



**The Politics of Skilled Immigration Policy**  
**Summary of Dr. Chris Wright Sunday Seminar Presentation on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2013.**

Dr Chris Wright spoke to the April seminar on the politics of skilled immigration. Chris started at the Centre for Workforce Futures in November 2011 after spending five years at the University of Cambridge. He received a full scholarship from the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust to complete a PhD in Politics and International Studies on the political challenges of labour immigration policy.

He said the policy is politically sensitive and full of contradictions, an area of policy where it is difficult to be both effective and ethically sound. The annual immigration intake consists of both humanitarian and skilled migration. The skilled migration intake has increased dramatically since the mid 1990's, especially in certain categories where it has been driven by demand, and in relative terms, the skilled and labour immigration intake has come to greatly outnumber the family and humanitarian immigration intakes. These changes did not occur organically, but rather they were driven by a series of policy reforms that made it easier for foreign nationals to gain work visas. One reason has been the historically high rate of Australian emigration, with other nations also trying to attract skilled migrants.

In Australia there has been a change from permanent to temporary migration with permanent migration remaining steady while temporary has increased enormously. Public opinion about this migration has been deftly managed in Australia, especially compared to other countries.

Dr Wright saw PM Gillard's recent comments on the 457 visas as extraordinary as it was in fact criticising the skilled migration policy. The criticism was followed by announced reforms to remove any incentive to replace Australian workers except where there are shortages, and to protect 457 visa workers from abuse. These reforms were minor and affected very few as the scheme has generally been working well. While the reforms were reasonable, the rhetoric wasn't. The fact is the 457 visa workers are not pushing down conditions but are filling positions where there is real shortage and in regional areas. *The reason for the rhetoric was not policy but politics.*

In fact Dr. Wright said he has not seen any evidence to support Government rhetoric that *"overseas workers are willing to come in on lesser wages which have pushed down wages at a time when wages should have been on the rise"*. Such rhetoric is really about politics and in particular, the relationship between skilled immigration policy with two other issues: the politics of skills policy, and the politics of immigration control.

There is a long term problem with Australia's skills policy with positions being filled by temporary migrants that should be being filled by training young Australians. Our skills policy framework has eroded over the past 20 years. This is a consequence of the economic changes that have followed from the liberal market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. We've seen three trends in the labour



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market that have impacted adversely on our skills training. Employers don't invest in skills requiring widely based training but skills training is now market driven; The workforce has been casualised which has meant these employees don't receive instruction; Employment has been moving from manufacturing and the public service to resources and services where there is a reliance on poaching workers rather than providing good training. To make changes training needs to be re-regulated and protection needs to be provided. To implement this would mean dislocation and some economic costs. The economy is now more dynamic so skills need to change.

Dr. Wright said that relying more on skilled immigration, as a complement to our existing domestic skills policy, is not a bad option for meeting skills shortages. But this carries other risks as a long-term policy solution, because skilled immigration policy is highly susceptible to the politics of immigration control. A depressing aspect is that, to counter negative public opinion, a government needs to show that it is in control of its 'border', its migration intakes. The number of people who wish see expanded immigration is always smaller than those who do not want to see it increased. While the Australian reaction is better most countries we have witnessed a race to the bottom in the political discourse around immigration. Australia is not alone in respect – in fact, the discourse is worse in many European countries, but we seem to be moving closer to those countries.

The rate of unemployment has an effect on attitudes. Recently public opinion against expanding migration has increased so the government is trying to appeal to this. As Howard showed rhetoric can effect public opinion. In the 1990's Ruddock spoke against family migration and for skilled migration, as long as they were young and spoke English. Others were discriminated against. Prior to Howard, under the four previous Prime Ministers, policies saw even numbers of skilled and family migration. Because of his popular response to Tampa he was able to relax controls on wanted skilled migrants without public disquiet.

Gillard is replicating the Howard policy of favouring skilled migration over family reunions. By appearing to control borders it allows the Government to change other aspects of immigration policy. For all the Government's bluster, it has not actively sought to reduce the skilled immigration intake, because it has an economic interest in maintaining an expansive program, and the task of reforming Australia's skilled training policy is beyond it. But to be able to maintain an expansive skilled immigration policy, the government needs to send signals that it's firmly in control of immigration flows. Its inability to achieve this in relation to asylum seekers explains its use of firmer language in relation to 457 visa holders. This negative discourse spreads into public consciousness.

**CCJP wishes to thank Dr. Chris Wright for an extremely interesting presentation.**

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