

Dear Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern,

I am an immigrant and for the last 20 years I have been proud to call New Zealand home.

My husband, Sid Sahrawat, and I run three restaurants and employ more than 60 staff. Fifty percent of our workforce is made up of residents and citizens. The other 50% are migrants on visas.

The last time I spoke about immigration was when the blue team was in power. I was met with tremendous support from within the hospitality industry but also a lot of negativity. "People like you are the reason we can't buy a house in Auckland" was a comment in an email that stuck with me the most. Two elections later, even with a new government that purports to be a kinder, we are facing the very same issue. The added problem this time around is it is a lot worse.

A [recent survey](#) from the Restaurant Association of New Zealand showed 92% of hospitality business owners were finding it extremely difficult to recruit for senior roles and the same applied to the 73% recruiting for entry-level roles. This week I have spoken to hospo business owners in Auckland, who like us, are struggling to find staff. Our industry is now forced to reduce hours or close parts of our business to cope with staff shortages.

It's almost impossible to find replacements in this climate and we are plugging the holes where we can. Chefs washing dishes as well as doing the job of two chefs is not ideal or sustainable. Our working mums in the business are job-sharing to keep up and right now our kids are coming second to the demands at work.

This is not sustainable, but it's the reality of life at the coalface and I know many other business owners are feeling the same, if not worse. No amount of remuneration will help fix the stress our teams are feeling. Extra pay for extra hours in a peak season is one thing, but to sustain that pace month after month results in stress, burnout and risk to mental health.

The situation is set to get worse when staff on working holiday visas face visa expiry in July. Immigration New Zealand has advised them that they have no information of any further extensions. These staff are now planning to return to Europe, where they are from.

We have advertised for months, giving New Zealand citizens and residents preference for every role. We have had no luck. People do not show up for interviews, and apprentices are unable to start work until training is completed. Even the temp agencies have no candidates. No one is available to fill the roles even on a short-term basis.

On Monday, we were hopeful that minister Kris Faafoi would announce an extension to the existing visas of people already in New Zealand.

Oh my foolish optimism. Minister Faafoi was sick and instead minister Stuart Nash made the disturbing announcement that immigration would be reset as never before, and would now be strongly targeted towards the highly skilled, highly paid and wealthy investors.

Did I hear that right? Out of the mouths of a Labour government? Your government... one that was for the people? One that said "Let's keep moving" and "be kind" and talks of a team of five million. Well, we feel very lonely right now.

How did you get it so wrong?

Nash said that businesses should invest capital in machinery and upskilling Kiwis instead of relying on low-skilled workers. Just what does that mean for a public-facing, hands-on industry like ours?

Hospitality is defined by its people – people cooking delicious food and providing great service. Recipes are passed down through families, between chefs, the culture is shared, it is not taught to robots. Do you want us to replace people in our industry with robots? I remember you dining at Cassia. I was there to greet you; our team was there to unobtrusively meet

your needs. Would you have preferred to have an app take your order and a robot cater for your dietary requirements?

Eating out is a social experience where you connect and celebrate good food with other people. Covid-19 showed us how much people missed social connections. We reopened Cassia for takeaways in level three after the first lockdown and the demand was crazy. We loved seeing customers dressed up for a night in, excited to eat food that was not cooked by them.

Your government wants to define workers who are not paid large salaries as low-skilled. Apparently, it's because some employers exploit lower-paid staff. Perhaps it is time the government looked at itself as an employer.

Your government is happy to suggest pay freezes for hardworking people earning \$60-\$100,000, like teachers and nurses, but private sector employers must comply with all the policy the government sets, because what choice do employers have in the private sector?

Sure, we would love to pay more to all our staff but, unlike the government, which is OK with having a deficit on the books, we would trade ourselves right out of business.

Perhaps you would like New Zealand hospitality businesses to make dining out exclusive and inaccessible, reserved only for the high rollers you're planning to bring in on the new immigration policy you're proposing.

Skills can be taught but we need people who are willing to learn, willing to show up and do the mahi. A lot of us in the industry do that – we engage with training colleges and institutes, take in apprentices. But the demand for staff outstrips the supply. It will take years of work alongside the government to entice workers back into the industry, so it eventually becomes self-reliant. And now we face the added challenge of Australia luring talented hospitality staff as they themselves face staff shortages.

I can assure you, Prime Minister, Sid and I are grateful to be New Zealand citizens, to be business operators despite the anguish of the past year, and

especially considering what is happening in hospitality around the world. We are grateful that we have come through Covid relatively unscathed.

Your government can pat itself on its back for that.

You have done a great job of promoting New Zealand to the world. As each travel bubble opens, tourists from around the world will want to return to the haven that is New Zealand. Tourism was one of our biggest earners. We want those tourists back and to experience our hospitality, our Kiwi manaakitanga.

But who will be there to provide that experience when now, having survived Covid, you are cutting off our lifeblood?

Immigrants have a place in our communities and in our businesses.

When productivity is impacted because we start shutting our doors, when we cut out hours it means job losses, it means lesser revenue generated, it means lesser taxes in the government coffers to help pay for healthcare, infrastructure and housing. If a restaurant closes it impacts not just one business but its suppliers who in turn are helping the farmers and producers so the whole chain is impacted.

Will your caring government come to the table and engage with us business owners, and actually listen to us? Work with us to solve the immediate issues with staffing by keeping our existing workforce here and reuniting some families separated because of Covid-19. Then let us work to create a plan for future sustainability when it comes to immigration and the hospitality sector. Let us engage more New Zealanders to train in the hospitality sector. Now doesn't that sound like a kinder plan?

Yours sincerely,

Chand Sahrawat

Co-owner, Sidart, Cassia and Sid at The French Café