



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Petitions Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Petihana

54th Parliament
July 2026

Petition of Bharat Bhushan: Reinstate residence pathways for workers affected by COVID-19 border closures

Presented to the House of Representatives
by Greg O'Connor, Chairperson

Contents

Recommendation.....	3
Request for residence pathways	3
Background.....	3
Previous parliamentary consideration	3
Comments from the petitioner	4
Comments from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.....	4
Immigration during the COVID-19 pandemic	4
Our response to the petition	5
Appendix.....	6

Petition of Bharat Bhushan

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Bharat Bhushan—Reinstate residence pathways for workers affected by COVID-19 border closures—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request for residence pathways

This petition was signed by 3,317 people. It was presented to the House by Ricardo Menéndez March on 24 June 2025, and requests:

That the House of Representatives reinstate a pathway to residence for Bharat Bhushan and long-term temporary workers who were unable to re-enter New Zealand during COVID-19 border closures.

Background

On 19 March 2020, the Government effectively closed New Zealand's borders to all but New Zealand citizens and residents to help limit the spread of COVID-19. The border closure, with limited exemptions, remained in place for two years.

The 2021 Resident Visa was a one-off visa designed for onshore migrants affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and border closures. The visa was open for applications between 1 December 2021 and 31 July 2022.¹ Applications were limited to people who were in New Zealand on an eligible visa on 29 September 2021.

Previous parliamentary consideration

The Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament reported on 26 petitions related to immigration policies in the context of COVID-19.² Also, during the 53rd Parliament, the House held a special debate on 13 May 2021 on the committee's interim report about immigration and border policies.³

In addition, the Education and Workforce Committee of the 53rd Parliament reported on a further six petitions concerning the 2021 Resident Visa.⁴

We note that the reports of the Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament and the Education and Workforce Committee of the 53rd Parliament did not make any recommendations to the Government.

¹ Further information about the 2021 Resident Visa is available on [the Immigration New Zealand website](#).

² The interim and final reports of the Petitions Committee of the 53rd Parliament on petitions related to COVID-19 immigration and border policies are available on [the Parliament website](#).

³ The Hansard transcript of the [special debate](#) on the interim report of the Petitions Committee: Immigration and border policies is available on the Parliament website.

⁴ The report of the Education and Workforce Committee of the 53rd Parliament on 2021 Resident Visa petitions is available on [the Parliament website](#).

Comments from the petitioner

Bharat Bhushan was offshore visiting his critically ill mother at the time the New Zealand borders closed. Mr Bhushan and his wife had lived and worked in New Zealand for years. They held valid visas and intended to return to New Zealand shortly after their visit. However, the petitioner said that he and his wife were “locked out indefinitely” by the swift onset of COVID-19 and the Government’s decision to close the borders. Although Mr Bhushan’s employer initially assured him of a job on return to New Zealand, due to the prolonged border closure the petitioner was eventually made redundant.

Mr Bhushan considers that he and his wife were unfairly excluded from applying for the 2021 Resident Visa. He submits that they met three of the eligibility criteria for the 2021 Resident Visa but were disqualified solely because they were outside the country at the relevant time. He said they felt penalised, not because of a lack of contribution to this country or merit, but for being on the wrong side of a closed border.

In the petitioner’s view, the refusal to allow re-entry has produced an inequitable outcome for individuals who otherwise satisfied visa requirements and made significant contributions to New Zealand. He said this resulted in loss of employment and income, and exclusion from government support packages.

When the borders reopened, Mr Bhushan said many of those who were overseas during the pandemic hoped that their prior contributions would be recognised. However, he said they were instead asked to apply for new visas. He said he was treated as a new applicant, with no recognition of his study or prior work experience in New Zealand, and he was subject to revised qualification standards.

Mr Bhushan is seeking a reassessment of these policies, including recognition of prior contributions and the establishment of a dedicated pathway for those stranded offshore during the pandemic.

Comments from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

We received a submission from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), which is responsible for immigration policy. Immigration New Zealand (INZ), which manages and enforces border and immigration requirements, sits within MBIE.

Immigration during the COVID-19 pandemic

The ministry confirmed that temporary visa holders who were offshore when the borders closed in March 2020 were unable to re-enter New Zealand at that time. There were some limited exceptions for certain groups, such as essential (later termed critical) workers. The ministry estimated that approximately 10,000 temporary visa holders were outside New Zealand by August 2020.

The 2021 Resident Visa offered a one-off residence pathway for migrants and their families who were already in New Zealand. The ministry said the approach supported the Government’s objective of retaining the then-current workforce, while continuing to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering the country. It said that temporary visa holders who were

offshore were excluded from the residence pathway as they were not considered part of the existing workforce and could not provide the same level of certainty for employers.

The ministry acknowledged that the exclusion of offshore visa holders from the 2021 Resident Visa was difficult for some migrant workers. It said immigration settings are regularly reviewed to ensure that they meet the Government's objectives, and it is not uncommon for policy to change.

The ministry said that current residence policies provide opportunities for skilled migrants to settle in New Zealand. It said that people who were ineligible for the 2021 Resident Visa can apply through several skilled residence pathways if they have returned to New Zealand and may have their pre-COVID work experience and qualifications recognised where they meet eligibility criteria. It noted that options will include two new pathways from August 2026, for experienced migrants and those in trades and technician roles.

Our response to the petition

We note Mr Bhushan's concerns about the changes to immigration policies that affected his visa status during New Zealand's border closures. The issues raised by the petitioner were well examined by the Petitions Committee and Education and Workforce Committee of the 53rd Parliament.

Immigration New Zealand has no discretion to accept a residence application under a category that has closed. However, the Immigration Act 2009 provides discretionary powers to the Minister of Immigration, or their delegate, to grant visas in special cases.

We think it is more appropriate for individual cases of this kind to be taken to local members of Parliament for assistance in requesting a special direction from the Minister, rather than for retrospective global changes to be made to immigration policy developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We thank Mr Bhushan for his petition and wish him well.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was signed by 3,317 people on the Parliament website. It was presented to the House by Ricardo Menéndez March on 24 June 2025 and referred to us that day. We met between 31 July 2025 and 23 July 2026 to consider it. We received written submissions from the petitioner and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

Committee members

Greg O'Connor (Chairperson)
Hon Andrew Bayly (from 1 July 2026)
Kahurangi Carter (until 11 February 2026)
Greg Fleming
Paulo Garcia (until 1 July 2026)
Celia Wade-Brown (from 11 February 2026)

Related resources

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on [the Parliament website](#).