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Abode reform in Wellington to benefit HK

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in Wellington
and agencies

NEW Zealand's Labour Government, accused of failing to clamp down on alleged corruption among immigration consultants, announced reforms yesterday to attract the brightest people to the country.

Hongkong, whose emigrants have been at the centre of the country's immigration row, is certain to benefit greatly from the thousands of New Zealand passports that will be on offer.

Immigration Minister, Ms Annette King, said she was looking for an annual immigration quota that would bring in a net gain of 10,000 immigrants above the estimated 70,000 New Zealanders who leave the country each year.

Ms King said a points system was being introduced which will be heavily weighted in favour of skilled workers who are young and appear to be able to settle easily.

The country's business migration scheme, which has a backlog of 2,000 applicants, and the "occupational priorities list" are being scrapped to make way for the new system.

Applicants will now have to apply from their own country. At present many

people arrive on visitors' visas and then apply for permanent status.

In order to process the huge influx of immigration applications, the Government will effectively privatise the system by employing consultants to vet applicants for them.

But, following reports of irregularities by private consultants involving Hongkong applicants, only carefully vetted and accredited agents will be employed by the immigration authorities.

Ms King confirmed that the government was investigating a number of consultants. "I'm rather alarmed by the quality of them," she said in a radio interview.

"Anybody, a cowboy or anybody, can be an immigration consultant. All they need to do is set themselves up and say they're an agent and tell people they can help them. You will find that the ones the Government deal with will have had a rigorous check done on them."

But the Government's announcement drew a bitter attack from Ms Ruth Richardson, finance spokeswoman for the opposition National Party.

Speaking under parliamentary privilege, she said: "If the Minister [Finance Minister, Mr David Caygill] had investigated the immigration fraud in Hongkong, as I did last week, he would

have found the issue was not the quality of the immigrants.

"There is corruption in Hongkong. The government knows it. It has investigated the agents named by the National Party and yet it will not prosecute."

Mr Aaron Natrass, the Hongkong-based immigration consultant who was last week named by opposition Members of Parliament in connection with alleged irregularities, yesterday said he would be applying for accreditation and would push to make sure he got it.

Mr Natrass has vigorously denied claims made against him.

He said yesterday's immigration announcement was "major news" for Hongkong people wishing to emigrate.

A spokesman for the New Zealand Commission said they were waiting for details about the size of the increase of Hongkong's immigration quota.

Meanwhile, the Auckland-based immigration consultant who supplied allegedly forged papers to a Hongkong family, leaving them in limbo, faces investigation by the authorities.

Immigration Service general-manager, Mr Peter Jones, said last night that the service had a "great interest" in the allegations against the consultant.