

Time for a PNG Engagement Visa

by Natasha Turia and Stephen Howes

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Photo Credit: Natasha Turia

Notwithstanding uncertainty around **300 unallocated visas**, and disappointing results in Palau and FSM, the first **Pacific Engagement Visa** ballot was a **stand-out success**. Pacific-wide, **more than 56,000 registrations** were received by the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) ballot for some 3,000 PEVs. (To remind the reader, the PEV is allocated by ballot to reduce risks of brain drain and to equitably distribute visas in a situation of excess demand.)

No doubt, **increased access** to decent job opportunities, better healthcare and education benefits **triggered high interest**. All in the hope of securing a better life for individuals and their families in Australia.

Fiji (30,512) recorded the highest number with **more than 50%** of PEV registrations. PNG came second with over 8,000 registrations, six times its quota of 1,350 PEVs.

This is an impressive result for PNG in the space of three months. Unlike in Fiji, where migration seems to have become a national habit, PNG has no tradition of out-migration. In fact, PNG has one of the **lowest shares of remittances to GDP** in the world, and only **a tiny diaspora**, with fewer Papua New Guineans in Australia than Samoans or even Cook Islanders. PNG's participation in the **Pacific Australia Labour Mobility** (PALM) scheme has also been disappointing. As of 31 July 2024, of **the total 31,950 PALM visa holders** in Australia, 1,995 came from PNG or only 6%, much less than Fiji (6,365), Vanuatu (5,950) and Solomon Islands (4,940).

And yet, the PEV ballot shows, there is a lot of interest within PNG for migration, and furthermore for permanent migration.

As more Papua New Guineans secure passports and the PEV becomes better known, the number of PNG PEV ballot entrants will increase exponentially over the coming years. The current quota given to PNG under the PEV of 1,350 is completely inadequate and, at 0.01% of the population, only of symbolic value at the national level.

What should Australia do? An incremental increase in the quota PNG receives

under the PEV will benefit a few hundred more Papua New Guineans but is neither here nor there at the national level. Australia needs to be braver and make a permanent shift to its migration policy by establishing a specific permanent residency pathway for PNG separate from the PEV.

New Zealand shows how this can be done. Instead of a single, Pacific visa, New Zealand has two: the [Samoa Quota Resident Visa](#) exclusive for citizens of its former colony of Samoa; and the [Pacific Access Category](#) (PAC) which provides visas for other Pacific countries to which New Zealand has been historically close. In fact, more visas are provided to Samoa (1,100) than all the PAC countries put together: Fiji and Tonga normally get 250 each, Kiribati and Tuvalu 75 each (numbers have changed to make up for the visa's suspension during COVID).

Following New Zealand's example, Australia should introduce a PNG Engagement Visa alongside its Pacific Engagement Visa. The PEV could continue or expand, but PNG would be taken out and given its own visa, the PNGEV.

What should be the PNGEV quota? The Samoa model mentioned earlier would suggest a quota of around 50,000 (based on the ratio of PNG's to Samoa's population). Perhaps one-fifth of that amount — 10,000 — might be a realistic starting point, while still large enough to make a difference at the national level in PNG. Recall that some 20,000 applied for the PEV (primary applicants plus their family members). Many more will apply next year.

Such a move would be highly appropriate for two countries that are “[joined at the hip](#)”, as PNG's Prime Minister James Marape put it in his address to the Australian parliament earlier this year. It would be appropriate given their shared military history, symbolised by the [Kokoda Track](#). It would also be appropriate given PNG's status as a former territory of Australia and the shameful White Australia policy that kept Papua New Guineans out of Australia for decades. And it would be appropriate given Canberra's concerns about Chinese influence in PNG.

In terms of timing, the introduction of the PNGEV would be appropriate now because this day next year will be the 50th anniversary of Papua New Guinea's independence. The PNGEV would be a practical initiative to right the wrongs of the past (the White Australia policy) and to belatedly welcome Papua New Guineans to Australia's shores.

Much better than a new National Rugby League team, or more aid, the PNGEV would supercharge people-to-people links between the two countries. It is also no exaggeration to say that it could change PNG's destiny. Papua New Guinea is not on a positive trajectory. According to [a recent survey](#) of PNG university students, for

every 5% who thought PNG was heading in the right direction, 95% thought the country was heading in the wrong direction. Foreign aid cannot bring about fundamental change. Even PNG's politicians seem helpless to change the path the country is on. Only more integration, more international exposure and ultimately more public demand can change PNG's national trajectory. If Australia really wants to make a difference in PNG, it needs to think bigger, and think PNGEV.

Note: The PALM numbers mentioned have been adjusted slightly to give correct figures for 31 July 2024.

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