

Australian government introduces pro-business, regional-based immigration visas

By Tony Robson
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The Australian government last month created two new visa categories that further tailor immigration policy to the requirements of big business and the privileged few. Eligibility will be determined by the size of an applicant's bank balance and a commitment to live in a designated region, anywhere outside Sydney.

From July 1, skilled migrants under the age of 45 who are prepared to go to regional areas can be granted a three-year temporary residency visa. After two years, they can apply for permanent residency, but only on the proviso that they remain within their allotted region.

From November 1, wealthy self-funded retirees can be given four-year residential visas if they agree to live in rural Australia. In order to qualify, they must also pay a visa charge of \$8,000, have a net worth of \$800,000 to \$1 million, invest \$500,000 in state and territory bonds, have full private health insurance and have no other dependants other than a spouse.

Acting Prime Minister John Anderson and Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone unveiled the changes in a joint announcement. Vanstone made clear that the new visas would not increase Australia's total migration quota but "redirect" migrants with what the *Sydney Morning Herald* described as "grey money" and skills to regional areas.

While the changes build upon a consistent trend in Australian immigration policy over the past decade, they go much further than anything previously introduced. Immigration policy has been consistently geared toward serving the commercial requirements of the private sector, while divesting new migrants of welfare support and other basic democratic rights.

With both new visas, the Howard government has extended policies that were first introduced by its Labor predecessor. The corporate elite can literally buy their way into the country already by taking advantage of a range of visas specifically for investors and company executives. For example, if they invest more than \$750,000 into a government security or have net business assets exceeding \$300,000, they qualify for resident status on the grounds of "business skills".

Likewise, the Employer Nomination Scheme currently gives priority to companies that recruit their employees from abroad.

Accompanied by cuts in the overall immigration quota, these policies have been part of a systemic shift away from family reunion visas, which once allowed working class migrants to sponsor their parents or other close relatives to migrate.

The government has tried to argue that it has not sacrificed the family reunion program in favour of business interests. "The policies that this government has put in place over the past few years have focused on skilled migration and brought about a program that is highly beneficial to Australia's economy, while still catering for family reunion," Philip Ruddock, the previous immigration minister, recently insisted.

But this claim does not survive scrutiny. Until the early 1990s, family reunion migrants made up some two-thirds of the annual intake. Today, skilled migrants account for 61 percent of the non-humanitarian intake—up from 22 percent a decade ago.

A growing number of state and regional-specific immigration programs has been in operation since 1996. The Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) is designed for employers who have been unable to fill skilled vacancies from the local labour market. To meet the criteria, employers must run a business in a designated area—anywhere apart from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, the Gold Coast, Newcastle and Wollongong. Between 1997-98 and 2001-02, a total of 4,123 visas were granted in this category.

The Skilled-Designated Area Sponsored (SDAS) and Skilled-Australian Sponsored programs require a less direct link between sponsor, employee and designated area. Under SDAS, families living in designated areas can sponsor skilled close relatives to settle in these areas, but the migrant is under no obligation to settle in the designated area where their sponsor lives. In the Skilled-Australian Sponsored category, the sponsor does not need to live in a designated area but bonus points are awarded to applicants whose sponsors do so.

While the number of regional visas has increased dramatically over the past year, the overall utilisation of these schemes has been low. According to Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) statistics, just 17,000 people entered under these

schemes from 1996 to 2001, around four percent each year of approximately 80,000 annual settler arrivals. The numbers granted regional visas climbed by 92 percent during 2002-03, but this still represented only 8,000—seven percent—out of 108,070 new immigrants.

By making the new temporary visas more stringent—dependant on settling within a designated area—skilled migrants will become virtual indentured labourers to the employer or regional/state government concerned. While conceding that would-be migrants had been reluctant to commit themselves to remain in certain zones, Deputy Prime Minister Anderson declared that perceptions were changing. He warned that those who breached the terms of their visa “won’t be able to stay in Australia”.

This raises a number of questions. What kind of surveillance and policing will be carried out to ensure that skilled migrants remain compliant? What happens if migrant workers are retrenched by the company that recruited them? Will they face instant removal from Australian soil? What if they are unable to find alternative employment that pays a living wage in the designated area?

Temporary visa holders will be under constant duress to accept any terms and conditions dictated by employers. Many regions have suffered depopulation precisely because of the declining job prospects and poor infrastructure available.

Some members of the legal profession have raised concerns about the implications for civil liberties. The *Christian Science Monitor* quoted immigration lawyer Nigel Dobbie, who asked: “Why should they go to other states, like South Australia, which are not financially healthy? It’s like asking an Australian not to go to London, but instead go to Northumberland if they want to migrate. Sydney is the hub.”

The *Christian Science Monitor* added: “Immigration lawyers here say Australia is the first country to try and keep migrants away from certain cities.”

However, none of the political parties in Canberra has voiced objections of a democratic nature. The main criticism from the Labor party, raised above all by New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, has been that the federal government is not reducing the overall numbers of migrants. “The way for the federal government to do this is to cut the immigration intake by 30,000 per annum,” Carr stated.

Labor’s only other criticism is that the government has not fixed a high enough rate at which migrants will be dispersed to the regions. The ALP’s Chifley Research Centre published a report last September calling for 45 percent of all new immigrants to be confined to regional zones within three years.

There are already thousands of refugees in rural areas, mainly from Iraq or Afghanistan, who are deprived the right to permanent residency. They hold temporary protection visas (TPVs)—a category that the Howard government introduced in October 1999 as a punitive measure against asylum seekers who enter the country without permission.

Even after they have been found to be genuine refugees who have fled persecution, most are barred from ever applying for permanent status. Instead, they are kept in a perpetual state of limbo, having to reapply for a TPV every three years. They have no family reunion rights and cannot leave the country without the risk of losing their visas.

Of the more than 8,000 TPVs granted since 1999, 3,606 have reached their expiry date. A mere 27 refugees have been granted Permanent Protection Visas from the 604 cases considered, whereas 535 have been refused. By mid-2005, nearly all TPVs will have expired.

Many of the refugees holding TPVs are currently propping up the low-wage economy in the agricultural sector, even though they include highly qualified professional people. Some 1,000 or so live and work in Shepparton, Victoria, a fruit-growing centre. Agricultural businesses have become so dependent on them that rural-based National Party MPs have argued that they be allowed to stay, but not for humanitarian reasons.

“They’re a resource,” National Party MP John Forrest said. “Someone accused me of being mercenary, for looking at them as a resource. Whatever works, mate. I’m not a bleeding heart, but they are making an economic contribution out here where I live.

“I’d have around 2,000 of them ... this is a good news story, because out here where I am, we’ve got work, heaps of it. There’s work 12 months a year here. And it’s jobs Australians don’t want to do—I mean imagine picking stone fruit on a day like today when the temperature’s near 40—but they’re doing it. In March, we will need 10,000 people at least in the Sunraysia. That’s just round Mildura. Swan Hill is more dependent on stone fruit, so they probably need 3,000.”

The Howard government is not prepared to contemplate such a move, however, lest it be viewed as a retreat from its hard-line on refugees. Along with detaining asylum seekers in prison camps and using the navy to force back refugee boats, TPVs were introduced as a deterrent—to warn intending asylum seekers that any attempt to obtain refuge in Australia would be just as perilous as anything they were fleeing.

When it comes to the needy and the persecuted, the Howard government has erected an impenetrable wall around the continent. When it comes to the wealthy or the supply of labour to corporate Australia, however, no such restrictions apply.

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