

# Australian military to allow foreign nationals amid recruitment crisis

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The Labor government and the Defence Department announced yesterday that foreign nationals from countries in the US-led Five Eyes spying network will be able to join the Australian military. The policy is striking for the speed with which it is being implemented, and the link drawn to the need to prepare for major conflict.

Labor's Defence Minister Richard Marles declared: "The Australian Government has chosen to grow the Australian Defence Force because it is essential to meet the nation's security challenges through the next decade and beyond."

The defence announcement added: "Defence Personnel Minister Matt Keogh said people were Defence's most important capability and addressing shortfalls in recruitment required innovation."

Marles' remarks were a thinly veiled reference to the accelerating war drive against China. Government and defence documents have repeatedly stated that the military must be prepared for a major conflagration in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to insisting upon a need for advanced strike capabilities, they have repeatedly warned in worried tones of a recruitment crisis across all branches of the military.

From July, New Zealand citizens who are permanent residents of Australia will be able to apply to join the military. That announcement provoked a worried response from the New Zealand government, which expressed fears that its own recruitment pool would be depleted. Estimates place the number of New Zealand citizens in Australia at over 600,000, while New Zealand's population sits at around 5.1 million.

Then from next year, permanent residents from the UK, US and Canada will also be able to enlist. Australia together with New Zealand, the UK, US and Canada form the top-level intelligence sharing network of trusted American allies.

There are eligibility requirements, but they appear to be relatively minimal. In addition to having permanent residency status, the recruits must have been living continuously in Australia for a year. While some media reports suggested that those who had served in foreign militaries would not be eligible, the announcement only stipulates that they cannot have been in the armed forces of another country in the previous two years.

Concurrent with the opening up of the military to citizens of

the Five Eyes countries, Defence declared that it would streamline the Overseas Lateral Recruitment Scheme, which allows the military to fill capability shortfalls by recruiting skilled overseas applicants. It provided no details, however.

The announcement raises a host of questions.

In the first instance, the foreign national recruits are being encouraged to join the military and potentially die in its service, under conditions where they are denied many of the rights of citizenship. Even dual citizens, who have Australian and a foreign citizenship, are not permitted to stand for federal office under the country's anti-democratic 1901 Constitution.

Marles suggested, without definitively confirming, that the foreign recruits would be eligible for Australian citizenship within three months of enlistment. Under conditions of a nationalist crackdown on immigration, including attempts to blame foreigners for the housing and social crisis, there is a clear possibility that the prospect of citizenship will be used to coerce overseas nationals to join the military.

The enlistment of nationals from the Five Eyes countries also points to the ever-greater integration of the Australian military with the US and its close allies. There is a clear possibility that US, British and other military veterans will be brought into the Australian military through the permanent residency scheme.

Already, Australian naval personnel are embedded in the operations of US attack submarines. This is to provide them with the skills and expertise required as Australia acquires its own fleet of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact with the US and Britain. US troops, including some 2,500 marines, are effectively based in Australia, while the two countries are proceeding with a plan for a joint intelligence centre.

A controversy erupted yesterday, with the Liberal-National Coalition accusing the government of "bungling" the announcement of the permanent residency recruitment scheme. That allegation came after seemingly conflicting messages from government representatives about who would be eligible.

Defence Personnel Minister Keogh told the media that permanent residents from "any other countries" would potentially be eligible. Defence Minister Marles then said "the focus is on Five Eyes and the Pacific," even though the oppressed Pacific Island nations are not included in the scheme

as it was announced on Tuesday.

The Coalition hysterically warned that if Keogh's statement was accurate, Chinese permanent residents could enter the Australian military. This, they asserted, would be a massive security threat. Labor immediately dampened down those warnings, insisting that Chinese and other non-Five Eyes residents would not be eligible. Whatever the politicking involved, the exchanges underscored the fact that China is being treated as an official enemy, and its citizens demonised, while the military expansion hinges on greater collaboration with the US and its allies.

The comments, though, do indicate that the program will be broadened, likely to include citizens from the Pacific Island nations. The clear trajectory is towards a rapid boost to eligibility to address the recruitment crisis facing defence.

Labor's National Defence Strategy, released in April, stated that cumulatively all branches of the military were short 4,400 personnel on targets. With only 80 percent of recruitment targets met in 2021–22 and 2022–23, the shortfall will continue to grow. The permanent residency program so far announced is predicted to only result in 350 odd new recruits a year. The impetus for a further broadening is clear.

The strategy canvassed options to reverse the trend, including "widening eligibility criteria to enable more people to join the ADF [Australian Defence Force], including developing options to recruit, where appropriate, non-Australian citizens; streamlining the recruiting system to translate this wider pool of eligible applicants into an increase in the number of ADF recruits..."

The ADF has already loosened eligibility criteria, including by removing restrictions on people with certain medical conditions and by adopting a case-by-case approach to physical fitness. It has also announced cash bonuses and other incentives for new recruits.

Young people are increasingly bombarded on social media with glossy advertising. Slick videos cut between fighter jets flying over picturesque locations, and assertions that youth can acquire qualifications and set themselves up for a non-military career by joining the armed forces.

The lack of uptake, despite this push, is undoubtedly related to various demographic shifts. Urbanisation has accelerated, under conditions where for many years a substantial proportion of recruits were young people from regional and rural areas. Growing numbers of young people are studying at university and other tertiary institutions.

Almost half of Australian citizens have a parent born overseas, in an expression of the increasing internationalisation of the working class, which has weakened the objective basis for nationalist appeals. Civil organisations that once functioned as auxiliary arms of recruitment, such as the Churches, are in a deep-going crisis and have no mass influence among young people.

The defence strategy and broader official discussion over

recruitment and retention hint at some of these factors. They pointed to "cultural issues" in the military, including bullying and various forms of backwardness, as well as the high rates of veteran suicide and mental health crisis.

The fundamental issue, though, a widespread hostility to militarism and war, is never explicitly raised. It has been demonstrated in the mass weekly protests against the Gaza genocide, which have involved hundreds of thousands of people, many of them young. However conscious, there is a widespread sense that joining the military means risking involvement in disastrous wars.

In its own way, the latest scheme is a warning of the official determination to reverse this trend and to press ahead with the drive to war despite opposition. The permanent residency announcement is one element of the implementation of the defence strategy. Its other constituent parts are also being rolled out.

The strategy, following on from a Defence Strategic Review last year, outlines a new military doctrine. In place of a nominal defence of the Australian mainland and its approaches, the armed forces are to focus on "impactful projection" throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond, including through the acquisition of missiles and other strike capabilities across all branches of the military. This is clearly and explicitly directed against China, which American imperialism views as the chief threat to its global dominance.

Globally, the turn to war, including the US-NATO proxy conflict with Russia in Ukraine, is being accompanied by a discussion of recruitment. The Tory government has placed a policy of compulsory service for youths at the centre of its campaign in Britain's snap election.

Similar policies have not been openly canvassed by Australian Labor leaders, but they are undoubtedly under discussion in official circles. That was made clear by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* "Red Alert" series last year. Declaring that there would likely be a war with China within years, it called for a breaking of "taboos," including by stationing US nuclear weapons in northern Australia and by introducing mass conscription.

While the defence strategy was generally well received in national security circles in April, a comment in the *Australian Financial Review* bemoaned the fact that it did not explicitly canvass "national mobilisation" for war. That was a clear call for a turn to conscription.

Such a policy would provoke mass opposition, as it did in World War I and the neo-colonial onslaught against Vietnam.



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