

Aussies lose in visa cut

A TIME-honoured rite of passage for thousands of young Australians each year could be under threat after Britain yesterday announced a review of the working holiday visa.

Among his changes to the country's immigration and asylum policies, Home Secretary David Blunkett said Britain would expand the working holiday-makers scheme beyond "white Commonwealth" countries in an attempt to include the entire Commonwealth as well as European Union citizens.

Home Office Minister Angela Eagle said the Government would put a ceiling on the amount of successful applicants, which could drastically cut the number of Australians using the scheme.

"We will restrict it, but we don't have a number in mind at this precise moment," Mrs Eagle said.

"It's too early for me to say you needn't bother coming over to work if you're an Aussie. I think most places I eat and drink in London would be empty without Australian visitors working there."

Up to 100,000 Australians between 17 and 27 visit Britain under the scheme each year, mixing travel with jobs such as bar work and as nannying.

Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Canadians make up the vast majority of applicants granted the two-year working holidaymakers visa, which entitles them to work part time.

"We think the working holiday-makers scheme is a useful route into the country, but we want to make sure it's relevant to today's needs rather than reflect what went on in the past," Mrs Eagle said. "At the moment it tends to be settled into a white Commonwealth thing. We want to modernise and refocus the scheme."

She said further details would be announced within the next three months.

The changes may be bad news for backpackers, but offer prospects for skilled workers under the Highly Skilled Migrant Program.

"We are an open, trading economy and we need to ensure that we can recruit people we need to compete and prosper in the new global economy," Mr Blunkett told Parliament.

The Highly Skilled program allows Australians and other nationals who qualify under a points scheme to enter Britain to search for work without having arranged a job.

BRITS COPY MIGRANT RULES

BRITAIN yesterday adopted some of Australia's controversial immigration and asylum policies, including language tests and oaths of allegiance for migrants.

Migrants wanting to become British citizens must take compulsory English language tests and an exam on the ways of British life, including its culture, history and politics, Home Secretary David Blunkett said.

As in Australia, they must recite an oath to help them embrace British values, laws and customs.

"It is fundamentally important that people living in the UK on a permanent basis should be able to take a full and active role in our society . . . helping us secure integration with diversity," he said.