

Pacific paternalism keeping families apart

by Stephen Howes

26 October 2023



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In July of this year, the Australian government introduced a new aged care visa. The [Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement](#) (ACLA) allows the employment of aged care workers on temporary visas, with the prospect of a pathway to permanency. To qualify, workers have to be offered a salary of at least \$51,222. This is well below the minimum required for a normal temporary work visa (the Temporary Skills Shortage visa), which has recently been increased to \$70,000. Despite this being not much above the minimum wage, aged care worker migrants are (of course) allowed to bring their families with them.

Now consider the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM). PALM allows workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste to work in Australia for up to four years. Based on a recent ANU-World Bank survey of 537 long-term PALM workers (those here for more than a year), the average salary of these workers is around \$61,000, well above the ACLA minimum of \$51,222.

Pacific workers, however, though earning significantly more on average than the aged care minimum, are denied the right to bring their family with them.

The Labor government went to the federal election with a promise to [end the mandatory separation](#) of families from PALM workers. (This was only for long-term PALM workers who are here for at least a year, which seems reasonable, as short-term or seasonal workers are only in-country for a few months, too short a time to relocate a family for.) This was a welcome and overdue reform. However, though it was originally meant to be implemented from January 2023, progress has been slow.

First of all, it was decided that a pilot had to be undertaken. Then it was decided that not even a pilot could be undertaken without legislation put in place to [give PALM workers extra benefits](#). For example, PALM workers will be given Medicare. They will also get the childcare subsidy, and family tax benefits. None of these benefits is available to the new aged care visa holders or other temporary workers. Legislative reform takes time, and the new legislation was only put before parliament last

month. Because the legislation also covers benefits for those on the new (and completely separate) Pacific Engagement Visa, which the Opposition is against, it is possible that this legislation will get stuck in the Senate.

The **start date for the family accompaniment pilot** was meant to be January 2023, then January 2024, and has **now been further delayed**.

There is a clear inconsistency here. If PALM workers earn more than the aged care visa minimum, and aged care visa workers are allowed to bring their families, then PALM workers should be. Or, at the very least, all PALM workers earning more than the aged care minimum should be able to bring their families with them.

The current situation is not only inconsistent, but it is paternalistic towards Pacific workers and their partners. Workers on the aged care visa and their families are allowed to take the risks involved with the visa holder being on a low-income wage. In most cases, where there is a family, there will be a partner and the partner will also work. But in some cases, there could be children but no partner, or perhaps the partner can't find a job. \$51,000 is not a lot of money for a family to survive on without welfare benefits.

In effect, we are saying that it is alright for an aged care worker to take the risk of bringing their family to Australia on a \$51,000 salary, but not for a Pacific worker on an average \$62,000 salary. All of a sudden, when it is a Pacific worker, we become worried about their family, and about the risk that they will struggle on a single, relatively low income. It makes no sense at all.

Perhaps this is the price you pay for having a scheme like PALM limited to a group of countries. Governments get more involved, and governments are notoriously risk averse. **Pacific governments are also worried** about the risks associated with family accompaniment.

But this is an explanation for the current inconsistency, not a justification. Australia should not, where practical, be mandating family separation as a condition of entry for a work visa. We don't do it for any other categories of migrant workers, and we shouldn't do it for Pacific workers. By all means, change the legislation to give Pacific workers and their families more benefits. (For consistency, this should be done for other low-income migrants as well.) But don't make that a condition for ending a policy of mandatory work-related, migrant family separation. Treat Pacific workers as adults. Inform them and their families of the costs they will face in Australia, and let them decide. If a pilot is needed, commence it immediately.

Policy consistency is preferable to Pacific paternalism any day.

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