

## *Lay out the welcome mat*

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### **Body**

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Australia should fling open its doors to immigration to ensure long-term prosperity, writes Greg Craven.

On the normal scale of respectability there are lies, damned lies and statistics. Then there is economics.

Economics combines the reliability of damned lies with the interest value of statistics. To write anything even vaguely economic in character is to know that one is tired of readership.

But looking for the first time from New York towards Australia, economics does come inconveniently to mind, like intruding thoughts of Kevin Rudd during an erotic daydream.

For a start, there are a few worms in the Big Apple these days.

National unemployment is at 9 per cent, and it shows. There is the odd empty shop, like a missing tooth in a perfect American smile, and the usually chirpy Yanks have a wistful lilt in their voices.

Particularly when you say you are from Australia. They know what 3 per cent unemployment is, but cannot remember what it feels like.

They are not sure where Western Australia is, but are pretty certain it is composed of 90 per cent precious metals and 10 per cent shiraz.

All of which makes you remember - fleetingly - that whatever our challenges may be in Australia, life could be worse. Wayne Swan may be plotting mini-budgets based on the Kaiser's invasion of Belgium, but in the United States, a Treasury razor gang would pass for social workers.

None of which is a call for complacency.

On the contrary, observing the twitchy mess that is the US is to contemplate just how we can ensure that we do not pass the same way.

Just now, there are a couple of thoughts that cannot fail to strike you in New York. The first is that the historical formula for America's greatness is all around you: immigration.

From the Statue of Liberty looming over the mass disembarkation point at Ellis Island to your Italo-American cab driver, New York proclaims the profits of a national **welcome mat** that was **laid out** for two centuries.

The second is that this is a country no longer open for business in the same way. Its people are worried about migration in a time of economic hardship. They are understandably wary of strangers bearing bombs.

### Lay out the welcome mat

All in all, this is a country ready to look the gift horse of immigration firmly in the mouth.

If it had done so a century and a half ago, the US we know today would never have come into being.

Without a ready **welcome** to thousands of starving Irish, penniless Italians, malnourished Chinese and oppressed Jews, the US would still be a baker's dozen of former British colonies more than replaced by the later successes of Empire.

Which should turn our own national mind, in the customary way, to how we profit from the troubles of our closest friend.

With the US at least temporarily **out** of the immigration market, any bold, English-speaking Western nation with a high standard of living is presented with a once-in-a-century opportunity to become a net importer of global talent.

As the shutters come down in Los Angeles and Chicago, doctors, scientists, dentists, engineers and budding billionaires from around the world do not simply turn off their ambition.

They look for societies with prosperity and foresight that matches their own aspirations.

Here in Australia, we live in a region of the world that is booming in terms of its levels of education and economic development.

From world-class engineers in India, to brilliant scientists in China and wizards of capital in Singapore, Asia is bursting with talent that once looked towards the Atlantic, but now would relish the opportunity to flower, at least for a time, in Australia.

With our world-class education system, many of these woulda-been Bostonians are already here studying.

With their world-class innovation systems, millions more are packed with intellectual fireworks ready to go off in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth.

Australia's last great surge of productivity was led by micro-economic reform.

But you cannot deregulate the same industries twice, and you can only rigorously assure a finance system once.

The next great competitive advantage will go to the country that can corner the market in international talent.

Let's not give a good mate an even break.

## Graphic

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CARTOON: Gallery David Rowe

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Lay out the welcome mat

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