By REY KOSLOWSKI

Many states across the U.S. have passed restrictive immigration measures in recent years. But New York under Gov. Andrew Cuomo is bucking the trend.

"We are a state of immigrants," he declared in his 2012 State of the State address. "While other states build walls to keep people out, we open our arms and we invite people in." The Empire State is in this regard a lot like Australia, which is notable among developed nations for actively recruiting immigrants.

Comparing New York to the land down under may seem odd at first glance. But if New York were a country, its 2010 gross domestic product of $1.13 trillion would be very close to the $1.24 trillion Australian GDP. New York's population of 19.4 million is also comparable to Australia's 22 million people. New York's foreign-born population is 4.3 million, or 22.2% of total population; Australia has 4.7 million immigrants, or 21.9% of its population. If New York were a country, the size of its immigrant population would rank 13th in the world, after Australia in 11th place.

There are some big differences between New York and Australia. The Australian government sets an annual immigration target—190,000 immigrants this year. Most are admitted for employment, and the government selectively recruits highly-skilled immigrants using a point system. New York, by contrast, relies on the federal immigration system to recruit newcomers. Most immigrants to the U.S. receive permanent resident status based on family reunification rather than employment.

New York and its cities have nevertheless implemented policies to help immigrants, ranging from assistance in applying for government services to barring many government and law enforcement officials from inquiring into residents' immigration status. New York was also one of the first 12 states to enact legislation permitting undocumented immigrants who meet specific requirements to pay in-state tuition rates at public universities.
Gov. Cuomo is now making good on his promise to establish an Office for New Americans that will in turn create 30 neighborhood-based opportunity centers intended "to ensure that our state's many newcomers have the opportunities necessary to realize their full potential and become part of the family of New York." The state issued a call for grant applications from organizations interested in hosting opportunity centers, where immigrants will receive English-language training, civics education, and naturalization-application assistance.

The Office of New Americans plans to hire three lawyers who will each travel to 10 opportunity centers and hold monthly immigration-law consultation sessions. The opportunity centers will additionally host "starting your own business seminars" with the help of regional New York State Small Business Development Centers and Entrepreneurial Assistance Programs. Immigrant entrepreneurs will have access to job training, interview and resume writing workshops and professional networking opportunities.

While there is little that Albany can do to shape immigration flows nationally, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is spearheading an effort to reform U.S. immigration policy. Mr. Bloomberg co-chairs the Partnership for a New American Economy, a bipartisan group of 400 mayors and prominent business leaders whose companies collectively generate more than $1.5 trillion in annual sales. The group includes CEOs of New York-based corporations like Goldman Sachs's Lloyd Blankfein and News Corp.'s Rupert Murdoch. (News Corp. owns The Wall Street Journal.)

Mr. Bloomberg and his partners recently issued a policy report favorably comparing Australia's "responsive and adaptable" immigration policy to "America's broken immigration system." To fix our system, the partnership supports comprehensive immigration reforms that would "attract and keep the best, the brightest and the hardest-working" immigrants, enable "foreign students to stay in the United States to work" and "establish a path to legal status for the undocumented."

Republicans who once joined bipartisan congressional coalitions for immigration reform have retreated from their past support (Sen. John McCain) or become endangered species through tea party-dominated primary contests (Sen. Dick Lugar). So there is little hope for the comprehensive immigration reforms outlined by the partnership—except, maybe, if members of this influential and wealthy group would form a Super PAC to boost Republicans willing to vote for comprehensive reform.

If these business leaders will not exert enough political muscle to adjust the attitudes of congressional Republicans, they should stop dreaming of U.S. immigration policy moving toward an Australian model. Instead, the partnership's wealthy New Yorkers could donate matching grants for the Office for New Americans to help the 4.3 million immigrants who are already in the Australia of the United States.

Mr. Koslowski is associate professor of political science and informatics at the University at Albany, State University of New York.
