

Labour, Tory MPs to join Indian migrants' protest

Senior Labour and Conservative MPs will join a demonstration here Thursday to protest the recent changes to immigration rules that have adversely affected thousands of highly skilled migrants, many of them from India.

The demonstration will be held at the parliament square, Westminster. The demonstrators will then proceed to 10, Downing Street, to submit a memorandum to Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The demonstration will be joined by Damien Green, the Conservative spokesperson and shadow immigration minister, and Labour MPs such as Keith Vaz and Andrew Dismore, among other MPs and peers.

Nearly 49,000 migrants have been affected by the changes to the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme (HSMP). The changes include setting new criteria for working in Britain that will in effect mean that many who are already in the country will no longer qualify to do so.

Migrants from India are the largest single country group who have been allowed into Britain under the programme. According to Amit Kapadia, coordinator of the demonstration, 85 percent of migrants under the programme come from Asia.

The new rules were introduced without warning Nov 7. They require HSMP migrants to re-qualify introducing new tests including earnings requirements and academic qualifications. The HSMP migrants are the third group to be adversely affected by changes to immigration rules announced in 2006, the other two groups being doctors from India and other non-European Union countries, and migrants with Work Permits.

For the doctors, permit-free training was abolished, making it difficult to secure employment in the National Health Service. Doctors of Indian origin have challenged the changes in a judicial review. A judgement is expected later this month.

For the migrants with Work Permits, the qualifying period for settlement in Britain was changed from four years to five years, which affected the family, housing, education and plans of thousands of people in jeopardy. This change is expected to be admitted for judicial review, depending on the judgment in the doctors' case.

The doctors and migrants have protested the changes on the grounds that they were put into effect retrospectively, without consultation, and amounted to changing the rules from the time the migrants had first entered Britain.

Damian Green said: 'Everyone agrees that Britain benefits from highly-skilled migrants. The government's decision to change the rules so that people who are already here and want to stay are now disqualified is both unfair and wrong-headed.'

'It is unfair because the people involved have made a commitment to this country which is being flung back in their faces. It is wrong-headed because it sends a signal to highly-skilled people around the world that Britain is an unreliable place to work.'

'Conservatives want an immigration policy which is tough and thoughtful. The current government are talking tough but acting stupidly. It has failed to control our borders, so it is lashing out at precisely the people who benefit our economy. This is another in the growing list of disasters from John Reid's Home Office.'

So far, sustained lobbying by migrants with their MPs and petitions to the Home Office has not led to reversal of the changes. The highly skilled migrants from India have also appealed to the Indian government to intervene.

Kapadia, organiser of the Thursday demonstration, said: 'The whole issue with these new rules is that people are being asked to re-qualify for their visa extension through a points based system (PBS) rather than initial promise of extension on economic activity alone.'

'This new PBS expects us to gain more points on higher salaries and on younger age. Both of them are very difficult as higher salaries in UK are not possible due to the duration of visa which we are issued (1, 2, 3 years) due to which we are considered for contract or temporary jobs by employers and employment agencies and not for jobs of permanent nature wherein higher salaries are possible.'

The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA) has called upon Liam Byrne, immigration minister, to suspend the changes, but this has been rejected. The ILPA has said that it is 'unfair and unreasonable' to change the rules retrospectively, which would force talented and skilled individuals to leave Britain.

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