

TO CAP IT ALL

The UK's new coalition government has plans to crackdown further on immigration. What does this mean for South Africans and Antipodeans? WORDS DANIEL LANDON

The crackdown on immigration from countries outside the EU has continued under the UK's new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, and it's not good news for Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans.

THE CHANGES

Under changes announced last month, from July 19 fewer visas will be issued to skilled workers coming from outside the EU. This encompasses the highly skilled migrant category (the Tier 1 general visa), and sponsorship by an employer (Tier 2).

The UK home secretary, Theresa May, says migration will be scaled back to the levels of the 1990s – to tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands – with a limit on migrants from outside Europe just one of the ways the Government intends to achieve this.

"It is necessary to attract the world's very best talent to come to the UK to drive strong economic growth," May says.

"But unlimited migration has placed unacceptable pressure on public services



Immigration was a key election issue for PM David Cameron (centre)



Don't delay any visa applications

and, worse, severely damaged public confidence in our immigration system.

"Our over-reliance on migrant labour has done nothing to help the millions of unemployed and low-skilled British citizens who deserve the Government's help to get back to work and improve skills."

THE PLAN

The Government has begun a consultation process, which will run until September, to decide how to cut immigration in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 categories. The changes will then come into effect on April 1, 2011.

Business lobby groups and several MPs have already expressed concern that restrictions on skilled workers could make it harder for British companies to recruit the staff they need.

In the meantime, the Government says there will be an interim cap on Tier 1 and Tier 2 visas,

to ensure the number of visas issued stayed below that of last year.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

According to Robyn Cory, 1st Contact's visa manager, the cap will be set at 24,100, a decrease of about 5 per cent on last year. Multinational staff transfers, and people extending existing Tier 1 (or highly skilled visas issued before the points-based system),

will not be affected at this stage.

It is not yet clear how the cap will be broken down among Tiers 1 and 2, Cory adds. In 2009, there were about 6885 Tier 1 and 17,000 Tier 2 visas issued.

From July 19, the number of points required for a Tier 1 visa will rise to 100, up from 95. The extra five points can come from earnings, age or education categories. A Bachelor's degree remains the minimum educational requirement for a Tier 1 visa.

Aside from the cap in Tier 2 numbers – by limiting the number of certificates of sponsorship that employers can issue – there are no changes to the requirements for Tier 2 visas and applications are being processed as normal.

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AND NOW FOR THE GOOD NEWS

Although there has been a reduction on the numbers of Tier 1 and Tier 2 visas, other visa categories are unaffected by the Government's changes.

Neither the Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme (working holidaymaker) category nor ancestry visa category have been mentioned by the Government in their immigration crackdown. 1st Contact's Robyn Cory says she did not expect any changes to these categories.

Meanwhile, changes to the process for gaining British citizenship proposed by the previous government – which included extending the qualifying period by two years – are still a possibility, but have yet to be introduced.

The Tier 4 (student) category is as yet unaffected, however, the Government says that this category will be the next to be examined.

BUT GET IN QUICK

The UK Government has made it plain that curbing migration to Britain is a priority. This means it is not going to get any easier, or cheaper, to obtain the right to live and work in the UK.

"Laws are consistently changing," Cory says. "If you qualify for a particular visa category, or for citizenship, apply as soon as you can."