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## Who's really behind a "Big Australia"? The politics of Australia's immigration policies

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### Key takeaways:

#### 1. Who caused the post-pandemic surge in Net Overseas Migration?

- It was driven by global forces more than local ones. The COVID-19 shock created a whipsaw effect in migration across all rich countries, not just Australia.
- Both parties contributed to the surge. To the extent that specific Australian policies played a role, these policies were shaped by both the Coalition and Labor.
- The Coalition lowered departures using pandemic-era visa extensions. These were further extended by Labor. Allowing migrants to stay longer suppressed departures.
- Labor revived arrivals. After COVID, Labor allowed a partial arrivals rebound—at the Coalition's urging. However, overall arrivals stayed below pre-pandemic forecasts.

#### 2. Who caused Australia's 25-year surge of temporary migration?

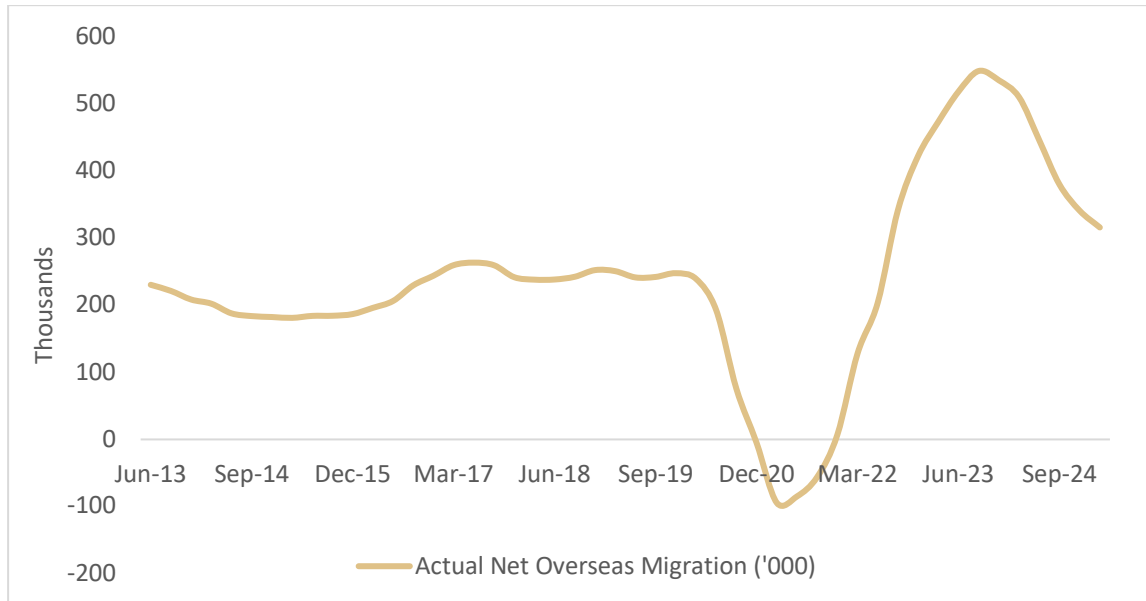
- The Coalition has generally expanded temporary migration. They tied universities to international student fees, created the 457 visa, expanded post-study work rights, and signed nearly 70% of Australia's working holiday migration agreements.
- Labor has often tightened immigration policy. They raised financial, compliance, and labour standards on students and skilled workers, and introduced stricter integrity measures on colleges, savings, English language tests, and visa hopping.
- The Coalition has reduced bureaucratic capabilities. They broke up the immigration department and eliminated its research and compliance capabilities, replacing these functions with symbolically tough "stop the boats" policies.
- In sum, Coalition governments have driven most of the long-term expansion in temporary migration, while Labor has more often acted to restrict or regulate flows. There is no foundation to claims that Labor has followed a policy of "Big Australia".

## Introduction

Australian migration has recently been extremely volatile. Net Overseas Migration fell into negative numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic. When borders reopened, it surged primarily in response to pent-up demand. From 2024, it fell again and is now in steep decline. This pattern has occurred only once before in Australia: during and after [World War I](#), when military troop movements disrupted migration on a similar scale to the recent pandemic.<sup>2</sup> We call this distinct pattern the "whipsaw effect" (Figure 1).



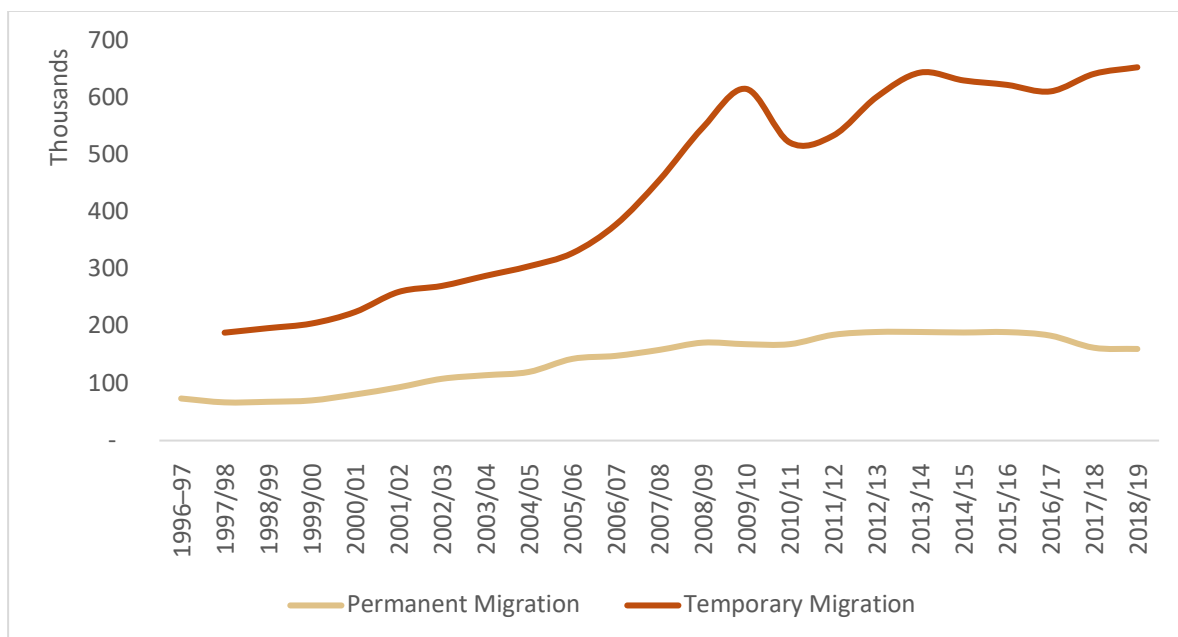
Figure 1: The pandemic whipsaw effect in Australian net migration



Source data: Australian Bureau of Statistics

The recent peak of the whipsaw effect has stirred up long-running anti-immigrant feeling in Australia. Some of this has included elements of racism, both overt and subtle. But much of it comes from more practical concerns about the consequences of longer-term increases in migration: a steady rise over the two decades before the pandemic, driven largely by the growth of temporary migration paths into Australia (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The other migration surge: permanent vs temporary immigration to Australia, 1996-2019



Source: Gamlen, A. & Sherrell, H. 2022. 'Australia and New Zealand: Classical Migration States?'. In Hollifield, J., Martin, P. & Orrenius, P., and Héran, F. (eds), *Controlling immigration: immigration policy in an era of globalization and crisis* (4ed). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.



Currently, there are two main criticisms of the Government’s migration policies. One claims the current Government caused the recent post-pandemic swings. The other says the swing is evidence of the Labor Party’s supposed long-term preference for higher immigration. How valid are these criticisms? Who really caused the post-pandemic surge in Net Overseas Migration? And who has driven the rise of temporary immigration in recent decades? Below we review the evidence and draw conclusions.

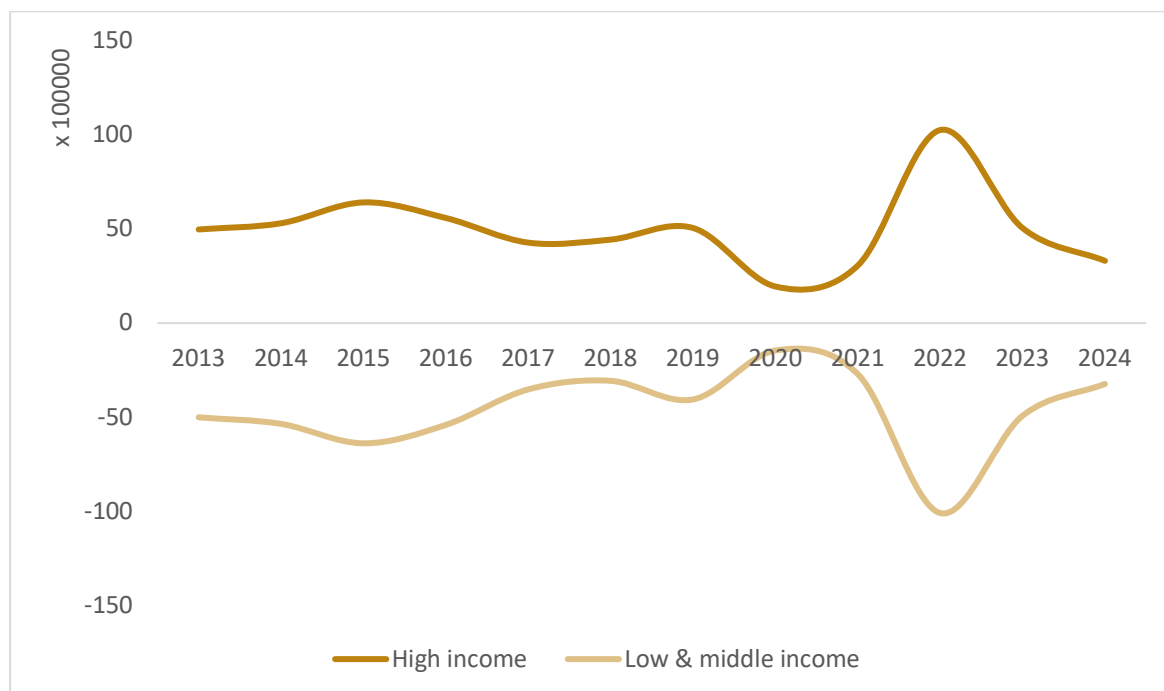
### Who caused the post-pandemic surge in Net Overseas Migration?

The post-pandemic surge of Net Overseas Migration has been driven by global forces more than local ones. The COVID-19 shock created a whipsaw effect in migration across all rich countries, not just Australia. To the extent that specific Australian policies played a role, these policies were shaped by both the Coalition and Labor. The Coalition lowered departures using pandemic-era visa extensions, which suppressed departures. These measures were initially prolonged by Labor. Labor then allowed a partial arrivals rebound—at the Coalition’s urging—but overall arrivals stayed below pre-pandemic forecasts.

Australia is far from the only country to experience a post-pandemic surge of Net Overseas Migration, close on the heels of a large drop during the pandemic itself. This same whipsaw pattern has appeared in every rich country since COVID-19 began (Figure 3). Lockdowns froze migration everywhere, damming up demand for workers in rich countries and supply in poorer ones, like the tide pulled out before a tsunami. When borders reopened, those flows came crashing back with pent-up force.

Migration since then has behaved like [a system jolted off balance](#), comparable to a plucked guitar string or a pushed playground swing. The pandemic shock drove both arrivals and departures far from their usual path. As restrictions eased, corrective forces such as policy changes, bottled-up demand, and personal choices pulled them back, but not equally: arrivals surged past trend in a sharp overshoot, while departures stayed well below expectations. The result is not a neat return to equilibrium but dampened oscillations—a rogue wave of net migration followed by fading ripples.

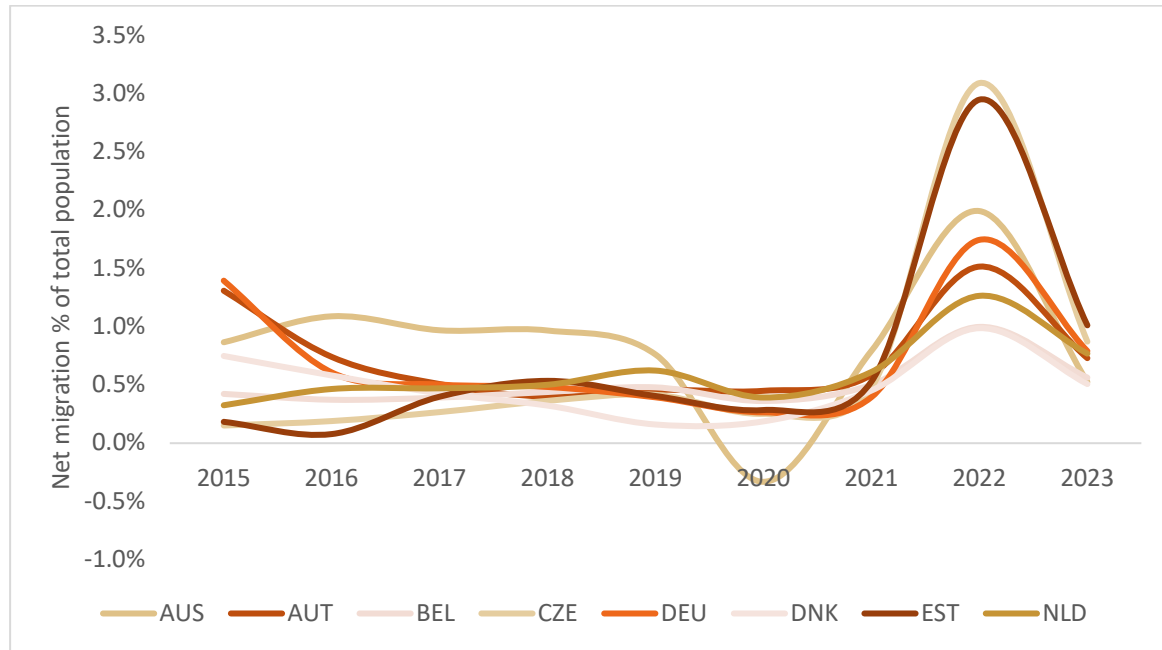
Figure 3: Net Migration, high-income countries vs middle- and low-income countries, 2013-2024



Source data: *World Population Prospects, United Nations*

The whipsaw effect in rich countries looks much the same as in Australia, though Australia’s pattern is more jagged. First, Australia’s drop in net migration during the pandemic was deeper, falling into negative numbers. By contrast, the average rich country did not lose people through migration. Second, Australia’s rebound after the pandemic has been smaller than that of the average rich country.

Figure 4: *The whipsaw effect in pandemic-era net migration, selected countries*



Source of net migration estimates data: *Gaskin and Abel 2025, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.22821>*

If specific Australian migration policies—other than reopening the borders—caused the whipsaw, the pattern would show up only in countries with similar policies. But many countries with very different policies show the same effect (Figure 4). So, the evidence suggests that Australian policy was not the primary cause.

Of course, this eliminative reasoning isn’t final. Maybe Australia’s policy did cause the whipsaw effect, and it is coincidence that other countries show it for different reasons. Or maybe their policies, though usually different, converged during the pandemic. We can test this by looking closely at Australia’s policy on migrant arrivals and departures during the period in question.

Net migration grows in two ways: arrivals increase, or departures decrease. Both types of change have occurred at certain moments since the pandemic hit, but the main driver of the surge was low departures. Below we examine the policy drivers of both overseas arrivals and overseas departures since the onset of the pandemic.

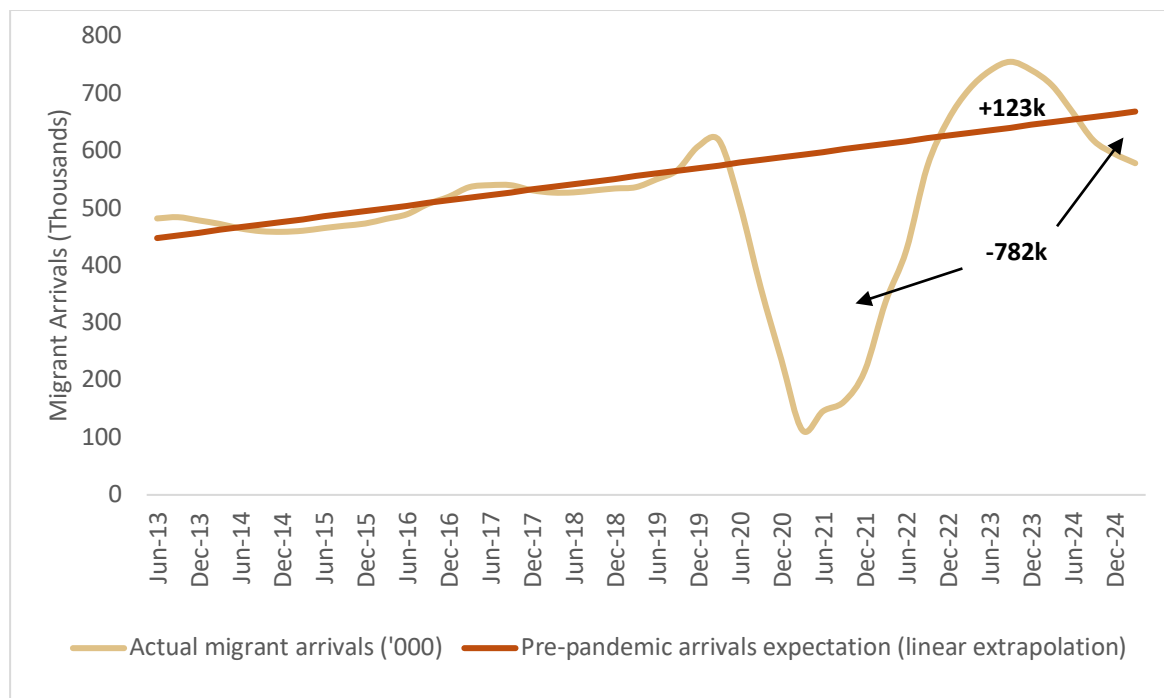
**How and why have recent overseas arrivals trends changed?**

Since March 2020, cumulative arrivals have been far below what was predicated in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Due to this cumulative shortfall in arrivals since March 2020, population growth has been lower than forecast in 2019.

What happened to the overseas arrivals trend can be accurately described as a partial post-pandemic recovery. It was driven by a bipartisan consensus that the Australian economy needed immigration to return. There had been a massive shortfall of arrivals during the pandemic lockdowns. After lockdowns ended, everyone agreed that Australia’s arrivals must be stimulated.

First the Morrison Government lifted Australia’s strict border closures and reinstated visa processing in late 2021. Then in mid-2022 the new Albanese Labor Government expanded visa processing—especially for temporary visas—which allowed pent-up demand from employers to be met.

Figure 5: Migrant arrivals fell during the pandemic, then partially recovered



Source data: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Overseas Migration

The efforts to revive immigration were bipartisan. Though implemented by Labor, they were strongly supported by Australia’s major [right-leaning press](#) outlets, and by the Coalition itself. For example, Peter Dutton, by then leader of the Coalition in Opposition, called Labor’s efforts “[too little, too late](#),” arguing that Labor should increase migration levels to an even higher level.

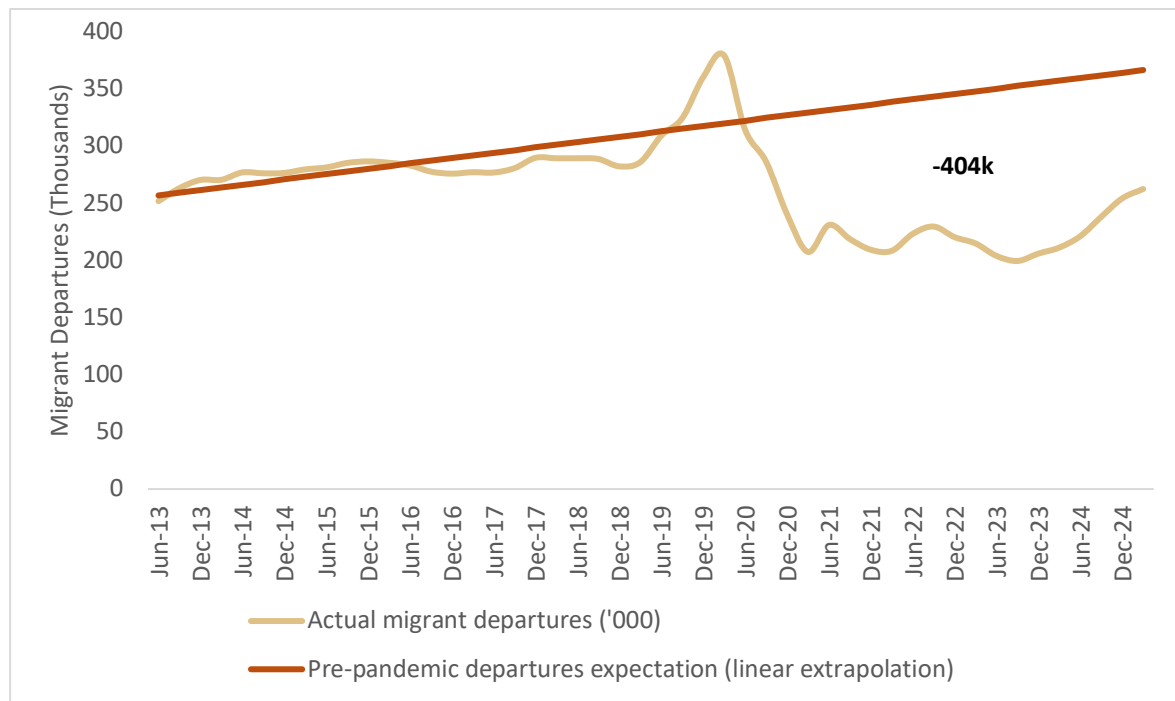
These post-pandemic policies contributed to a partial rebound in arrivals. However, the rebound was not big enough to make up for the larger fall during the pandemic (Figure 5). Moreover, the arrivals recovery was short lived. Arrivals are now falling rapidly, partly due to restrictions imposed by the Labor Government. Labor has recently tightened arrivals settings by introducing [stricter student visa rules](#), limiting post-study work rights, raising English requirements, and imposing de facto quotas on education providers to curb excessive inflows.

**How and why have recent overseas departures trends changed?**

The main driver of the post-pandemic surge in Net Overseas Migration has been a sustained decline in overseas departures. Both arrivals and departures stopped during the pandemic lockdowns. As just

explained, arrivals made a partial post-lockdown recovery. However, departures have still not recovered (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Migrant departures also fell during the pandemic, and have still not recovered



Source data: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Overseas Migration

Both Coalition and Labor governments have contributed to the recent stagnation in departures at a low level. The loosening of departures policy began in February 2020 with the Coalition’s creation of the [Pandemic Event Visa](#) (subclass 408), which granted one-year extensions to temporary visa holders and two-year extensions to Temporary Graduate Visas. Applications remained open until August 2023, with most extensions set to expire by late 2025.

Alongside the 408 Visa, the Coalition also introduced [wide-ranging pandemic concessions](#) for temporary family, parent, skilled regional, business, and safe-haven visas. For example, in February 2022, the Coalition extended Skilled Regional visas by three years. These visas had originally granted the holder five years in Australia, which was thus extended to eight years. Consequently, a five-year visa originally set to expire in January 2022 was extended until January 2025. And a five-year visa originally commencing in January 2022, originally set to expire in January 2027, was extended until January 2030.

When Labor took office in May 2022, it tightened the scheme by capping [Pandemic Event Visa](#) extensions at six months, and those shorter concessions had expired by mid-2024. On the other hand, Labor also continued access to the Coalition’s COVID era temporary work visa and continued the longer graduate visa. Labor could have ended these extensions earlier, and some argue they should have, but the Coalition was not among those voices.

In large part because of these extensions—introduced by Morrison’s Coalition Government and initially expanded by the first Albanese Labor Government—Australia has had lower-than-normal departures for 20 straight quarters. If any specific set of policies, as opposed to global events, led to the 2023 surge in Net Overseas Migration, it was the extension of temporary visas, which suppressed departures.

However, with extensions expiring and departures now rising again, Net Overseas Migration is falling fast.

To summarize: the post-pandemic surge in Net Overseas Migration was driven more by global events than by Australian policy. All rich countries have experienced a similar surge, as part of a “whipsaw” pattern of Net Overseas Migration caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic. That said, the policies of both the Coalition and Labor have shaped the local version of that whipsaw pattern to some extent. During the pandemic, the Coalition granted visa extensions, later kept by Labor, which caused a sustained drop in departures. After the pandemic, at the Coalition’s urging, Labor briefly eased arrivals to restart the economy, leading to a partial rebound. When these trends came together in 2023, net overseas migration surged, closely matching the earlier shortfall.

However, much of the current anger about migration is not about the whipsaw effect so much as a belief that the Labor Party has consistently pushed a “Big Australia” through mass immigration in recent decades. Is that true?

### **Who has caused the rise of temporary migration in recent decades?**

A common perception is that Labor governments favour a “big Australia” and have been responsible for the increases in immigration in recent decades. This perception partly arises from the conflation of immigration issues with crime and security—a policy area where right-leaning parties in all liberal democracies have traditionally claimed to be tougher than left wing ones. However, our analysis shows that Coalition governments have contributed significantly more than Labor governments to the increasing temporary immigration levels over the past quarter century.

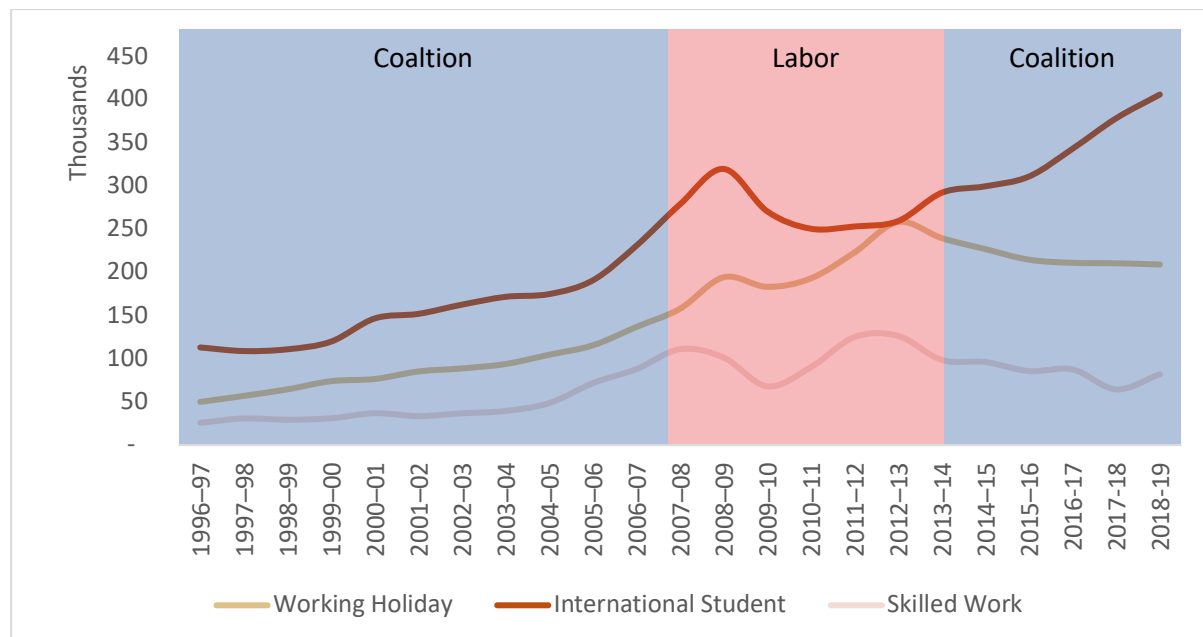
In a speech to the [Business Council of Australia](#) on October 27 2009, then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made the following comments:

I have said before that I believe in a big Australia. This is good for our national security. Good for our long-term prosperity. Good in enhancing our role in the region and the world. The time to prepare for this big Australia is now.

Rudd was not articulating official Labor policy. He may not have anticipated the phrase “big Australia” becoming a recurring political label for Labor. He more likely believed himself to be stating a bipartisan post-WWII call to “populate or perish” by growing the size of Australia’s population to support economic growth and national defence.<sup>4</sup> But since then, media and rival politicians have cast Labor as the party of high immigration, while the Coalition has been portrayed as favouring lower levels. At certain times this label has benefited Labor politically, and at other times it has benefited the Coalition.

Regardless of Rudd’s personal views, and irrespective of whether it has been a political curse or blessing for Labor, the “big Australia” label is not an accurate description of that party’s long-term track record on migration. A glance at Figure 7 shows a more complex link between politics and migration. Since the late 1990s and prior to the pandemic, major increases in student migration have come under Coalition governments, while increases in temporary skilled worker and working holiday visas show a more complicated picture. However, it is important to recognise that both restrictions and relaxations of immigration policy have sometimes had a delayed effect, so that one government is blamed or credited for the changes made by its predecessor.

Figure 7: Temporary visa grants, by stream



Source: Gamlen, A. & Sherrell, H. 2022. 'Australia and New Zealand: Classical Migration States?'. In Hollifield, J., Martin, P. & Orrenius, P., and Héran, F. (eds), *Controlling immigration: immigration policy in an era of globalization and crisis* (4ed). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

### International student migration

International students make up the largest share of the temporary migration program. By the mid-2000s, international education was Australia's [third-largest export](#), tying student migration to both university funding and the wider migration system. Which governments led the charge?

The roots of large-scale international student migration go back to the [Dawkins White Paper](#) (1988) under Hawke's Labor Government, which merged colleges with universities, expanded enrolments, and introduced HECS. These reforms pushed universities to act more like corporations and seek new revenue. Coalition governments strongly supported and [built on](#) this model.

Under Howard (1996–2007), [Coalition funding cuts](#) made universities more dependent on full-fee international students, which became one of Australia's fastest-growing "exports". At the same time, migration changes gave international graduates access to skilled migration if their studies matched jobs in demand, turning education into a [pathway to permanent residency](#).

Importantly, the Howard Government made it possible for international students to apply for and be granted permanent residence [from within Australia](#). They were then granted a bridging visa until the outcome of their case was determined thus extending their stay in the country. The growth of the numbers of persons on bridging visas has been a problem facing both Labor and the Coalition ever since that time.

During the Rudd–Gillard–Rudd years (2007–13), Labor cut back many of the Coalition's temporary migration measures. The temporary surge under the first Rudd government came from international students enrolling in short [hairdressing and cooking](#) courses. Both jobs were on the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) for permanent skilled migration, and by 2009 permanent residence

grants in the Skill Stream were dominated by cooks, hairdressers, and accountants. In February 2010, [Labor removed cooks and hairdressers from the MODL](#), and student enrolments in short courses fell at once. Soon after, demand for higher education grew with the graduate visa introduced on the recommendation of the [Knight Inquiry](#), which further increased the reliance of universities on international student fees.

From 2013 to 2022, under Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison, Coalition governments reshaped student visa policy to drive growth after the Labor-era fall. Following a recommendation of the Knight Inquiry (initiated under the previous Labor government), Coalition governments oversaw the [expansion of post-study work rights](#), allowing international graduates to stay two to four years depending on their qualifications. In 2019, Morrison's Coalition Government gave international students at regional universities an [extra year of post-study work visa](#) entitlement. Under the Coalition, streamlined Visa Processing [cut red tape](#), making approvals faster and more predictable, while [financial proof rules](#) were eased for applicants from key source countries.

Coalition governments from Howard onwards also [recast international students as part of Australia's skills pipeline](#), not merely temporary residents. Policies linked study to long-term options, with migration pathways that rewarded Australian qualifications and incentives for regional study to meet workforce needs. By streamlining visas and offering clear post-graduation paths, the governments rebuilt confidence in the sector and tied international education to the economy and jobs. Student immigration boomed from 2013 onwards.

Since 2022, the Albanese Labor Government has tightened international student policy, moving from post-COVID recovery to a focus on integrity and managed growth. Its Migration Strategy and Ministerial Direction 107 set stricter processing priorities to [reduce international student migration](#). It raised savings thresholds, visa fees, and [English requirements](#), and restricted onshore "visa-hopping". It also cracked down on "ghost colleges" by introducing [new ESOS powers](#) to suspend "high-risk" providers and restricting agent commissions.

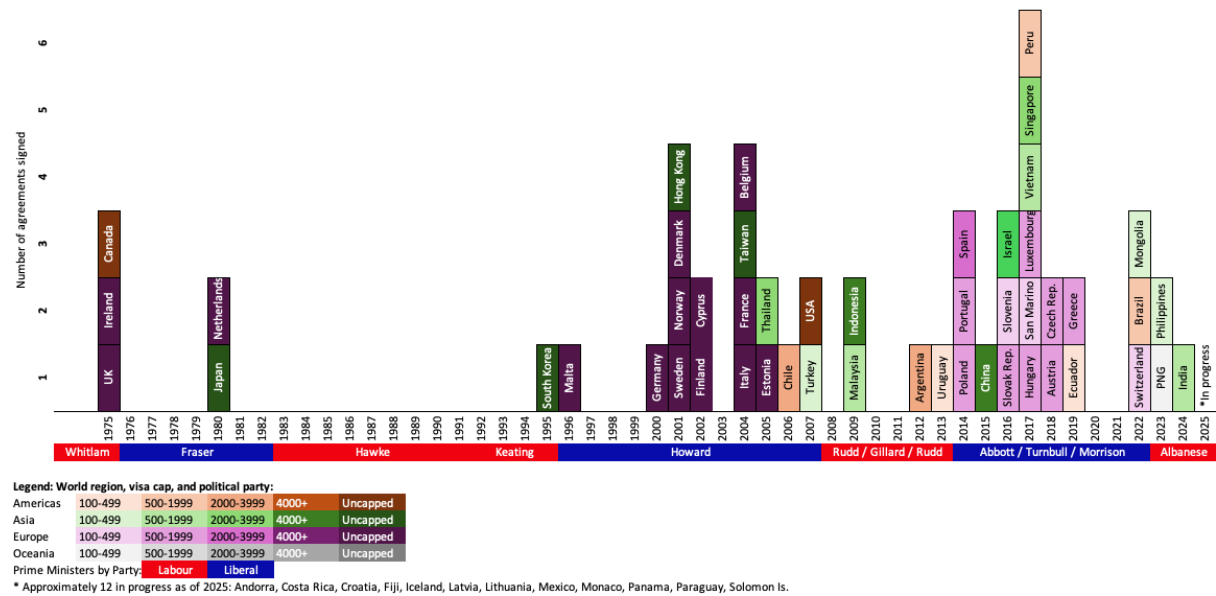
Conventional wisdom says that Labor governments have been more open to immigration while Coalition governments have been more closed. However, most of the growth in international student migration came during Coalition governments. Howard opened the door to full-fee students, tied study to residency and provided for onshore grants of permanent residence while numbers were rebuilt under Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison after a Labor slowdown. The Rudd-Gillard-Rudd governments mainly focused on tightening rules, with the Albanese government stressing integrity over expansion.

### ***Working holiday migration***

The second-largest temporary stream is working holiday migration under bilateral agreements. Which governments have expanded working holiday migration?

By early 2025, [Australia had 49 active work holiday agreements](#), nearly seven in ten signed by Coalition governments (Figure 8). Farming and other regional industries backed by the National Party have become some of the most reliant on backpacker labour. As of 30 June 2024, there were 170,437 Working Holiday Makers in Australia. Of those granted a second or third visa in 2023–24, about 45–56% worked in agriculture, forestry, or fishing, making farming one of the biggest users of backpacker labour.

Figure 8: Australia's Work Holiday Visa agreements, by date, region, size, prime minister and party



Source data: Department of Home Affairs (20240 BR0110), Working Holiday Maker visa program report, 30 June. Updates to 1.3.2025 from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/whm-program/latest-news>

Before Howard, Australia had six bilateral working holiday agreements: two signed by Coalition governments and four by Labor. These covered major White Australia-era source countries (the UK, Ireland, Canada, and the Netherlands) and two newer Asia-Pacific allies, Japan (signed by Fraser) and Korea (signed by Keating).

Howard’s Coalition government added 17 more agreements, allowing large—mostly uncapped—numbers of working holiday makers to stay in Australia for long periods. The government cannot curb this migration pathway without renegotiating the underlying international agreement. This limited Labor’s ability to restrict backpacker migration, which kept rising during the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd years—aided by four new Labor-signed working holiday agreements (though these were mostly capped).

The Coalition then signed 20 more working holiday agreements during the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison period. The new agreements opened Australia to substantial backpacker immigration from Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, Spain, Israel, Luxembourg, Mongolia, Portugal, Slovenia, San Marino, Czech Republic, Greece, Brazil, Poland, China, Slovak Republic, Hungary, Austria, Ecuador, and Switzerland.

During the [pandemic](#), the Coalition adjusted Working Holiday Maker (WHM) arrangements to address labour shortages and border disruptions. Visa holders in critical sectors like agriculture and health were allowed to work longer for the same employer and access further visas. Work in COVID-19 health and medical roles from January 2020 counted toward second and third WHM visa eligibility, while “specified work” rules were broadened for flexibility. Exemptions to the six-month employer limit were also expanded, supporting industries facing acute workforce gaps.

Since taking office, the Albanese Government has [reshaped Working Holiday Maker](#) (WHM) migration through both expansion and tighter rules. India joined in 2024, while a ballot system replaced the queue for China, India, and Vietnam. From mid-2024, UK citizens could get three-year backpacker visas without “specified work” requirements under the UK-Australia FTA. The government also updated exemptions to

the six-month employer limit and expanded the disaster recovery postcodes that count toward visa extensions.

Once again, despite the common refrain that Labor governments have more open immigration policies, most growth in working holiday migration has come under Coalition governments. Howard expanded agreements dramatically, as did Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison, opening the door to new source countries. Labor made smaller, capped additions and later introduced some new rules, with Albanese balancing modest expansion with tighter controls. Numbers on working holiday visas expanded during Labor's first term after the pandemic but appear now to have stabilised at a relatively high level.

### ***Temporary Skilled Worker migration***

The third major channel for temporary migration is the temporary skilled worker stream. Which governments have expanded this channel the most?

In 1996, under Howard's Coalition Government, Australia introduced the [Subclass 457](#) (Temporary Business Long Stay) visa, which let employers sponsor skilled workers from overseas for up to four years. This was a recommendation of the [Roach Report](#), initiated by the Hawke Labor Government—but it was implemented by Howard's Coalition. Over the next decade, the 457 program grew quickly, with simpler sponsorship rules and a longer list of eligible jobs. But its growth also drew criticism. [Labor groups and policy analysts](#) warned of worker exploitation, wage undercutting, and employers using the scheme to fill roles not truly in shortage.

Between 2007 and 2013, the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments tightened rules on the 457 visa program. They introduced stricter [labour market tests](#) to ensure jobs went first to Australians, raised English requirements for applicants, and imposed new training obligations on sponsoring employers. [Monitoring was also stepped up](#) to prevent misuse. The Labor-era restrictions explain the sharp contraction in this visa stream around 2009-10 (although the numbers subsequently increased again).

From 2013 to 2017, under Abbott and Turnbull, the 457 visa remained central to employer-sponsored migration but came under growing scrutiny, leading to stronger compliance checks. In 2017, [Turnbull announced its abolition](#), and in March 2018 it was replaced by the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa, subclass 482. The new visa set tougher English and work experience standards, shorter validity for many jobs, stricter labour market tests, and a two-tier job list. During COVID-19 in 2020, [Morrison introduced flexibilities](#) that let 482 holders in critical sectors stay longer. Since this time the Temporary Skilled stream has atrophied, and temporary visa growth has been displaced into the student stream.

Since 2022, the Albanese Government has launched the biggest reform of temporary skilled migration in decades. In December 2023 it released a new [Migration Strategy](#), with changes to roll out in 2024–25. Central to this is the replacement of the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) 482 visa with the Skills in Demand (SID) visa from July 2025, split into Specialist, Core, and Essential Skills streams. The reforms create a new Core Skills Occupation List of more than 450 jobs, offer clearer paths to permanent residency, and tighten compliance to curb misuse while aiming to attract long-term skilled migrants.

In sum, temporary skilled migration has grown most under Coalition governments—with the backing of employers—beginning with Howard's establishment and expansion of the 457 visa. Labor governments, by contrast, have often tightened rules, raised standards, and restricted pathways in response to concerns about exploitation and wage impacts—under pressure from unions. The Albanese

Government's reforms mark a middle path—retaining temporary skilled migration but redesigning it for integrity, clearer permanent pathways, and closer alignment with workforce needs.

That said, the numbers on temporary skilled visas have been increasing under the Albanese Government, apparently in response to strong demand from Australian employers. This is despite the high costs and administrative hassles associated with employing migrants compared to Australian residents.

## How and why have Australia's migration control capabilities grown weaker?

A consistent claim made by Coalition politicians and echoed in media commentary is that Labor is "weak" on migration, whereas the Coalition is "tough". However, our analysis shows that Coalition governments have been mainly responsible for an overall reduction of key migration control capabilities in recent years.

Controlling migration is a complex task involving many agencies at multiple levels, relies on strong technical capabilities in the public service. In recent decades, Labor governments have tended to build this capacity, while Coalition governments have consistently reduced it. In addition, while the Coalition's "stop the boats" policy is designed to appear tough, it has gone hand in hand with the elimination of key immigration control functions within the bureaucracy, such as research, analysis, and visa compliance.

### ***What actions have reduced Australia's migration research and analysis capabilities?***

Research and analysis are foundations of technical state capacity. It gives governments the means to identify problems, assess their scale, track developments, and judge the effect of their policies. In 1989, Hawke's Labor Government created the [Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research](#). The Bureau carried out major studies on settlement, workforce integration, population trends, and social cohesion. It issued reports, bulletins, and statistical series such as *Australian Immigration Consolidated Statistics*. Its evidence-based work shaped debates on immigration quotas, settlement programs, and multicultural policy, while acting as a semi-independent source of knowledge within government.

Howard's Coalition Government [abolished the Bureau](#) of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research in 1996, arguing that research could be conducted through Parliament and departmental units instead. While some statistical work continued, the Bureau's distinct identity and independence were lost. It was absorbed into the newly formed Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, marking a shift toward centralised control and reduced emphasis on independent or arm's-length research in immigration and multicultural policy.

After the Rudd–Gillard–Rudd years, the Coalition returned to office in 2014. Over the next nine years, it dismantled the wider immigration bureaucracy and folded parts of it into a [new Department of Home Affairs](#), modelled on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The new department's designers argued that a stand-alone immigration department had been vital after World War II to run the "populate or perish" program, but that immigration now touched every area of government and could be spread across agencies instead of housed in one.

When the Coalition abolished the immigration department and created the Department of Home Affairs, the Bureau's remaining [research functions disappeared](#). The immigration bureaucracy had been a store of decades of knowledge on the risks and benefits of migration; most of this was lost. Research was left to universities, yet they were themselves trapped in cycles of restructuring that prevented stable centres of rigorous research on migration-related issues. Many experts observed a tension between the Coalition's emphasis on toughness and the simultaneous reduction in administrative capacity.

Abolishing Australia's dedicated immigration bureaucracy was one of the most significant government decisions in recent decades. Until then, Australia had been what political scientists call a "[migration state](#)." Unlike garrison states, which focus on security, or welfare states, which focus on health, migration states centre on managing population movement. Policy is shaped by a broad mix of institutions—government, academia, the press, and civil society—that keep flows steady and guard against sharp political swings. Major changes are rare; most are modest and handled by career officials rather than politicians. Bureaucratic reforms pursued by Coalition governments have reduced this state capacity in recent years.

### ***What actions have reduced control of asylum-seeker immigration?***

Some experts argue that Australia's controversial "stop the boats" policy has strengthened Australia's immigration controls. Support for it is bipartisan, though the Coalition claims credit for its core features while casting Labor as weak on borders and unable to "stop the boats." As "proof," many point to the [rise in boat arrivals](#) from 2009 to 2014 under Rudd and Gillard. Most of these arrivals were genuine refugees from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, fleeing war, political turmoil, and persecution.

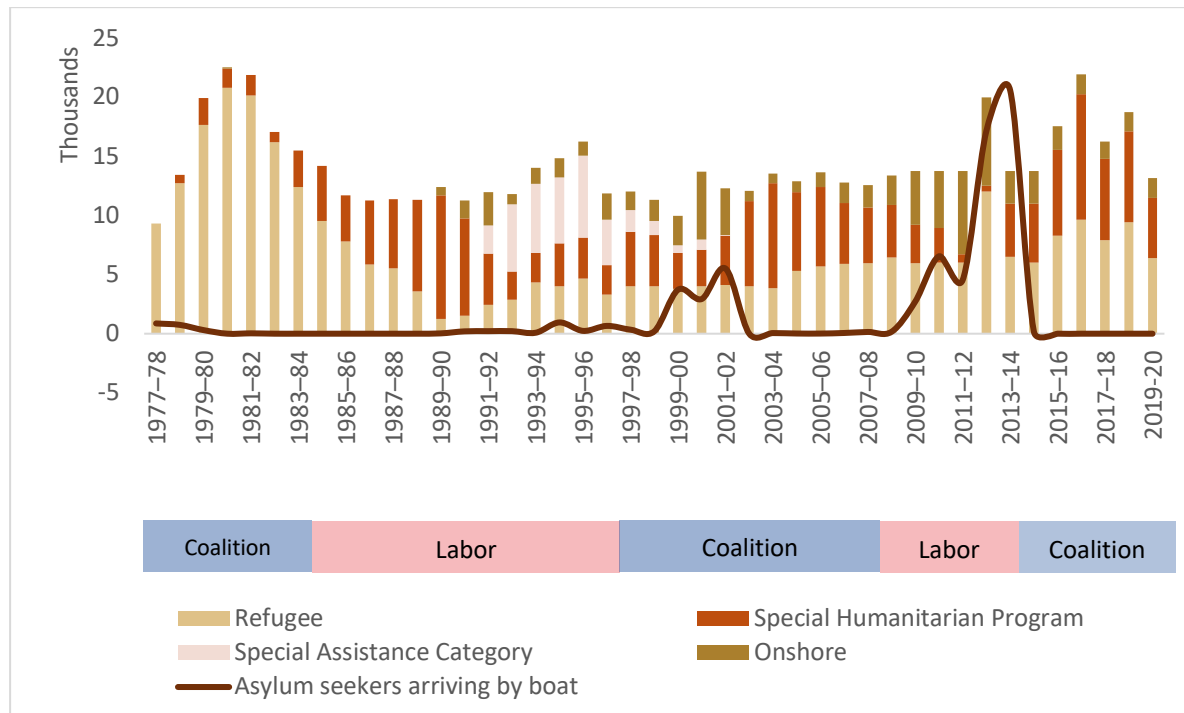
Australia's "[stop the boats](#)" policy refers to deterrence measures introduced from the early 2000s. These included the Pacific Solution, offshore processing in Nauru and Manus, and later Operation Sovereign Borders (2013). Together they used maritime interdiction, boat turnbacks, visa denial, reporting blackouts, and military enforcement to block unauthorised sea arrivals and stress that entry is only possible with a valid visa.

The stop the boats policy has long been a [key point of competition](#) between Labor and the Coalition. Supporters say the policy deterred irregular migration and, by showing firm control, built public confidence in Australia's large regular migration program. They argue this helped Australia avoid the populist backlashes seen elsewhere. The Coalition claims it strengthened the policy and portrays Labor as weakening it, reinforcing the common view that the Coalition is tough on immigration while Labor is weak.

This argument is not strictly accurate. While Coalition leaders focused on boat turnbacks and offshore processing, they also opposed Labor's legislative attempts to manage maritime arrivals and [eliminated the government's visa compliance function](#) as part of its wider dismantling of Australia's immigration bureaucracy. Opposing Labor's proposed laws during the 2009–13 surge prolonged the crisis and let the Coalition place the political blame on Labor. Later, disassembling the immigration bureaucracy to create the Department of Home Affairs reduced the capacity of future governments to control irregular flows.

In 2011, the Gillard Labor government proposed the "Malaysia Arrangement," under which 800 boat arrivals would be sent to Malaysia in exchange for 4,000 UNHCR-approved refugees. But in August 2011 the High Court struck it down: this would violate Australian law because Malaysia was not bound by the Refugee Convention. Labor then tried to amend the Migration Act in 2011 and 2012 to enable the solution, but [the Coalition opposed the bill](#), favouring offshore processing in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The deadlock blocked the plan, and boat arrivals continued until offshore processing resumed in 2012–13. Because this enabled the Coalition to attribute the boat arrivals to Labor policies, this episode helped considerably in the Coalition's successful re-election to Government from late 2013.

Figure 9: Australia's humanitarian visas, and boat arrivals



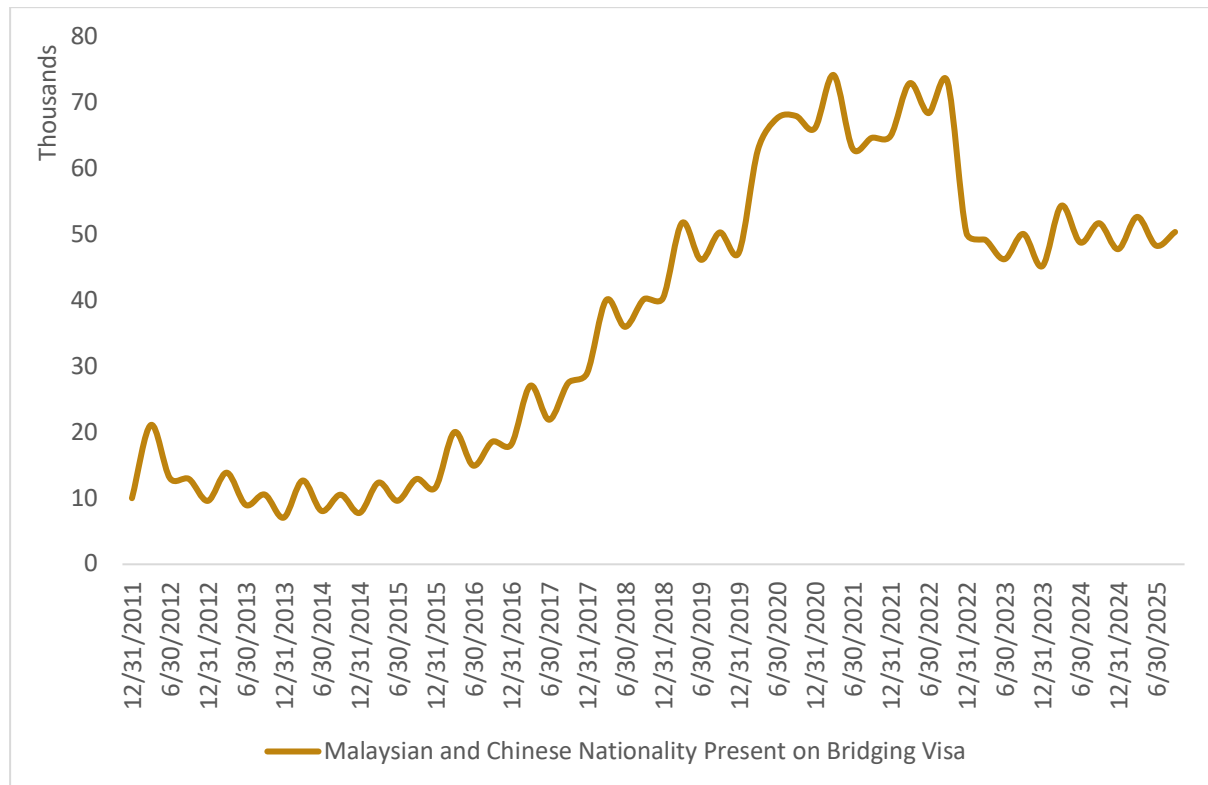
Source: Gamlen, A. & Sherrell, H. 2022. 'Australia and New Zealand: Classical Migration States?'. In Hollifield, J., Martin, P. & Orrenius, P., and Héran, F. (eds), *Controlling immigration: immigration policy in an era of globalization and crisis* (4ed). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Disassembling the immigration bureaucracy created [a vacuum in the government's ability to monitor and regulate flows across Australia's border](#). To see the impact, consider irregular and humanitarian migration. While Coalition leaders promoted "stop the boats" and a tough-looking new Department of Home Affairs, they were at the same time [eliminating the visa compliance function](#) once housed in the Department of Immigration. Removing compliance from the immigration bureaucracy enabled an increase of template-based humanitarian protection claims, overwhelming the asylum system. This issue later became the focus of the [Nixon Review](#) into the exploitation of Australia's visa system.

This surge of non-genuine asylum claims, so-called "bogus asylum seekers", took place under Coalition governments, and their policy changes played a major role in it. To see why, it helps to know that Australia's Humanitarian Program has two main parts: Offshore and Onshore. The Offshore program has two streams. One resettles refugees officially recognised and referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The other resettles people not referred by UNHCR but proposed by an eligible Australian body and found by the government to be facing human rights abuses.

The Onshore component of the Humanitarian Program is for people already in Australia who arrived with a valid visa and then applied for a Protection Visa. This is the way in which Australia meets its obligations to grant asylum under the Refugee Convention. It explicitly excludes people who arrive without a visa—usually by boat. Human rights groups dispute the legality of this under international law, but the Australian Government insists on it as part of the "stop the boats" policy.

Figure 10: Present in Australia on Bridging Visa - Malaysia and China nationality



Source data: Department of Home Affairs

If not by boat, how do asylum seekers reach Australia with a valid visa? As has long been the case, [most arrive by plane on temporary visas](#). After entry, they apply for a Protection Visa in order to gain asylum. When the Coalition removed the visa compliance function from the immigration bureaucracy, many [more such applications entered the system, mainly from countries for which approval of asylum claims was very low](#). As a result, the onshore asylum claims grew sharply under Coalition governments from 2014 to 2022 (Figure 10).

Most boat arrivals—though lacking a valid visa—have been found to be genuine refugees entitled to protection. By contrast, few in the recent onshore cohort have been recognised as refugees. This group expanded rapidly as a consequence of the Coalition’s approach. By August 2025, more than [100,000 people](#) had been denied protection visas and were either appealing or awaiting deportation—orders of magnitude higher than the number of [boat arrivals during 2009–2014](#).

Some supporters of the stop-the-boats policy argue that its main goal is not to control immigration itself but to create the perception that it is under control. They maintain that this perception reassures the public and reinforces confidence in the wider migration system. [John Howard’s 2001 campaign](#) is often cited as an example: his statement that “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” was viewed as affirming national control over immigration. Many analysts suggest that this perception helped sustain public support for an expanded, employer-driven temporary migration system.

We can think of this as the “soothsayer theory” of migration policy. Let’s say a fictional village suffers regular droughts. Each year the soothsayer sacrifices a villager to appease the gods. Some years it rains



afterwards, and people believe the sacrifice worked. But in truth, the soothsayer has no control of the rain—he is just killing innocents to make people feel reassured. In the same way, highly visible harshness towards a small group of asylum seekers may look tough and reassure some people that the migration system is in control. But this is not the same thing as really controlling migration: it deters the boat arrivals, but not the much larger number of plane arrivals. It mimics control, but in practice has coincided with declining capacity to manage migration.

### Strange bedfellows

Political science offers a well-known explanation for this kind of [double-speak strategy](#) on migration policy, sometimes called the “strange bedfellows” theory, after a phrase from migration scholar [Aristide Zolberg](#). The theory holds that right-leaning parties often talk tough on migration while keeping policy open, while left-leaning parties tend to talk open while keeping policy tighter.

Why does this happen? The theory argues that the main divide today is not between left and right, but between “open” and “closed” factions within each party—those for or against globalization (Figure 11). On the left, the open faction is a socially liberal intelligentsia that supports migration as a matter of rights and diversity. On the right, it is an economically liberal business elite that supports migration for labour market flexibility.

On the left, the closed faction is the trade union movement, which opposes migration as a force for labour market deregulation. On the right, it is the nationalist movement, which resists migration as a driver of cultural change. This reshaping of the left–right spectrum creates dilemmas for leaders. They must still run parties branded as left or right, but to do so they must resort to double-speak on globalization—of which immigration has become the most visible symbol.

Figure 11: The strange-bedfellows theory of immigration policy

	LEFT	RIGHT
OPEN	<p><b>Liberal Intelligentsia</b> Culturally open to diversity and the right to migrate</p>	<p><b>Business Elite</b> Economically open to a free global labour market</p>
CLOSED	<p><b>Labour Movement</b> Economically closed to competition with foreign workers</p>	<p><b>Nationalist Right</b> Culturally closed to foreign dilution of national identity</p>

©2014 Alan Gamlen Matrix for explaining immigration policies

Left-wing leaders must talk open on migration, praising diversity to satisfy the liberal intelligentsia. But to hold their coalition together, they must act closed, tightening labour rules to placate unions. Right-

wing leaders must talk tough on migration, invoking “great replacement” fears and promising drastic, unrealistic cuts to reassure nationalists. But they must act open to satisfy the business elite that depends on migrant labour.

Meanwhile, parties on both sides must court “strange bedfellows” across the aisle. Alliances of socially and economically liberal elites have become common—and have dominated Western politics since the 1970s. But in the past 15 years, new alliances have formed between economically and socially conservative bases. Often labelled “populist,” these alignments are now reshaping politics in Europe, the UK, and North America. If neoliberals had their revolution in the late 20th century, we are now seeing a counter-revolution led by a new kind of neoconservative, which we call the neonativist.

In Australia, the strange-bedfellows theory helps explain the Liberal–National Coalition’s current predicament on immigration. The party suffered a historic defeat in the 2025 election, after a campaign marked by tough rhetoric on migration. It remains divided on why: some argue it drove away centrist voters by echoing Donald Trump, while others argue it lost because it did not copy him enough.

Many in the first group, the Business Elites in the open-right quadrant of Figure 11, argue for a more moderate, evidence-based approach to immigration. Their aim is to win back the “Teal” independents, who split from the Coalition in the last election over its stance on climate action. But such a shift would mean breaking old ties with far-right parties like Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigration One Nation. That would bring a short-term loss of support in exchange for a possible long-term gain.

Their opponents in the second group argue for keeping the same strategy: talking tough on immigration to satisfy the Coalition’s closed-right nationalist faction, while staying open enough to give employers the temporary migrants they want. This approach would avoid the short-term cost of potentially splitting the party but could lock it into long-term decline, as Australia’s fastest-growing groups—diverse, educated, urban, young—are the ones most opposed to the current stance.

## Conclusion

Australian migration has been extremely volatile in recent years, which has revived long-standing anti-immigrant sentiment and concern about rising immigration levels in recent decades. These concerns have led to criticisms of the current Labor Government’s immigration policies. In this paper we have examined the extent to which both main political parties have contributed to the recent volatility, and analysed which policies have driven the longer-term increase in Australia’s immigration levels.

We find that the recent sharp “whipsaw effect” in migration was the product of a global shock—the COVID-19 pandemic—combined with Coalition-era visa extensions that held down departures and bipartisan decisions to reopen borders after lockdowns. Labor’s role has been marginal, and often more restrictive than expansive.

But what about the “other migration surge”—the long, slow rise over the past quarter century? Since the Howard era, the Coalition has used tough rhetoric on migrants and asylum seekers for political gain, while quietly expanding migration to meet business demands, especially through temporary and low-skilled visas. Labor, more influenced by unions, has been cautious on numbers, focused on worker protections, and quicker to address student visa abuses. Both parties have calibrated the intake to Australia’s economic needs, though Labor has been more open to refugees.

Over the past 25 years, it has been Coalition governments—more than Labor—that have consistently expanded temporary migration. Coalition governments cemented the dependency of universities on

international student revenue, established the 457 visa, oversaw the expansion of post-study work rights, and signed the bulk of working holiday agreements. Labor governments, by contrast, have usually raised visa application thresholds and tightened integrity rules. The popular label of Labor as the party of “Big Australia” is more political myth than reality.

What has most reshaped migration policy is not short-term partisan fights but long-term structural change—above all the disassembly of Australia’s immigration bureaucracy under the Coalition. While promoting “stop the boats,” the Coalition opposed certain government legislative proposals to manage irregular maritime arrivals. This helped the Coalition return to office, where it eliminated the government’s immigration research and visa compliance capabilities. This left the system less able to regulate flows. This tension between tough rhetoric and more open policy settings has consistently characterised the Coalition’s migration approach.

However, both major parties have engaged in a well-known form of double-speak on immigration. The Coalition has projected toughness while expanding migration, while Labor has tended to celebrate diversity while often restricting immigration flows. But as politics increasingly polarises around an open-versus-closed divide, these old strategies are fraying. Against a global background of heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric, leaders in both the main Australian political parties are experimenting with new ways to talk publicly about immigration, uncertain of where it might lead them.

The past few decades of politics in Australia have led to a point where Australia’s technical capabilities in migration are at an all-time low. Since the closure of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research in 1996, the country has lacked a stable, non-partisan institutional base for sustained, long-term analysis of migration, population change, and multiculturalism. Australia would benefit from established a national migration research institute, established as an independent statutory authority rather than embedded within operations-focused government departments.

In the absence of such an institution, public debate is prone to being shaped by political rhetoric rather than evidence, undermining the capacity of government to anticipate challenges, design effective interventions, and sustain public confidence. Re-establishing a dedicated research body would restore the infrastructure necessary for Australia to function effectively as a migration state, ensuring that policy remains grounded in rigorous, independent knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> The Migration Hub aims to promote well-informed exchanges among a wide range of perspectives. The Hub itself does not have an opinion, nor does it aim to have one.

<sup>2</sup> A similar effect likely happened due to World War II but is harder to confirm because the net overseas migration data for that period excludes migrant arrivals and departures of Australian military personnel.

<sup>3</sup> To be precise, we estimate that from June 2020 to March 2020, Australia’s cumulative overseas arrivals have been 782,000 lower than would have been expected by now based on a simple linear extrapolation of the overseas arrivals trend observed from June 2013 to March 2020 (see Figure 5).

<sup>4</sup> On [2 August 1945](#), Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell declared to the House of Representatives: “If Australians have learned one lesson from the Pacific War... it is surely that we cannot continue to hold our island continent... unless we greatly increase our numbers.” [Labor](#) tied immigration to post-war security and development, setting ambitious growth targets. When Menzies’ Liberal–Country Party coalition took power in 1949, it not only maintained the program but [expanded](#) it. Both major parties embraced the “populate or perish” principle as essential for Australia’s survival and prosperity.