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Australia's new 'Home Office' is a worry for immigration policy

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the minister in charge of the new 'super-portfolio', Peter Dutton, announce the changes on Tuesday. AAP/Mick Tsikas

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When Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the establishment of a Home Affairs portfolio this week, he described it as “similar to the Home Office of the United Kingdom”. Drawing inspiration from this British model is worrisome for the immigration portfolio.

Immigration mismanagement

Planning immigration has never been a core task of Britain's Home Office. As political scientist Randall Hansen has described, the UK in the 20th century has long managed immigration using its nationality legislation.

Migration management was set to become a priority under the Blair government. Decades after Australia did so, it introduced a points-based system for skilled migrants.

In practice, the Home Office did not anticipate the large inflow of citizens from new members of the European Union in the 2000s. This fuelled public concerns that eventually played a crucial role in

Brexit.

Immigration-related Home Office activities have been mired in enforcement issues. From the 1980s to the 2000s, asylum applications took years to process.

More recently, European citizens aiming to apply for residency in the post-Brexit UK have faced a bureaucratic nightmare. This has been criticised by the EU.

What's in a name?

The Home Office was originally established to protect British citizens, with a focus on Britain's infrastructure and customs, and on the prevention of entry by "undesirable aliens". It has historically been inward-looking.

This has also been the case of Australia's Department of Home Affairs, established at Federation in 1901. After the second world war, a distinct Department of Immigration was established to plan and oversee the expansion of the country's population. This was a major strategic and economic goal at the time.

In Australia, both the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Immigration have co-existed over the years, with two exceptions. From the late 1980s to 2007, the former disappeared as its portfolio was handed to the Department of Justice and Customs. Then, in the early 1970s, the Whitlam government abolished the Department of Immigration, because its administrative culture was considered to still reflect the White Australia policy, which had been effectively scrapped in 1966.

The Fraser government reinstated the Department of Immigration in 1976, this time with a strong multicultural rationale. Home Affairs disappeared again in 2013, while Immigration expanded to become the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

The 2013 name change already meant the department's focus on immigration became narrower than before. It was now mainly concerned with the admission (or refusal) of immigrants. Settlement and multicultural affairs were transferred to the Department of Human Services.

The newest name change, and its close association with the British model by Turnbull, appears as a symbolic marginalisation of the immigration portfolio. It is not clear yet whether an agency under a Home Affairs "super-ministry" will carry "immigration" in its name.

In Britain, the corresponding agency under the purview of the Home Office is called "UK Visas and Immigration". Yet it existed for several years as the UK Border Agency (UKBA), with no reference to immigration. The then home secretary, Theresa May, eventually split UKBA in two following the revelation that hundreds of thousands of people had entered the UK without the appropriate checks.

Critical timing

The creeping invisibility of the immigration portfolio comes as the government is overseeing major changes to immigration policy, and is increasingly using the rhetoric of putting Australians first.

In April, the admission of skilled migrants was overhauled with the abolition of the 457 visa. The government shortened the list of professions for which skilled foreign workers would be eligible for a four-year visa to Australia, and subsequently for permanent residence.

A citizenship reform is before parliament. It significantly extends the time permanent residents must live in Australia before they can apply for citizenship. It also introduces more stringent English-language proficiency requirements.

The legislation would require citizenship applicants to demonstrate their allegiance to Australia more strongly, with a pledge to Australian values and proof of integration.

It has been written that, rather than encouraging integration, these changes could result in newcomers feeling more distanced from Australia. The disappearance of "immigration" from the department name may contribute to this uneasiness.

And prospective immigrants to Australia may justifiably fear the changes will cause confusion about division of responsibilities, or a further delay in processing times.

Turnbull has promised the reform will involve strong oversight mechanisms. He noted that such mechanisms were essential to respect the rights and liberties of "all Australians".

As Amy Maguire noted, Turnbull did not make any specific reference to the rights and liberties of non-citizens living in Australia. One can thus worry to what extent Australia's "Home Office" will better protect them.

 Immigration National security Malcolm Turnbull Peter Dutton Home affairs minister 

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