

# Australian government imposes harsh financial burdens on immigrant families

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The Liberal-National Coalition government has just made it harder for working class families to migrate to Australia, and effectively cut migration numbers at the same time.

The changes feed into the right-wing agitation against immigrants, making them scapegoats for deteriorating economic and social conditions. They also take to a new level the corporate model of migration, imposed by successive Coalition and Labor governments. This utilises a points-based system to prioritise readily-exploitable skilled employees for business, while restricting the number of poorer families.

As of April 1, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government made significant alterations to the "assurance of support scheme." This reactionary scheme denies migrants the right to bring family members to Australia unless they demonstrate to the government they can financially provide for them. The scheme is specifically designed to target poorer migrant families and is touted as a means to keep new migrants off welfare.

The amount of income that families must have to act as financial backers for their parents has been doubled. For example, previously a couple had to have a combined annual income of \$45,185 to vouch for their parents. That total is now \$115,475 a year. Similarly, a single person must now earn \$86,606, up from \$45,185.40. These income levels exclude millions of working class households.

Additionally, as of April 1, 2019, bank guarantee requirements for certain visas will be increased and expanded. These guarantees force migrant families to provide lump sum assurances to the government, which they must pay if a newly-arrived family member requires a payment from the government. For example, an assurer must guarantee \$15,000 if the family

member applies for a Contributory Parent or Aged Parent visa, up from \$10,000 previously.

Chelsea Liu, a migration agent, told the media her clients, predominately from Chinese backgrounds, were confused and worried. "Some of our clients, they are already thinking of withdrawing their application, or [getting] family members' or friends' help to support their parents as well," she said.

This attack on poor migrant families has paralleled moves by Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton to reduce the annual immigration intake. In February, Dutton publicly called for immigration levels to be cut. At the time, Treasurer Scott Morrison said that would cost the Australian economy up to \$5 billion over four years by slowing growth and reducing the pool of skilled workers for employers.

It was reported this month that in a private meeting Dutton proposed reducing the annual immigration intake, currently capped at 190,000, by 20,000. Both Turnbull and Morrison denied the media report, but it is now clear that such a cut is being implemented.

The *Australian* reported last week that with tighter "vetting" methods undertaken by the Department of Home Affairs, the intake for 2017-18 was expected to hit a 10-year low of between 160,000 and 170,000.

Senator Pauline Hanson's right-wing populist One Nation party has continued to demonise immigrants and refugees, especially Muslims and "Asians," and demand harsher cuts to immigration. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott has echoed this demand, reflecting worsening rifts inside the Coalition government.

Despite Turnbull's formal rejection of large-scale immigration reductions, the entire migration policy is geared toward denying entry to poor and working-class families, while prioritising wealthy business people and

workers with specialised skills required by big business.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) recently reported that changes made in July 2017 to the skilled independent subclass 189 visa may already have cut the migration intake. The new visa subclass is allocating places to New Zealand residents who have been in the country for five years or more.

The ABC revealed that 1,512 of these new visas had been issued since February, with 7,500 applications still being processed. With a 44,000-annual cap on skilled visas and between 60,000 to 80,000 eligible New Zealand residents in Australia, the changes may crowd out applicants from other countries.

New Zealanders living in Australia should have full civil, employment and political rights, as should all workers internationally, but the government is playing them off against other immigration applicants.

As part of this divisive policy, the government is also seeking to introduce university-level English language tests for citizenship, and give “special” treatment to white South African farmers supposedly facing persecution.

Greens immigration spokesman Senator Nick McKim said he was “deeply concerned” by the changes. “[Dutton] is seeking to cut immigration by stealth and to have more English-speaking, white and wealthy people migrate to Australia,” he told the *Guardian*.

The reality is Australia’s immigration policy has always been biased against poor working-class people, dating back to the racist White Australia policy, championed by the Labor Party and the trade unions, which existed for most of the 20th century.

Since the 1980s, one government after another has introduced anti-working class immigration cuts. During 1989–90, the Hawke Labor government specifically cut the parent intake from 10,900 to just 2,500 annually. In 1992, the Keating Labor government slashed migrant intakes and introduced vocational English language proficiency tests into the visa points system.

These policies were intensified by the Howard Coalition government from 1996 to 2007. It increased the required pass mark on English tests, imposed further limits on family immigration and introduced the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme for companies in regional or remote areas to recruit workers from overseas.

After 2007, the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments and the Abbott-Turnbull Coalition governments stepped-up these discriminatory policies, focusing on making residency and citizenship for poor families increasingly difficult. While the Greens voice “concern,” they had firsthand experience in overseeing anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies when they formed a de facto coalition with the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013.

The latest attacks on poor migrant families will leave thousands of people scrambling to get large sums of money together, while their elderly parents and relatives languish, often in isolation, denied the basic right to family reunion.

*The author also recommends:*

Australia proposes visas for white South Africans  
[6 April 2018]

The new “White Australia” Policy  
[20 January 1999]



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