

The Pacific Engagement Visa needs to be delivered

by Stephen Howes and Ema Vueti

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The PEV legislation has not yet been passed by Australia's Senate

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Labor's announcement that it would introduce a Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) to provide Pacific Island citizens with 3,000 permanent resident visas annually has been [warmly welcomed in the region](#). Good progress was made with the new visa, with [crucial details released at the start of the year](#), but it is now clear that the target starting date of 1 July has been missed.

The legislation to enable the PEV passed through the House of Representatives in March, and was tabled for consideration in the Senate in June. However, it never made it to the Senate floor.

While all parties have expressed support for the PEV in principle, the sticking point has become the lottery behind the visa. Labor has modelled the PEV on equivalent New Zealand lottery-based Pacific visas (the Samoa Quota and Pacific Access Category visas). The Coalition has [opposed the introduction of a lottery](#) into Australia's migration system, meaning that the prospects for the actual introduction of the PEV are now in the hands of the Senate crossbench.

The Greens and the Jacqui Lambie Network (JLN) have indicated their support for the PEV. The Greens have proposed (in the [report of the Senate committee](#) established to scrutinise the bill) an amendment explicitly limiting the lottery to the PEV, and the JLN has proposed a [motion supporting the PEV](#) but also indicating support for developing permanent pathways for temporary Pacific workers. Both proposals seem reasonable, meaning that the government should have the numbers to pass the PEV enabling legislation. If so, then it must just have been a matter of a crowded legislative agenda that prevented this legislation being passed in June, and the PEV legislation should be tabled and passed when the Senate next meets at the end of July.

We certainly hope so. Having raised the expectations of the Pacific, and of Australia's Pacific diasporas, it would be not only tragic but deeply damaging for

Australia's reputation were it now to walk away from the PEV.

The best scenario would be passage with bipartisan support. The Opposition has indicated that they support the PEV in principle, but not the lottery. They have instead called for PEV eligibility to be restricted to temporary Pacific migrants in Australia through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. Of course PALM workers should and would be eligible to apply for the PEV visa. Moreover, they would have an advantage over other applicants since they already have a job, one of the main requirements of PEV issuance. So we would expect PALM workers to be well represented among PEV recipients. However, formally linking the PALM and the PEV would be a diplomatic own goal. As long as Australia sticks with the well-accepted New Zealand approach to issuing permanent resident visas to the Pacific (that is, through a lottery), the PEV will be well received. But if Australia takes a different approach, it will immediately raise suspicions that it is introducing the PEV not to benefit the Pacific, but to benefit itself.

While hoping that the Opposition will have a change of heart and start supporting the PEV legislation might be overly optimistic, once the PEV is introduced, the evidence from the New Zealand equivalent visas is that **it will become highly popular**. In Samoa, there are 40 applicants for every available Samoa Quota visa, while in Kiribati there are 60 and in Fiji 75 for every Pacific Access Category visa. Given this, once introduced the PEV will quickly become an irreplaceable and vital tool in Australia's Pacific engagement. Bipartisan support for the PEV, if not possible upfront, will surely emerge over time.

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