



The Hon Clare O'Neil MP

Minister for Home Affairs
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 Transcript

Press Conference

Subjects: *New migration strategy, net overseas migration, visa system, transition to net zero.*

SPEAKER: Just in Canberra where the government is giving an update on its migration changes.

CLARE O'NEIL: Okay. How are we going, guys, are we ready to go at the back? Fantastic. Okay, well, welcome everyone. We're here today to launch a Migration Strategy for Australia.

Migration is our country's special source. If we look back at the last 70 years, virtually everything that we have done as a country that's truly mattered has involved asking the best and brightest from around the world to come and try to help us.

It is an essential system for the growth, for the prosperity, for the security of our country, and it's one that we need to protect and nurture.

When we arrived in government we found a migration system in tatters. Don't take it from me, take it from Dr Martin Parkinson, who wrote a comprehensive review for our government, which told us that this is a system that has been deliberately neglected over a decade.

It was a system that wasn't working for workers, that wasn't working for business, and it was not oriented towards meeting our national interest.

Our government has picked up this really ambitious reform project, and what we'll be launching to you today is a plan that will see us address those major challenges in the system.

We are going to make sure that we bring numbers back under control, that we build a better planned system around essential things like housing, and perhaps most importantly of all, that we build a program that delivers for the national interest.

Now, we're joined here today by two very special people, the Acting Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Liam O'Brien, and also the Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, Bran Black.

Now, these two men in the organisation sadly don't agree on everything, but they're here today because they agree with the work that the government is doing.

Minister Giles and I have worked over a long period of time to build a package that has consensus, and the reason it has consensus is because we can solve the biggest problems that are challenging Australian workers, that are challenging Australian businesses at the same time, and the results of that are in the strategy.

Our strategy will bring migration numbers back to normal. Some of you will have questions about that, and I will go into the detail if you would like me to do that. But it's not just about numbers, it's not just about this moment and the experience of migration our country is having at this time. This is about Australia's future.

We've got some really big national challenges that we face as a country. We've got sluggish prosperity growth, which is affecting the wealth of Australian households, we've got a really fast ageing population, and we do not have the workers we need to care for them. We've got an urgent need to transition to a net zero economy and we don't have the skills and capabilities here to do it, and we face the most challenging geostrategic circumstances in our region that we've seen in 70 years, and we need to build sovereign capabilities fast.

Migration can help us answer all of these challenges. It's not the full answer to any of them, but it's part answer to all of them, but only if we get this system working for the country again, and the reforms that Minister Giles and I are announcing today will help us do just that.

ANDREW GILES, MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS: Thanks very much, Clare. Today we are announcing a strategy for a better, fairer and a more sustainable migration system, one that is good for workers because it's good for wages, good for business and good for Australia, operating in our national interest, enabling us to meet our challenges and seize the opportunities of the future.

And I say to my friend, the Minister for Home Affairs, thank you for all of the hard work and thought that you have put into driving this strategy, and to Liam and to Bran, thanks to you and to your organisations for working with us in the partnership that the Minister for Home Affairs has just described, ensuring that we are going to deliver the best outcomes for all stakeholders in this country.

Now, when we came into office 18 months ago, there were almost a million visas waiting to be processed, and beyond that, it's evident that there was no plan, no plan when it came to our migration system. We inherited a visa system in complete disarray, after a decade of neglect under the Liberals. There were long excessive waiting times, and too many migrants had no realistic or straightforward pathway to become permanent residents or citizens.

This strategy that we are announcing today builds on what we have done so far to fix this mess. And if you're a worker, it means high wages and stronger protections, it means mobility between employers, it means being part of a system in which exploitation is no longer a design feature, but something that is being designed out.

And if you run a business, it means a more productive and a more certain labour market that can drive your planning and your investment.

This strategy also means that we are able to better plan migration over a longer-term horizon instead of the short-term fixes of the past, something that hasn't happened. And in this regard we are working with the states and the territories.

Now, National Cabinet agreed to this back in August, and next week, I'm looking forward to sitting down with state and territory ministers to make sure that our migration system is meeting the needs of communities and communities right around Australia.

This is a wider reflection of the approach that Minister O'Neil just spoke about, a government that's committed to cooperation, to listening and then acting.

And I'll conclude by saying this: Our migration system fundamentally shapes who we are, and it shapes the kind of nation we will be into the future. Done well and planned for, it enables us as a country to stay young, dynamic and innovative, and ultimately, this is what will make Australia continue to be the most successful multicultural nation on Earth. Thank you.

CLARE O'NEIL: Thanks, Andrew. So we're going to ask Bran and Liam to say a few words about the strategy, and then we'll come back to you for questions. We'll deal with Migration Strategy questions first, and then once we've finished with those, we'll come to you for other matters that you want to ask about. So I'll invite Bran and Liam to come forward.

BRAN BLACK: Well, thank you, ministers, we appreciate the opportunity to be here today. The short point is that Australia is facing major skills deficits; nurses, psychologists, childcare workers, aged care workers, accountants, data scientists, practically every category of engineer that you might care to point a stick at, construction workers, and then of course there is the workforce that we need to plan for in terms of Australia's transition to net zero, projected to be a need for 30,000 workers between now and 2050.

Let me say it is always the preference of the Business Council of Australia to produce the workers that we need for the skill sets that we require right here at home. But the fact is right now we're not producing in sufficient numbers the workforce that we need for the future that we want. And that means we need to have the right settings to bring skills into Australia to help keep our economy moving, and we know that that's important because it helps drive wage growth, and that in turn helps drive a high standard of living for all Australians.

So we need to be competitive in terms of our migration settings, we need to make sure we get the right balance.

For many years the BCA has called for a number of key changes to the policy settings associated with migration.

We've called for a strategic long-term approach to migration, a longer temporary skilled visa with pathways to permanency, a specialist skilled pathway with high-paying jobs and a sensible threshold with no occupancy - with no occupation lists for that threshold.

We've called for streamlining labour market testing service level improvements for processing times, which have been dramatically blowing out over recent years, and trailing employer fees and improved worker mobility, and we are pleased to see in this strategy that all of those matters are being attended to. We believe this strategy gets the balance right.

We strongly endorse, more than anything else, we strongly endorse the move to long-term planning in relation to Australia's migration settings. That means that we can appropriately balance up the need to bring in the skill sets that the country requires with the need to ensure that we've got an appropriate opportunity to forward-plan around housing, around infrastructure and schooling, hospitals and other services that government provides.

We also back in the work of government in terms of its commitment to deliver increased housing. There is a long way to go, but appropriate steps and good steps are being made right now.

And we also support the efforts to crack down on dodgy providers of training. Student visas should be for genuine study. We are lucky in Australia; we have one of the best education offerings in the world. It is our fourth-largest export. It is worth \$30 billion a year to our economy, and it employs about 250,000 Australians.

Those people, those jobs, they deserve to know that they have certainty going into the future, and they deserve to know that the public backs them, in terms of the work that they provide, and that means cracking down on the unscrupulous providers that do us all a disservice.

So we think this strategy is a good strategy, and we think it gets that balance right. I'd like to take this opportunity, if I may, just to thank the ministers, and the government for the way that they've engaged with myself, my predecessors, Jennifer Westacott, but also my staff.

I think it's been an excellent consensus-building process, and we've been very pleased to be a part of it. Thank you.

LIAM O'BRIEN: Thanks Bran, and thanks Ministers. Every worker in this country has the right to safe, secure and fair employment. Whether you're a little kid starting out trying to build a career, or whether you're a migrant worker coming here in search of a new life, fairness should be at the heart of our migration program.

For too long that has not been how our migration system works. The legacy of the last decade in government has been one of neglect, that's seen rampant exploitation of temporary workers, and employers gaming the system to use temporary migration as a source of cheap labour, rather than training up local skilled workers.

Today this ends with this Migration Strategy. We congratulate the Ministers and the Albanese Government for these reforms. They will be instrumental in repairing our broken system, restoring public trust and confidence in our migration program.

Today I'm pleased to say that The Australian Union Movement are backing the government's Migration Strategy, which will go a long way to engineering out that exploitation, restoring permanency to the heart of our migration system, and ensuring that the system supports fair wages, conditions and job security for all Australians.

There's so much in this strategy that will benefit working people, both local and migrant workers alike, but I want to highlight three really key elements that the Australian Union Movement is proud of, and that we think are game changers in the future system.

The first is the very foundation of this strategy, one that is built on a tripartite approach to evidence, ensuring that we've got rigorous analysis of what's going on in our labour market.

A migration system should ensure that we are using migration to fill genuine skill needs, and that has not been the case. We are really proud of the fact that this strategy places Jobs and Skills Australia, a new national tripartite body that does the analysis around the labour market at the centre of determining exactly what skills are in shortage, why they're in shortage, and where they're in shortage, so that we can determine the appropriate role for migration to play when it comes to filling skill shortages.

The second is in relation to the Skills in Demand visa. Ending bonded labour and allowing exploited workers to move freely in our labour market is critical to ending exploitation, because your boss should not be in charge of your pay check and your passport.

These are the factors that we've been told for years give rise to exploitation, and I'm very proud of the fact that this country and this government has said "enough is enough" on this.

Workers who face exploitation in their employment will be free to move across those industries to find better jobs, to find safer and more secure jobs, and that is critical if we are going to end the exploitation of migrant workers, which I think for most Australians, they see as quite a shameful experience in a country that has been founded on the fair go.

We should be ensuring that those who come here to help us build our country, to provide us with the necessary skills, are provided with the same fair and secure jobs that we expect for every other Australian.

The final part of this strategy that we're most proud about is about re-balancing our migration, making sure that we are re-balancing away from temporary migration towards permanent pathways.

For too long in this country we've had a situation of permanent temporariness, which not only gives rise to the same exploitation that I've just talked about but is not something that is built on the values of Australia, or indeed on the history that we've had.

This country has been built on waves of successful migration policy, bringing the skills that we need, but also providing in return the opportunity for those newly-arrived migrants to set down roots, to help build their workplaces, their industries, and engage in their communities in productive ways.

We think the re-balancing is a really critical element to this strategy, and one that we think sets us on a much more even course for the future.

These are the three things that we think will restore public trust and confidence in our migration program, which is really critical, if we think about the important social licence that migration must have in terms of our society.

Finally, I'd like to join with Bran in thanking the Ministers and the government for the work that they have done here.

They have engaged in a tripartite way genuine consultation, and we think that that's really important, because the only way that we can solve the problems that have plagued our migration system and ensure that the system works for everyone is by doing it in a tripartite way and engaging with everybody that sees these things as important.

Importantly, today is the first step in a new direction, it is not the end of the course, and indeed as the strategy outlines, there is a lot of work to be done in the coming years to flesh out the detail around some of these reforms.

But we, the Trade Union Movement, stands ready to work with business and with the government to make sure that our Migration Strategy is successful. Thank you.

CLARE O'NEIL: Okay, we'll come to questions. Do you want to start [INDISTINCT] to us?

SPEAKER: Yeah, the migration - the graduation, the visa for post-graduates for students is being capped at two years. What's that hoping to avoid, and what's been happening previously?

CLARE O'NEIL: Yep. Liam just spoke really eloquently there about the problem, one of the problems we have in our system, which is the problem of permanent temporariness.

The Australian multicultural experiment has in part been so successful, because it's been founded in permanency and citizenship, and what we've seen really over the last few decades is a shift away from that to temporariness, and part of our work in the strategy is trying to address that.

One of the main ways that we see people end up as permanently temporary in our country at the moment is what have been very, very long-stay graduate visas, the longest in the world. So there's been possibilities, for example, for students to come here to finish what might be a four or five-year degree, and then stay for up to eight years on graduate visas.

Now, we are very proud to have an international education sector here in our country, it's a brilliant export for our nation, but if students are not going to be able to transition on to the skill program fairly quickly, they probably are not going to find a pathway to permanency in our country, and we're not doing them a favour by letting them stay here permanently temporary, and we're not doing the nation a favour, so we need to give sort, sharp answers to students, about whether they're going to have a pathway, and we do that viewing their ability to transfer on to the skilled list.

SPEAKER: What number of international students are you looking at as an annual intake, and your document says that international students contribute at \$30 billion a year, it's the fourth-largest export industry in Australia, so how much less is it going to be contributing because of that reduction, and if you don't reach that level, whatever it is, are you going to introduce a cap on international students?

CLARE O'NEIL: Thanks, [INDISTINCT]. So firstly, let me say international education's a really important export for our country, and all Australians should understand that. This is our fourth-largest export, it is the largest export of things that we don't grow or dig out of the ground, a really important thing for our nation. It is a critical way we build friendships and partnerships with other countries around the world, and educate a whole generation of young people, in particular from Asia and Southeast Asia, where we have a growth of geostrategic interests. So it's a really good and important thing.

What we want to make sure is that when students come here to study, they're actually here to study, and that we're not seeing what has been terribly exploited in practices, frankly, where people have run scams and got people to pay for visas, and use this as an opportunity to come to Australia to work.

We know that when students are in that position they are highly vulnerable to exploitation, so there's some big changes that need to occur here.

You asked about numbers. If I went back to the rate of growth that we saw pre-COVID under the previous government, if we tracked that to now, we would have 850,000 students in our country right now. Today there's about 650,000 students. So we expect to see that sector continue to grow, but we don't want it to grow as fast as it has been growing in the past few years.

So this is really about making sure we protect the sector, let it grow a little bit, keep those great economic benefits that it's generating for the country but don't, frankly, create a free for all where we see young people coming to our country who should be getting a great education and having a great experience, but actually find they're a victim of a labour scam and getting exploited.

SPEAKER: Will you introduce a cap?

CLARE O'NEIL: So we've put forward measures here that will help us bring net overseas migration back to normal in a very short timeframe. They're very significant measures that we're taking here, Things like increasing the English language requirements for students, making sure that the students who are coming here are going to be able to study and going to be able to thrive in our labour market.

If we do not succeed in that, of course there are other things that we can do, but I'm confident that the measures that we've put together here are being done quickly and that we've caught this problem in time.

I would say, I think if we didn't do anything about this problem for several years we'd be in a situation where we were having to look at things that would be very economically damaging for the nation. Do you want to come here? Go ahead.

SPEAKER: Yeah. So big universities are really reliant on this revenue they get from international students which means they can incentivise essentially to kind of do some of these practices, waive the English language requirements, and there's students who just want to come here for jobs? How do you address the integrity of tertiary education without taking away that funding that contributes up to 40 per cent of funding through universities like University of Sydney?

CLARE O'NEIL: We have great partnerships and supporters of what we're doing in the university sector, and the reason for that is that if this sector does not get its integrity issues under control, the sector itself will suffer. We have a good reputation globally as a provider of international education that we should all be concerned about protecting and the universities are right there with us.

They do not want Australia to be known as a country where you come here, you get exploited, you don't get educated properly, and, frankly, the course you signed up for wasn't quite what it looked like.

So we've got a bit of a repair job here to do because I have to say when I look at the laissez-faire model that the former government really took to this sector, that's how we ended up with the type of problems that we're talking to you about today.

So the things that we are doing are important for that sector, they're generally supported by providers of education, and that's because they know we've got to fix this otherwise it will really go off the rails.

SPEAKER: Minister, so most migration intakes often see people going to cities rather than the regions. So how

are you going to prioritise migrants going to the regions and then more specifically in the plan it says that regional visas will have the highest processing priority. What do you actually mean by that? What is the speed-up going to be? Is there going to be a specific time frame that they have to be processed by?

CLARE O'NEIL: So firstly, I just say we've done a huge amount since we came to government to make sure that we're trying to push as hard as we can to reduce the concentration of migrants in our capital cities.

I mean, I'm from Melbourne and we're so lucky that we've had generation after generation of migrant communities come and settle in our cities, but when we're talking about housing and infrastructure constraints that are very clearly affecting the lives of our community, it's been felt most acutely in those capital cities.

There is a lot more work, though, that has to be done on this and I say that partly because of those pressures in the cities, but also partly because we've got a situation where our cities are feeling those constraints of population and a lot of regional parts of our country are crying out for extra people.

Now, we have tried over a seven-year period to use the migration system to address that problem and it's had limited success. What Minister Giles and I are about to embark on is a specific policy project which is focused on that regional question. So we've kind of done everything we can under the current system to make sure that we're sending migrants where they're really needed but there is more work that needs to be done there and that's a big focus for us in 2024.

SPEAKER: And just on the processing times?

ANDREW GILES, MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS: There's really two things there. Before we get to the processing times, there's the issue of the visa allocations this is something we've already moved towards, tripling the allocations from those under the former government.

There's also the issue of us working much more closely with the states and territories, which is something I touched on in my opening remarks. But there really is an important role for processing directions and processing times.

For example, since coming to government we've been able to direct processing priorities at the highest level for healthcare and education in the regions, which means that people in those categories are getting their skills visas turned around in two to three days as opposed to the 10 to 11. So it's using all of the incentives in the system as well as the matters that Clare talked about just then.

CLARE O'NEIL: And we'll get you some numbers on the regional story. It's quite interesting, actually, what we've achieved so far. Paul, go ahead.

SPEAKER: What guarantees are there that we will be training people as we go? For example, could companies accessing the core and essential visa streams, or existing migration labour agreements be required to train Australians and to hire apprentices. And just for the ACTU and BCA, is that something that you would be in favour of?

CLARE O'NEIL: So we're trying to make it easier for business to get especially those skills at the very highest levels of the labour market, and the purpose of the specialist skills pathway that we are announcing today is really so that we can get those skills into the country that we can't grow quickly at home, but that we urgently need.

Think about people who are working as psychologists who will take otherwise, you know, 10-15 years to train, People like cyber specialists who we desperately need here to help the whole of the Australian community skill up on these things. So that's really the focus of the specialist skills pathway.

Liam talked a little bit about the focus that the Government is taking to put Jobs and Skills Australia at the centre of this discussion within government. So just understand that before we came to government, there was no mechanism for the migration system, the labour market, and the education system to coordinate. Nothing.

And that's why you end up with a situation where you put electricians on a skills shortage list and they're still there 20 years later.

Now our government's taking a very different approach. We're thinking and planning by sector and we're doing that in the tripartite way that Liam talked about, and we are using things like our amazing free TAFE offering to help make sure that we're growing the skills, not relying on migration to replace labour.

So the reason that we're trying to do things like the specialist skills pathway is because those people will not replace Australian workers. They will come here, they will build the productivity of those around them, they will share world's best practice, but we need to use the system only to replace those people, not to say that we're not going to skill up and train people. That's evidently not the government's approach. David.

SPEAKER: The ACTU and BCA, would you support something like conditions on core essential visas or migration agreements to ensure that there is more training and hiring of apprentices?

LIAM O'BRIEN: I might just say a few remarks just to pick up on what Clare said. The radical shift that we are seeing here is about how we set the foundations for migration policy. If we are going to have strong social licence, good public support, then Australians expect that when we look to skilled migration we do so with a clear purpose.

Putting Jobs and Skills Australia at the centre of the government's response is about ensuring that we are genuinely testing to make sure that we are identifying the skills that Australia needs. That's what's critical about this. That's why it's so important the work that Jobs and Skills Australia has to do in terms of identifying key skills shortages.

So we do support efforts to make sure that that is as rigorous as possible, that we don't just rely upon the data that's there, but that we dig into each sector to understand just not where skills shortages exist but importantly why they exist. Because unpicking the why is critical to determining whether it's appropriate for us to, in the long term, continue to address skill shortages using migration.

There are other levers, whether it be education or more broadly in the labour market. I think unions have been deeply concerned about the fact that for all of the jobs and skills shortages that we have, employers are not offering necessarily higher wages to deal with those and there are important things that Jobs and Skills Australia can do to start to unpack that. So we think that is a really critical part to the new system, making sure that it's rigorous and evidence based, but more importantly, diagnosing why the skill is in shortage.

BRAN BLACK: I would support those comments. We've been part of the Jobs and Skills process and we've seen firsthand what a difference it has made already, but I think most importantly, we're going to see, over time, that it's going to make a pretty significant contribution to the manner in which we undertake planning for our economy and planning for how we bring in the types of skills that we require from overseas, but perhaps more importantly, how we educate people here in Australia as well.

And that's where that important point, I think, really needs to be emphasised. It's the linkage that Jobs and Skills provides between our education system, our immigration system, our capacity to plan for infrastructure, our capacity to plan for housing. It's important for us to have that data and because of that joined up system, we're in a good position to do that.

So I think let's look at what Jobs and Skills Australia produces over time, and I think we will all see, over the course of the next few years, that joined-up approach delivers more of the results that we expect from our immigration system.

CLARE O'NEIL: Michael, and then I'll come to you, Angus.

SPEAKER: The business and the property industry are disappointed that the specialist skills pathway excludes

skilled tradespeople earning over \$135,000. Is there a risk at all that the decision makes it harder for the government to achieve its ambition to build 1.2 million homes over the next five years?

CLARE O'NEIL: It's really important to understand that our strategy changes don't make it harder to bring tradespeople to Australia, we're just not making it easier in the way that I've described with the specialist skills pathway, and I think that's not been particularly well understood in the conversation.

Our government feels strongly that for sectors like trades, you should have to prove that there is a skills shortage before you start to recruit overseas, and I have to say, that may be controversial with some groups in the community. It wouldn't be in my electorate. And I will just invite Liam, perhaps, do you want to add to anything I've said there?

LIAM O'BRIEN: 100 per cent. What this reform does is it ensures that there will be proper, rigorous assessment about where shortages exist, in particular in relation to trades, labourers, machine operators, those that might be needed in certain sectors. Because what we don't want to see is an undermining of that public trust and confidence.

Australians expect to have pathways to employment, in particular in those trades, so we're very comfortable with the approach that the government's taking here, that in our respects, does set the specialist skills level lower than we would want to see it, but provides those necessary safeguards in particular the trades and labour.

CLARE O'NEIL: I just make one more point, Michael, the purpose of the specialist skills pathway is about bringing people here that we can't grow quickly. If we don't have enough electricians and plumbers in our country, I believe that's a failure of our training system. If we don't have enough cyber security specialists of 10 years' experience, that's not about the training system, that's about a genuine new need that we're going to need to recruit across the world.

So the point of our strategy is we're not going to replace government failures to train people with migration outcomes. We should be making sure that we're training jobs - Australians for the jobs of the future, and that's what the strategy supports.

SPEAKER: Minister, you said at the beginning this was about returning the intake to normal, and in the document, it talks about halving it or getting it back to pre-pandemic levels, so 500,000 down to about 250,000. Is that - we're accustomed to that kind of number being a forecast, but is it now a policy target for the government to get to 250,000 in that 2025 year, and when do you expect to see results on a pathway toward that target?

CLARE O'NEIL: It's not a target, it's an estimate, and David, you'll understand that there are things about that number that are not within the control of government. So one of the things - one of the major inputs for the number is people leaving the country, and that's not something that government gets to decide. So we don't commit to those numbers as a target, as you've said, they are estimates of the policy decisions that we're making.

Our goal is to return migration to sustainable levels, and we want to do that for a number of different reasons: one, there are real housing and infrastructure pressures in our cities, and our government has done so much in 18 months in office to try to address those, but we can't fix it all in 18 months.

We have to run a migration program that maintains the support of the Australian community. That is something that's been a centrepiece of the success of migration in our country for 70 years. We will not sustain that if we don't run a program that people support and that people can see is in the national interest. So that's why addressing those numbers is very important.

Now, you asked about when we expect to see results, and I would say to you, we're already seeing results. Migration would be far higher today if the government hadn't already taken decisive action on this matter over the previous 18 months. Think about the decision to raise that minimum income for migrants, something that

had been frozen by Peter Dutton for a decade, for no good reason. One of the key centrepieces that was turning that temporary skilled program into something that resembled a guest worker program, something that Australians have over generations rejected time and time again.

So those sorts of changes, and there are many more, a \$380 million investment in our department to try to fix this mess that was left for us, all of these things are already having a significant impact, and I would say to you that the country is really going to feel the difference. We did have a big intake in that first year after COVID, that was always going to happen. A lot of you in this room would remember that when we had that large year of intake, we were suffering from the worst labour shortage we have experienced as a country for 70 years. Fruit was rotting on vines, you could not find a nurse in a hospital, you could not find a teacher in a school.

Now the government had to act, and I would say, you know, heard the comments of the Opposition this morning, the Opposition were urging us to act, in fact up until quite recently they were saying "more migrants faster". Now we see how the winds change and they change their position from week to week to week on this. I don't take any of their comments even remotely seriously.

What I would say is we've got a clear plan here, we had a higher-than-normal intake. Our government has set the bold and ambitious plan to bring it back to normal by next year, and that's what Minister Giles and I will be working towards.

SPEAKER: Minister, can you explain the rationale for making it harder for international students to come to Australia based on their English language skills?

CLARE O'NEIL: Every piece of evidence and research shows us that English language skills is a key determinant of how successful an international student will be both in their studies, but also in their work.

Now, what we have seen with students who are struggling with their English is that they are at much higher risk of exploitation, and that they are likely to gather in really low-paid work and not be able to move out of that over their time in our country.

Now we want to run a good integrity-filled education system here, but we also want to set our students up for success, and if we allow them to come here without functional English that will allow them to work, we're not doing that.

SPEAKER: Just on the specialist skills pathway, can I ask about businesses that potentially still fall within the cracks, for example, you mentioned psychologists, a lot of psychology companies might not have a \$4 million annual turnover, with start-ups, they might not be backed by VC funds. So is there still an avenue for them to be approved sponsors in some way without meeting those kinds of criteria to be able to employ, you know, people over 135,000?

CLARE O'NEIL: Yep. There are some ways, and it's a bit of a detailed question, so I'm going to get you some more information about that after, if you don't mind. Bran, I'll just invite you to answer, if you want to talk a bit more about specialist skills?

BRAN BLACK: Yeah, so we're pleased to see this, because fundamentally, when you look at the system as it stands right now, you've got to be in Australia for two years before you apply to have permanency, but you can't make an application unless you've had that two years.

So for us, we think it's really important in terms of being able to attract people to Australia that there's that capacity to show them that there is a genuine pathway through to permanency, and the threshold 135,000, it's slightly higher than what we wanted, but is a reasonable figure, and we think that that would send a good signal to the international market, so that when we do need to bring skills into the country, people will look at the Australian market and think, "Yep, this is a place where I can go."

CLARE O'NEIL: [INDISTINCT]. Okay, I'll come here and then to you.

SPEAKER: The Department of Home Affairs and the ABF will be key in rolling out this strategy, but in the APS census, that department and that agency performed the worst on things like culture, leadership and bullying reports. Have you set a priority for the new secretary and the ABF Commissioner to improve the culture in those agencies?

CLARE O'NEIL: Yep. Thank you for that question. There's really well-documented public concerns about some of the things that have happened in the Home Affairs Department over the previous years, and I think it is a really important problem to me, and one that Steph Foster and Andrew and I share a deep passion for addressing.

I would say that I see already changes in the Department since I became Minister. People are excited about being involved in a department that set the threshold of bold policy reform for government, and I think that's really helping. But by no means have we fixed all the problems, and it's something that Steph and I are working really hard on, and we're going to have a little bit more to say about that in the new year.

SPEAKER: Two more questions.

SPEAKER: Minister, just can I quickly follow up on David's question, I think, if you were halfway through the financial year, if you don't see a significant drop [INDISTINCT] in this financial year, does that cause problems down the track, and also, if I may, one of the things we often hear about people who do manage to get visas to come here as highly skilled workers is that they then face a lot of trouble getting their family to come with them. When we're talking about making Australia an attractive place in the competitive market, I notice in the document it sort of puts the question around family members off to a later date. When can we expect to see some change on that?

CLARE O'NEIL: Yep, sure. So I'll - Andrew will talk about family members. With net overseas migration, we're already seeing migration come down. That's why migration peaked last year, and that's why we're not seeing numbers referable to that peak this year, because of action taken by our government, and I really want everyone to understand this: the policy document we're announcing today is not the government's answer to net overseas migration rates being too high. We have been working on that problem for a long time now, and the only reason we're not at those, you know, 22/23 numbers is because of the action that we have taken.

Now I would say to you that it is going to take vigilance from me and Minister Giles to meet these numbers. That's going to be the honest reality, and I will just tell you that the Immigration Minister and the Home Affairs Minister should always be exercising that vigilance. The migration system is I think the most complicated system that is run by the Australian Government, it needs daily time and care and attention, and it didn't get that for a decade, and that's why we're in this godly mess.

So we are going to be tracking this very, very closely, and we're going to have to, if we want to see that pretty dramatic reduction that we are looking at.

ANDREW GILES, MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS: And [INDISTINCT], on family visas, I mean we are a majority migrant nation, so how our visa system enables Australians to remain connected to loved ones around the world really matters.

The work of Mr Parkinson highlighted two things in this regard. The first one was that our parent visa system was broken. The second one was the rebuild of our migration system was a 10-year task.

Now this is a big step towards that, today's strategy, but there is more to be done. I would say on family visas, that I'm really pleased with the progress that we have made on partner visas. The backlog is down, wait times are down. We know there is a big bit of work to be done around parent visas, it's something that we are actively progressing, and you'll hear a lot more about in the not-too-distant future.

CLARE O'NEIL: Why don't we just take a couple of questions, and we'll answer them all at once, because I'll get in trouble if we do it differently. So yep. Go ahead.

SPEAKER: So Abdul Benbrika could soon be freed. What have you been told about his release and why's action being taken to extend his detention [INDISTINCT]?

CLARE O'NEIL: Okay. Benbrika, I can't comment on, the matter's before the Supreme Court at the moment, and it's not appropriate.

SPEAKER: Minister Giles, in relation to the High Court ruling on NZYQ, what checks were the detainees that were released following that decision subjected to before being able to walk into the community given one individual last week was arrested on an outstanding warrant for return to prison, and are there any other individuals released who might have a similar issue?

ANDREW GILES, MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS: Thanks, Clare, for the question. As I think has been discussed on many occasions, the point in time which the High Court ruling requires a person to be released requires that they be released immediately.

What we have done since before the decision was to begin a process of effective coordination between the ABF, the AFP, and state and territory law enforcement officials. This was formalised shortly after the decision through standing up Operation Aegis, to ensure that when people are released, we have all the opportunities, all the resources of state and territory resources as well as the Commonwealth to do everything we can to keep the community safe.

Obviously last week we took a very big step forward through the passage of laws that now give Australians all layers of protection in respect of this cohort.

SPEAKER: About fed an outstanding warrant, why wasn't he handed straight from migration detention to police?

CLARE O'NEIL: Thank you, thanks everyone.