

Oceans of Opportunity: a new report on Pacific labour mobility

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A new report, "[Oceans of Opportunity: How labour mobility can help Australia and its neighbours](#)", has been published by the Menzies Research Centre, a Liberal Party think-tank. The report is authored by Stephen Bolton and Dr Rochelle Ball.

Launched by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on 1 March, the report [suggests](#) "specific visa classes be developed to encourage workers from Pacific Island nations to come to Australia to fill skills shortages, particularly in areas such as aged care, tourism and agriculture". As well as the visa proposals, the report makes three other recommendations: more funding for the Australia-Pacific Technical College to match up graduates with industry sectors in Australia experiencing shortages; accreditation of recruitment and labour agents; and access to Australian welfare for any new permanent visa holders equivalent to what New Zealand citizens receive.

The proposed Pacific Connect (Skilled) visa is important as it adds another voice calling for the introduction of a permanent Pacific Category visa, reiterating the recent Development Policy Centre-World Bank [Pacific Possible: Labour Mobility](#) report and the [Lowy Institute's](#) Leon Berkelmans and Jonathan Pryke in calling for more entry pathways for Pacific citizens. The constant public advocacy of a new visa is a positive sign for the feasibility of such an idea. The report also contains good analysis highlighting predicted future labour force gaps and clearly showcases the small number of existing entry points for Pacific workers into the Australian labour market.

However there are also a number of questionable assertions. In the [media release](#) to accompany the report, the Menzies Research Centre write "The report finds that as little as 10 per cent of Australia's \$1.3 billion in annual direct aid to Pacific Island countries may be actually benefitting those in need." There is slim evidence put forward to support this claim. More critically, some of the proposals seem overly complex. For example, one proposed visa, Pacific Connect (labour exchange), is designed to foster business to business links across Australia and the Pacific to exchange skilled workers. The administration of this proposal appears significant. It is difficult enough for an Australian employer to access the Seasonal Worker Program, let alone forge ties with overseas-based businesses to swap employees in peak seasons.

Despite this, the fact a domestic political think-tank with a conservative bent has publicly called for a number of major changes to foster labour mobility is testament to the growing interest in migration as a form of development potential in the Pacific. It is particularly positive to see such interest in the topic given John Howard's well-known aversion to Pacific labour mobility. Further, the strong links between the Menzies Research Centre and the Liberal Party, may signal a pending change of policy. Launching the report, the Foreign Minister [called](#) it "a most timely paper" and cited the Menzies Research Centre as "providing the basis for an ongoing policy debate that will transform into public policy that will benefit Australia and our neighbourhood." Hopefully this holds true for a new Pacific Category visa.