

Jobs key to avoiding decline in population

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SOUTH Australia is the leading state in attracting business and skilled migrants to regional areas, but its challenge is to reverse the brain drain to other states and raise the fertility rate.

The Rann Government has set bold targets for population growth.

In 2003, Premier Mike Rann declared he wanted two million people living in the state by 2050, up from a current population estimate (by the Australian Bureau of Statistics) of 156 million.

South Australia has aged faster than the country as a whole, and the Government sees population growth is a possible antidote.

"If population decline occurs at the same time as the population ages, it would result in a fall in overall productive capacity, contraction of demand and, ultimately, a lowering of overall living standards," warns the Rann Government's Prosperity through People policy document.

Rann says the community "must refuse to accept the inevitability of population decline and recognise the need to respond to the ageing of our population".

Population policy is driven by the Department of Trade and Economic Development. Chief executive Raymond Garrand says population policy is really another way of saying "jobs policy".

"This is about workforce development and skills development," Mr Garrand says. "We are competing nationally and internationally for workers."

South Australia was designated a "regional" destination for skilled migrants by the federal Government two years ago. The result: the state now accounts for 16 per cent of the nation's regional migration intake.

MOVING HOME

Net migration

Year to	Overseas	Interstate
Sep 1996	3697	-5257
Sep 1997	2850	-2577
Sep 1998	2556	-1672
Sep 1999	3491	-1813
Sep 2000	3690	-3823
Sep 2001	2408	-2375
Sep 2002	2984	-992
Sep 2003	4180	-2188
Sep 2004	4696	-3067
Sep 2005	7284	-3715

Source: ABS

This is double the state's share of the national population of about 7 per cent.

Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs figures supplied to the state Government show large increases in migrants in the last financial year.

In the 2004-05 financial year, 8797 migrants arrived in South Australia, up from 6157 in 2003-04.

This figure breaks down into large increases in business migrants, to 530 from 176, and employer-nominated staff, to 955 from 583. The total of skilled migrants reached 4669, from 3118 the year before.

And the humanitarian refugee stream grew strongly, up to 1787 from 867 the year before.

University of Adelaide demographer Graeme Hugo says there has been a "parametric leap" in migration levels.

"The international migration figures show

quite a turnaround — a very significant change," Mr Hugo says. The key question, he says, will be whether the state keeps hold of the new settlers, or if they join the established exodus of young, well-educated people to the other states.

"The key thing will be the census as the real indication of what has happened in the last few years," Mr Hugo says.

While progress is being made on migration, the choices made by the South Australian-born population — to move interstate while young, and to delay and avoid bearing children — appear difficult to overcome.

ABS estimates for interstate migration show it increased to 3715 in the year to September last year, up from 3067 the year before and 2188 two years before.

But Mr Garrard remains upbeat about the figures, pointing to the Make the Move advertising campaign in eastern states that is attracting interstate migration into South Australia.

In the year since the campaign started, about 7200 people have called the inquiries line to obtain an information pack on moving to South Australia.

Lifting the fertility rate — which has remained below the national average of about 1.8 children — also appears to be a major challenge.

University of Adelaide demographer Diane Rudd said the fertility rate was unlikely to increase, because of changing "social norms".

"Patterns of marriage and commitment and lifestyle show that young people are doing what they want for 10 years," she says.

"Changing social norms have resulted in lower fertility, and combined with young people leaving the state, it is a double whammy."