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Opposition parties call for Govt. to scrap term limits::

By Alex Wright

Government has been called on by the Opposition to scrap work permit term limits in a bid to boost the economy, international business and Bermudian jobs.

UBP Senator Michael Dunkley urged Government to come clean on its agenda behind the policy, remove the barriers to employers and employees and move forward for the sake of progressing the future of business on the Island.

Bermuda Democratic Alliance MP Shawn Crockwell also demanded the abolition of the six-year term limit for expatriate workers, claiming that it can scare off companies from doing business in Bermuda.

"We are certainly encouraged by the fact that there has been dialogue between the business community and Government, however this isn't the first time we have heard of this discussion, and unfortunately in the past the result has not been the abolition of the six-year term limit," he said.

"We think it doesn't assist Bermuda in attracting companies and retaining companies in Bermuda and what we do know is that it can be a deterrent because you don't want to be in a situation where we don't have security while you are here."

Mr. Dunkley said that Government's own figures showed that 90 percent of cases were approved, adding that term limits were still considered in many circles to be a major impediment to international business - one of the few sectors in the economy which was helping Bermuda to stay afloat at the moment.

He said the policy had had a negative impact on Bermuda and its reputation and had the effect of alienating those in international business who played such a key role in supporting the Island's economy.

"It is very clear that Government should abolish term limits - it is an empty policy," he said. "We have to ask why the policy has been under review for so long? I think Government has been silent for too long.

"It is disconcerting when you see our competitors such as Cayman coming out and saying they need to take a look at the issue.

"But from our perspective, there has been a lot of concern and discussion about it but nothing is taking place."

Mr. Dunkley said the UBP was all too aware of the need to protect Bermudians and their job opportunities, adding that there was still some misconception that work permit holders were taking jobs from Bermudians. In reality, he said, quite often guest workers actually created employment for Bermudians.

He said that in the boom times during the past 10 to 15 years work permit holders had also done many jobs that Bermudians didn't want to do and that a balance needed to be struck between making sure Bermudians came first and ensuring the economy remained vibrant.

"The business of work permits has to be handled correctly," he said. "There does not need to be a term limit policy just to protect jobs for Bermudians - instead there needs to be a sensible review of term limits on a case by case basis.

"Government, I believe, has dismissed any representation by their lack of action over the past months or years and we can't allow that to happen."

Mr. Dunkley said that Bermuda used to be a jurisdiction of choice for international business, but that had all changed due to the policy on work permit term limits and the fact that companies did not feel welcome or supported here any longer.

He said it was important now to focus on bringing in business to the Island in order to support the local economy and its workforce, while stemming the tide of outsourcing and jobs leaving Bermuda for good.

"I think certainly now in times where we have seen our economy shrink, we should be attracting new business, and to do that we require work permit holders but we will also create jobs for Bermudians in the process," he said.

Doug Soares, partner at Expertise Ltd., said that those dealing with hiring and retention issues in the international job market were experiencing the dampening effect that the present policy had on attracting and retaining the world's best human capital.

"To be clear, changing our present policy does not necessarily mean that we compromise the objective of that policy," he said. "In fact, any new policy should seek to be at least as effective as the current policy in terms of its effectiveness as an inhibitor of long term residency."
