



Speech by

**Lindy Nelson-Carr**

**MEMBER FOR MUNDINGBURRA**

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## **SKILLED INDEPENDENT REGIONAL VISAS**

**Ms NELSON-CARR** (Mundingburra—ALP) (11.45 a.m.): I applaud the Beattie government's participation in the skilled independent regional visa, or SIR visa, process. Without state government sponsorship, Queensland regions would be unable to avail themselves of new arrangements whereby the federal government is allowing visas for up to 4,000 additional skilled migrants per year, providing they live and work in regional Australia. I understand that Queensland's share will be between 500 and 600 SIR visas annually. At least 40 local government authorities, including the Townsville City Council, have indicated to the lead Queensland agency for skilled migration, the Department of State Development and Innovation, a desire to attract skilled migrants to their areas. Up to last Friday, the department's web site had received approximately 11,000 hits about the visa. Around 900 inquiries have so far been responded to.

Initially, from 1 July this year, only people from overseas who were already in Australia, such as students, were able to be considered for the visa, but since the beginning of this month the scope has broadened and applications are now being invited from offshore. I should add that overseas students studying at regional universities, James Cook University, for example, who wish to apply for a SIR visa will receive points towards their visa application approval.

Importantly for Townsville residents and residents of regional centres elsewhere, skilled workers will not be considered for an independent regional visa unless they have a trade or profession for which skills shortages already exist. In other words, they will not be taking jobs away from local people but they will be filling important gaps where their skills are desperately needed. To gain a normal permanent residency visa, applicants must score 120 points. The SIR visa requires 110 points and, apparently, those 10 points can make a very big difference. Applicants meeting SIR visa eligibility will at first be granted a provisional visa for three years on condition that they live and remain in a regional location. There is also allowance for a possible one-year extension. The visa does not provide immediate permanent residency, but it comes with the opportunity to apply for permanent residency once the residential location obligations have been fulfilled.

Last April, when the expanded intake was announced, I wrote to Premier Peter Beattie to say that Townsville would be ideally placed to figure in this program. Townsville has a proven record of welcoming migrants from many countries, and the new arrivals would quickly become part of the community, to the benefit of themselves and of course the region as a whole. I cite as an example the surge in new house and apartment construction in Townsville, which shows little sign of abating and which has caused an enormous shortage of skilled tradespeople. Even getting specialised jobs done around established houses can involve lengthy delays. Migrants skilled in trades such as carpentry, electrical and plumbing would help to ease this situation. There are many other trades and professions in which skilled people are at a premium in Townsville and other regional locations.

As I have indicated, this will not mean fewer opportunities for young Australian school leavers or for older Australians. In fact, research has shown that migration does not cause higher unemployment and that skilled migrants do in fact create work for lower skilled Australians. Whether the brain drain of Australians is as serious as is often made out to be or not, skilled migrants would at the very least help to

compensate for Australians who do depart our shores. At the same time, other lines of research also suggest that migration can help lessen the effects of an ageing population.

The *Australian* newspaper on 18 March carried a story about a new study called Two Australians by author and demographer Bob Birrell, which highlights the failure of other migrant programs designed to divert new settlers away from cities to unpopulated regions. If that is the case, the SIR visa should help redress that problem.

Turning away from the SIR visa to migration of another kind, I refer to people from interstate who make Queensland their new home. Of course, they do not need a visa to do that. What I believe they do need, however, is more encouragement to head beyond the boundaries of Brisbane, the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast. Australian Bureau of Statistics' figures show that almost 40,000 people from interstate migrated to Queensland last year and that most of them chose to settle in the south-east corner. There is no doubt that people from Victoria and other southern climes love north Queensland for a holiday, but persuading more of them to settle permanently in Townsville or elsewhere in the north—even if they are considering shifting to the Sunshine State to live—is something again. It is really a matter of spreading the word. After all, Townsville was ranked eighth in Australia's top 25 boom towns in the May edition of *mybusiness* magazine. Of course, north Queenslanders do not want their cities and towns to become overcrowded and bound up in too much traffic, but the objective, as I see it, is to ensure that the north's great lifestyle is maintained while managing sustainable growth and covering skilled workplace shortages.

Recently a *Townsville Bulletin* front page story heralded that the population of Townsville and Thuringowa had hit 155,000. Asked to comment, Thuringowa Mayor, Les Tyrell, said that a shortage of tradesmen could see people from just about any trade move north, where they would have guaranteed work. In the short term, at least, I look forward to seeing more skilled migrants settling in north Queensland to help overcome the skills shortage. In the longer term, hopefully more people from interstate will also discover the joys of living in Townsville and other places in the region.