Australian government shuts door on aged parents seeking to immigrate

Mike Head
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The Howard government yesterday vindictively carried out a threat to cut the annual immigration intake of aged parents from 2,500 to 500 for the year 1999-2000. The drastic reduction will mean great hardship for the 20,000 eligible applicants in the queue. All aged 60 or more, they will be forced to live for years without the support of their children and grandchildren living in Australia. Many will die before they are allowed entry.

Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock imposed the cut because the Senate last month disallowed regulations he had introduced on November 1 establishing a new "fast track" process for wealthier parents and their children to pay $16,000 in fees to jump to the head of the queue. The fees are part of a wider system of forcing immigrants to pay for the cost of welfare and medical services for two years after arrival, effectively stripping them of basic rights held by all other people.

In his standoff with the Senate, Ruddock consciously used the plight of the elderly applicants--many already waiting for five years or more--as a bargaining chip. He cynically warned that if his new rules were overturned, he would slash the quota to 500 and people would have to wait 30 years for entry. At the same time, his Department encouraged 2,500 applicants who could afford the fees to file "fast track" applications, hoping to set one group against the other.

The Labor Party Opposition, the Australian Democrats and right-wing "independent" Senator Brian Harradine yesterday variously denounced Ruddock's announcement as "heartless", "inhumane" and "malicious". The Democrats' spokesman Senator Andrew Bartlett said Ruddock was "attempting to blackmail the Senate using migrants' parents as political pawns".

These charges are all true, but also camouflage the fact that the Howard government is only extending a policy that began under the previous Labor governments of Hawke and Keating. Since 1989-90 successive governments have cut the parent intake from 10,900 to 2,500 and now to 500. The resulting anguish has hit hardest in working class and Asian families. Nearly half of the parents on waiting lists are Chinese, with most of the rest coming from other Asian and poor countries.

Moreover, the Howard government's policy, like that of its Labor predecessors, is driven by a definite agenda--that of catering exclusively to the requirements of business, while also pandering to the anti-immigrant and racist prejudices encouraged by the One Nation Party. Ruddock unveiled his decision in the context of further reinforcing the Labor government's shift of immigration policy from "family reunion" to "business" and "skilled" migration to meet specific employer needs.

Ruddock announced a minimal increase in the overall annual immigration quota--from 68,000 to 70,000. The additional places have been allocated to a "Special Eligibility Stream," largely consisting of people who have already resided in the country for 10 years on temporary visas and have proven their employment or business value. He also announced a new "Contingency Reserve" to enable businesses and state or territory governments to recruit and nominate up to 5,000 migrants with specific skills. One of the criteria for this scheme will be the willingness of the immigrants to live and work in remote locations.

Despite the government's claim to be supporting the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia out of concern for the Kosovar refugees, Ruddock said there would be no increase in Australia's humanitarian intake of 12,000.

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With almost 600,000 ethnic Albanians now in transit camps, the government will permit the entry of just 200 families who have relatives already living in Australia. The government's earlier, belated, offer to take 4,000 Kosovar refugees on a strictly temporary basis has been placed on hold because of the European Union's opposition to the airlift plan.

Certain business leaders and ruling Liberal Party politicians, notably Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, have criticised both the government and the Labor Party for not expanding the immigration program. Kennett has called for a 50 percent increase in the annual quota, with the aim of boosting the national population from about 20 million to 28 million by 2060.

To a certain extent, Kennett and others represent definite commercial interests that stand to benefit from higher immigration, particularly the housing and construction companies. With growing economic, social and political turmoil throughout Asia, these voices are also harking back to the post-war slogan of the Chifley Labor government: "Populate or perish". Their concern is that Australia's vast thinly-populated territory will increasingly attract the attention of millions of people whose lives are being devastated in neighbouring countries.

Both sides of this debate are preoccupied with how best to protect and expand the profits of corporate Australia, at the expense of, and by exploiting, the conditions of working people and the oppressed masses. The Howard government's callous decision on the elderly parents is an end-product of this nationalist and pro-capitalist program.

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