



Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Family Reunion Visas

Introduction

The Chinese Australian Services Society Limited, as an entity of the group commonly known as “CASS” in the community, welcomes the opportunity to lodge submission to the Senate inquiry into the family reunion visas. As a longstanding community group, CASS has been dedicated to assisting disadvantaged people of the local communities and advocating on their behalf. Our submission contains the views and concerns we received from our service users and people in our community, through observations and conclusions we made while delivering services to our clients, who are significantly affected by the family reunion visas.

About Our Group

CASS is the brand name of a group of registered charities providing a comprehensive range of social and welfare services to the multicultural communities, covering a wide geographical area including the Metropolitan Sydney and Wollongong. It includes principally its parent entity, the Chinese Australian Services Society Ltd (founded in 1981), and the subsidiary, CASS Care Ltd (established in 2002) which is also an endorsed public benevolent institution (PBI) by the Australian Taxation Office. CASS operates a 63-bed Residential Aged Care Facility in Campsie, Home Care Packages for over 600 frail seniors, Commonwealth Home Support Program for over 700 frail seniors, Community Visitors Scheme, Disability Services, Settlement and Health Services, Child Care Services, and Vocation and Training Services, etc. At present, more than 3,500 families access CASS services and activities every week.

Our Response to the Family Reunion Visas

We are glad that the Greens is seeking consultations on the current family reunion visas program. We understand that the migration program aims to support and maximise the long term economic and social benefits for Australia, however, it is important to take into account of the needs of some fellow Australians.

In contributing to the consultation, we would like to raise the following issues and recommendations:

1. Waiting Times for the Granting of Relevant Visa

According to Australia's 2020-21 Migration Program Planning Levels, family stream visa category takes up 77,300 places. However, the parent and family visa categories only account for 5,000 places, less than 7% of the total family stream visas. This allocation is grossly insufficient to meet the demand of people who want to reunite with their parents and dependent relatives, seemingly only one family out of more than 6 families could be successful. In addition, as reported on many occasions, the number of applications lodged within the first three months of each application year for the available places often takes up all the available places already, resulting in applications lodged later would simply be just joining a long queue, encountering long waiting time for processing and granting of the relevant visa.

The Issues Paper of Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) pointed out that, the role of family reunion in settlement process is of great importance and can bring personal, social, community and economic benefits to Australia. With partners or parents sponsored by skilled migrants around, they often share family responsibility and household duties and assist to take care of children or grandchildren. With partners' and parents' assistance, a higher proportion of skill migrants can have time to work longer or engage in full-time jobs, enabling them to focus on doing their jobs well and making economic contributions to Australia.

Moreover, increasing the proportion of family stream visa, including parent visa, can prevent an outflow of talents, as a low level of partner/parent visa approval rate may force skill migrants to return to their country of origin to secure help for looking after their children or show filial piety to parents. This situation is especially crucial for migrants from China where most of them are the only child of the family due to China's previous one child policy and therefore the sole supporter of their parents. On the other hand, with the fast and great economic growth of many developing countries, the income gap between Australia and those countries is narrowing quickly,

leading to the decrease of incentives for migration. Family reunion visa will become one of the major factors impacting on the global competitiveness of Australia.

Through reuniting with family in Australia, migrants will expend their income in local economy rather than remitting their income overseas to support family members there, which is detrimental to the Australian economy.

Thus, it is suggested that the proportion of family stream visa, especially the parent and family visa be increased.

2. Commitments from Applicant and Sponsor for the Granting of Relevant Visas

When applying for a visa, usually their family members need to provide an assurance of support (AOS) to ensure the applicant and the sponsor can pay back the government if the applicant needs any payment from Centrelink. The AOS can last for 1,2,4 or 10 years depending on the type of visa an applicant is applying. Parent visa, especially contributory parent visa, applicants need to provide a 10-year guarantee. However, the current AOS has a number of issues/inadequacies that can hardly provide any support to vulnerable migrants if they are experiencing domestic violence, financial crisis, etc. CASS settlement services workers have come across migrants of non-English background, especially seniors who relied financially on their children, experiencing physical/psychological/financial abuse from their intimate family members. The AOS impedes the victims to leave home and seek help from the system with the concern of lacking financial support.

To minimise the government's financial burden of providing payments to new migrants, policy in securing the responsibility of sponsor during AOS period should be enhanced. A sponsor should show how they would financially support the applicant in Australia with detailed care/financial support plan including a supplement plan indicating how they would ensure the applicant's livelihood under circumstances such as unexpected change in the sponsor's household or financial condition. In addition, the relevant legislation should be tightened to

enforce an agreement between the government authority and the sponsor specifying the sponsor's legal liability. Breaching the commitment by a sponsor is a criminal offence and would lead to penalties unless there are unusual circumstance.

3. Limitations on Eligibility and Cost to Apply for Relevant Visas

Comparing with other countries, such as United Kingdom and Canada, the cost of applying for relevant family visa by Australia is extremely high. The long processing time, currently more than 30 years for parent visa and up to 50 years for their dependent relatives, and high application fees for family visa, are impacting adversely upon the mental health and wellbeing of applicants and their family members in Australia who desired to reunite with family and partners. To shorten the processing time without adding financial burden to Australia, the government could consider introducing measures for those applicants that are willing to extend the waiting period for Centrelink payments in exchange for a shorter processing time.

CASS suggests that more alternatives be offered for family visa applicants who have various needs. For migrants' parents, the current range of visa options is limited and costly. Parents can only stay for a maximum of 12 months in an 18-month period with a tourist visa of 3 or 5 years at a cost of approximately \$5,000 to \$10,000 at present. A more flexible visa options with lower cost should be offered while applicants are waiting for family reunion visa to be processed.

Conclusion

We wish to reiterate our welcome for the opportunity to provide feedback to the consultation on the Senate inquiry into family reunion visas. We would appreciate if the Australian Greens taking into account the viewpoints and concerns expressed in this submission. We are happy to have further discussion to elaborate on our viewpoints and concerns. Also, we consent to this submission being made public.