

# Visa plan to grow bush

## Migrants may be forced to regional areas under a proposal to fight skills shortages

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IN CANBERRA

ALMOST half of Australia's new migrants could be forced to settle in regional areas each year under a radical plan to ease the nation's skills shortage.

Struggling to find short-term solutions for the nation's skills crisis, the Rudd Government looks set to use migrants to help dying regional centres and townships unable to find workers.

About 140,000 migrants are granted entry into Australia each year.

A well-placed source told *The Courier-Mail* Labor discussed the plans in Opposition, after a policy document was prepared for Labor's Chifley Research Centre in 2003.

The Rudd Government is now designing its migration intake for 2009-10, which is set to go to Cabinet in April.

Among the measures that could be considered by Immigration Minister Chris Evans is a proposal to force at

least 45 per cent of migrants to reside in areas with a population below 350,000.

The Chifley Research Centre policy document warns that local government areas with large population declines include Mt Isa, in northwest Queensland, Whyalla in South Australia, and Ashburton and Coolgardie in Western Australia. It said current schemes to balance migrant distribution had failed.

"This effect may also be exacerbated by the lack of controls under some of the schemes, whereby migrants selected under them are not obliged to settle in the designated area," the report said.

A spokesman for Senator Evans yesterday refused to say whether the Government was considering the reforms. But in a senate estimates committee on immigration this month, Senator Evans said the Government was "keen to look at ways of encouraging people to move to regional areas where there are employment opportunities and demand for labour".

He said there was a major structural problem with labour supplies and with low levels of unemployment there was a huge demand for labour in particular sectors of the economy

"Part of the challenge for this Government, as with the previous government, is to try to work out ways to attract labour to the particular areas in need and what levers one can pull to try to do that," Senator Evans said.

"As you know, there has been a reaction from some in the Sydney area who are saying that there ought to be some sort of active discouragement of people moving to just the big cities and that we have got to find ways of moving them to areas in need."

Currently, some migrants are encouraged to live in regional areas under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, which aims to help regional employers nominate skilled migrants to fill full-time vacancies for at least two years.