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# Bring it on: the population inquiry our elites do not want

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OPINION



Should Australia have an explicit population policy? It might sound scary but one way or another we do have a population policy, with

immigration being the variable we can control.

Let's not forget that in the first Intergenerational Report released in 2002, it was predicted Australia's population would reach 25 million in 2042. It will reach 25 million this year. That's a difference of 24 years.

The reason for this blowout is almost entirely because of high rates of immigration. There was a short blip in the local fertility rate, but it didn't last. If we want to control the rate of growth of population, we need to seriously trim

the permanent migrant intake and restrict temporary migration.

Yet the last thing the elites want is a Senate inquiry — any inquiry, really — into the arguments for a population policy and what factors should determine it. They don't want ordinary folk to express their views because they may not endorse the big Australia strategy favoured by the Turnbull government and supported by Labor. And let's not forget the urgers from business, property developers and migrant lobby groups: they won't want an inquiry either.

But take a look at the figures. Nearly three-quarters of Newspoll respondents are in favour of the government reducing the number of permanent immigrants.

According to the Lowy Institute's survey, there was a 17 percentage point jump this year in the proportion of respondents who agreed that "the total number of migrants coming to Australia each year is too high". And 41 per cent of respondents agreed that "if Australia is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation".

Let us not be fooled by the entreaties from businesses that we can't cut immigration because they won't be able to find the workers at wages they want to pay. This self-serving pleading should be dismissed; the alternative is to invest in training and raise wages to attract workers in short supply.

As for Treasury's endorsement of high rates of immigration to bolster tax revenue, its economists should know better.

The economics of immigration are very clear: it reduces per capita income in the short term; the long-

run gains in per capita income are very modest and largely accrue to immigrants themselves; and estimates of economic gains ignore factors such as congestion costs, house prices and loss of urban amenity. The costs of providing extra infrastructure and services are largely borne by the states and territories — not the commonwealth.

Bring on an inquiry. It's time we had deliberate and informed analysis of the case for and against an explicit population policy. The elites might just have to listen.