

First, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to have my thoughts heard in the discussion around immigration and productivity. My main concern is that productivity should not be framed simply in a monetary context. The current debate presumably arises from concerns about ensuring welfare gains for our population into the future. My suggestion, therefore, is that welfare should be the primary metric in this discussion, not GDP per capita.

Welfare is, of course, a complex construct but it is the driver of many of our decisions. One important underpinning issue is that we don't seem to have a clear policy statement about how many people we think this land can sustainably support. I fully appreciate this is a hard thing to discuss without people feeling challenged. But not talking about something doesn't make it less important, just less considered. Once we have a theoretical target population range we have a key parameter to plan our future. How many houses are needed, how many schools, roads, communication networks, power stations, etc.? Also, how many people should we seek to acquire, what skills do we wish them to have and how quickly do we want them to come? Without a model of our intended target population size I truly cannot see how informed decisions can be made about things like immigration and welfare targets, as you are effectively shooting at a moving target and hoping for the best. At present we appear to rely on projected rates of change "how much faster will we grow and can we keep up with that rate of change?" With this in place we then accept the costs of growth as inevitable; the continual loss of farmland for housing and roads, the loss of wildlife, the degradation of forests and waterways, the accumulation of waste... All of which reduces welfare outcomes. It is true that continued population growth causes these things – but should we, as a society always accept this type of growth? Do we have to? How much can we take before our tangible living standard suffers? They are reasonable questions to ask.

So in summary, I hope that this debate starts with the viewpoint that productivity is not just about monetary gain per capita. Instead, it's about utilising our resources (human, natural and capital) in ways that lead to the greatest sustainable increase in welfare for our people for the generations to come. Part of that story is a realistic sense of the population size range that could sustainably maintain a high level of welfare without environmental degradation. New Zealanders love their beautiful country and the immigration/productivity debate needs to acknowledge welfare concerns associated with that deep empathy for the land as being equally as important as monetary gain. Finally, I think we must acknowledge that we are doing this for our children, as they will inherit the outcomes of our actions. They expect wisdom from us and they are right to do so. What we need is the courage to set the right course, even when there are short-term difficulties to face in order to achieve long-term gains.