find additional ways to analyse and present the impacts of immigration on government priorities such as economic and workforce growth, trade, innovation, social cohesion, our aid programmes and national and regional security.

If this all seems theoretical then just three weeks ago the Prime Minister announced a new cross-portfolio border security initiative with the visa at it’s heart.

It has been a pleasure to talk to you today and I wish everyone an enjoyable and fruitful time at the conference.