

Guest workers are already here, Mr Costello

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12 July 2006

<https://apo.org.au/node/6108>

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Australian Treasurer, Peter Costello has once again rejected the idea of Pacific Island workers filling seasonal labour shortages in Australian agriculture. At a meeting in Solomon Islands earlier this month the treasurer said, "Australia has never been a guest-worker country. We have never been a country where we bring you in and ship you out. Australia is an immigrant country."

Perhaps the treasurer should have a chat with Senator Amanda Vanstone. In the last financial year, the Immigration department granted around seventy thousand temporary 457 visas to skilled workers and their family members - almost half the number of people entering the country each year as permanent migrants. It can hardly have escaped the treasurer's attention that the union movement has been campaigning against the increasing use of these visas to fill gaps in the Australian labour market - meatworkers, welders, construction workers, bakers - all brought in on a temporary basis. A new row is brewing over plans to use the temporary visa to bring in truck drivers (though the unions seem to have less of an issue with state governments bringing in doctors and nurses to staff hospitals).

Granted, these skilled workers are not seasonal: they come for years rather than a few months, are often accompanied by family members and eventually have the option of applying to stay on as permanent residents, provided their employer will sponsor them to do so. But according to Senate estimates only about 15-20 percent of these temporary workers remain in Australia. In other words, at least four out of five do 'ship out' at the end of their contracts, which sounds suspiciously like the operation a guest worker program by another name.

In addition to the 457 visa holders, there are more than 100,000 young travellers coming to Australia each year on twelve month working holiday maker visas - double the number who came ten years ago. This program was designed to enable backpackers aged 18-30 to gain a deeper appreciation of the Australian lifestyle and culture (and eke out their travel budgets) through short bursts of paid work "incidental" to their trip. The arrangement is reciprocal, with young Australian travellers gaining equivalent work rights in certain countries overseas.

But what began as an 'experiential' scheme has evolved into a labour market program, at least in rural areas. Many horticultural producers now rely on these travellers to do the bulk of their picking and packing. The extent to which the industry depends on this foreign labour force has been recognised by the federal government, which has offered the carrot of a second twelve month visa to entice more young travellers into agricultural work.

Growers are grateful for the government's initiative, but casual tourist labour does not provide an ideal workforce. Each season new workers must be trained from scratch and backpackers tend to disappear when the weather gets hot and the beach parties start. Horticultural producers would prefer a more dependable labour force that returns each year, enabling workers to incrementally build up skills and reduce training time, spoilage and accidents.

Mr Costello says it won't help Pacific nations in the long term "to keep sending their best and their brightest off to Australia". With this comment, he inadvertently puts his finger on the nub of the issue. Canberra is happy to cherry-pick doctors, nurses and rugby players from the Pacific, but it is the lower-skilled workers with fewer options who are most in need Australian jobs.

The key idea behind a seasonal labour scheme is not for these workers to become permanent residents, but for them to travel to Australia for a few months each year and then return home with money, skills and experience to help improve the lives of their families and communities.

There are legitimate reasons to move cautiously in opening up Australia's agricultural labour market to Pacific Island workers, but the issues of concern are not those identified by the treasurer. How do we ensure that access to a ready supply of offshore labour does not stifle future innovations in Australian agriculture? How can we ensure that the workers will be treated decently (though presumably the Treasurer has every confidence in WorkChoices to deliver on that score)? How will Canberra decide the diplomatically sensitive question of which Pacific Island nations get to take part in such a scheme? And how will recruitment be organised to ensure that jobs go to those who need them rather than to relatives and friends of local power brokers?

In a well designed and regulated program, none of these issues is insurmountable and pilot schemes can be used to test the ground and identify and resolve problems.

The question for the treasurer is this: does it make more sense to have well-heeled Canadians and Danes and Japanese cutting grapes in Mildura and plucking tomatoes in Shepparton or should we offer these jobs to Pacific Islanders who are desperate for work, income and experience? After all, it is Australian peacekeepers that will be called up to restore order if unemployed youth riot in Honiara or Port Vila.

The treasurer is right that a seasonal labour program will not solve all Pacific's economic and social problems, but it could make a contribution.