

The politics of immigration

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Body

Politicians need to weigh up the benefits against the costs, writes Shamubeel Eaquad.

Immigration is firmly in the spotlight for the coming election.

There is growing tension between two view points: one that embraces growth and diversity, and another that is less articulate, but demands a fair go for those already here, and an idea of first come first served.

The converging view on **immigration** in **politics** is on more stringent controls and tougher integration measures - and that skilled migrants are good, unskilled migrants are bad.

This is a shift from the philosophies of tolerance, growth and diversity that have allowed **immigration** policy in New Zealand to be unstructured and without an articulated and convincing end goal of what **immigration** will serve.

But the social licence from unpredictable and large flows of migrants has been revoked by many Kiwis.

In the urban centres, **immigration** and population growth is seen to be worsening decades-long failure to build enough infrastructure such as roads, public transport and homes.

In the provinces meanwhile, immigrants are doing jobs for wages that no-one else will accept.

Immigrants are keeping wages low and there are few incentives for businesses to change their focus to be less seasonal, or to offer training and career progression, resulting in a persistent rump of jobless folk.

But many businesses fear losing access to a global workforce.

Business uses the global workforce to meet its need for workers, ranging from highly skilled software engineers to farm hands.

Even businesses' fears will ring hollow to many voters. Can they really not train more young people to fill these jobs?

If dairy farms need cheap labour to be viable, are they really so good for the economy, leaving aside all the environmental issues? Are businesses really saying that if they paid higher wages people would still not work in these jobs? What exactly is going on here?

Fear and anxiety around **immigration** are real, and so are businesses' fears around losing access to a global workforce.

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Mixed up in the **immigration** debate are many complexities around structural policy failings, not just in population policy, but also infrastructure, housing, public services like health, and gross failures in education and training.

People do not weigh up the evidence when thinking about **immigration**. Rather, our brains are biased towards accepting claims that fit with our beliefs about society and social problems.

The big public philosophies at play seem to be fairness, waiting your turn and playing by the rules. Immigrants coming in, 'using up' roads, houses and 'taking our jobs', fly in the face of all these philosophies.

It is difficult to believe that in a growing population, everyone can be better off.

Most people intrinsically think that the gain of one person comes at a cost of someone else - even though this is not true. The whole point of economic activity should be that both buyers and sellers are better off as a result of a transaction, and the economy is made up of the multitude of these transactions.

It is much easier to blame foreigners than to understand the complex and long-term factors that shape our lives.

This is why economists should not be the ones to tell this story of **immigration**.

Economists' narratives are inevitably tied up in the economic gains and losses. For each supporting economist, it will be easy enough to find another person with an opposing view.

The conversation has to be led by politicians, because it is their role to shape the public's views on why we have **immigration**, where that will take our population, and how we will manage the costs and benefits that come with **immigration**.

It's a shame that our politicians do not have the skill nor the intellect to understand there is little in public policy that is either good or bad, rather, each public policy must balance benefits with costs.

Immigration policy is no different - there are costs and benefits. How we bank the benefits and minimise the costs should be the political narrative.

CAPTION:

Excited new citizens are pictured taking the Oath of Allegiance at a Citizenship Ceremony at the Convention Center in Palmerston North. DAVID UNWIN/FAIRFAX NZ

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