

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Coalition opens way for foreign chefs, brickies

EWIN HANNAN THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 07, 2014 12:00AM



Sous chef Antonio Molina and head chef Daniel Shepherd at Crown casino in Melbourne. Picture: David Geraghty  
Source: News Corp Australia

**THOUSANDS of foreign chefs, bricklayers and tilers will no longer have to be sponsored by employers to obtain permanent visas, as the Abbott government eases skilled migration rules to address alleged labour shortages.**

Under changes backed by business groups, the three professions have been added to the Skilled Occupation List from July, meaning these workers will be able to apply for a permanent visa without requiring a sponsor.

Unions attacked the changes as unjustified given employers had recently said there were having “little difficulty” finding workers in the building industry.

Documents seen by The Weekend Australian also show the agency that recommended the changes acknowledged the inclusion of chefs could result in “exploitation of the training system for permanent residency”.

Trade and Investment Minister Andrew Robb said the tourism sector faced labour and skills shortages, with an additional 56,000 workers required by next year, including 26,000 skilled positions.

Assistant Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Michaelia Cash said the addition of the three professions would be welcomed in regional areas where there was increased demand for these jobs but “a decrease in apprenticeship completions”.

“As an island nation with a small population, a sustainable human capital strategy for Australia must be readily available to safeguard business from labour and skills shortages,” Senator Cash said.

“However, it would be simplistic to say that there is always an Australian willing and available to fill a particular position in various geographical locations within Australia, and it is the role of the skilled migration program to fill the gap.”

Under the general skilled migration program, professionals and other skilled migrants can enter Australia without being sponsored by an employer. While they have to nominate an occupation on the skilled occupation list, there is no obligation for them to work in that occupation.

The government has capped the program at 43,990 skilled visas next financial year. For each of the professions on the list, the number of positions available is capped at 6 per cent of the occupation’s workforce.

Senator Cash said the government had decided to set the cap for chefs at 3 per cent for an initial six months.

According to the ABS Labour Force survey, about 76,100 chefs, 23,360 bricklayers and 15,800 floor and wall tilers work in Australia.

Under the 3 per cent cap, up to 2283 overseas chefs could apply for a place in the program, rising to 4566 if the cap went to 6 per cent. For bricklayers, the maximum number would be 1401, and 948 for floor and wall tilers.

Senator Cash stressed the changes would not result in thousands of extra foreign workers coming to Australia. Given total places remained capped at the same level, the entry of additional chefs, bricklayers and tilers would result in less places being approved among the existing 188 occupations on the list.

United Voice, the union representing chefs, said it did not accept there was a “skills gap” among chefs.

“The industry has got no problems attracting staff in Australia, the industry has a problem keeping staff,” said the union’s acting national secretary, David O’Byrne. “It has high turnover, low wages and highly casualised labour.”

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union pointed to the latest national survey by the Master Builders, which found the degree of difficulty in finding employees and subcontractors decreased in the March quarter.

“All categories are close to record lows with little difficulty finding employees or subcontractors in the building industry,” the survey said.

Dave Noonan, the national secretary of the CFMEU’s construction division, said the policy change “again demonstrates that the Abbott government does not have the interests of working Australians at heart”.

Master Builders acting chief executive Richard Calver said the survey also showed “strong

growth in the residential construction sector”.

In recommending the changes, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency said the inclusion of chefs “presents risk in terms of exploitation of the training system for permanent residency purposes” as had occurred prior to 2010. It said the risk had been diminished by policy changes.

Mr Robb said the changes would ensure Australia could fill the workforce needs of the “next wave of tourism infrastructure”.

At Crown casino in Melbourne, Mark Holmes, general manger of food and beverage, said Crown gave priority to recruiting locally and had a program to train Australian chefs. “But we still currently have a number of local chef vacancies which have taken much longer than usual to fill,” Mr Holmes said.

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