



Humane treatment of asylum seekers this election

August 2010

'I was born in a dangerous land. I was persecuted for who I am and what I believe. I was tortured in an interrogation room. I was dumped in the ocean. I was locked up in detention.

I am an asylum seeker, every asylum seeker, and this is my story. I am not a 'queue jumper'. I am not an 'illegal arrival'. I am not a 'political issue'.

I am a human being. Please treat me like one.'

'I am every asylum seeker' an article by Greg Foyster based on letters from asylum seekers in detention.

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Asylum seekers have once again become a political football in the lead up to the Federal election with both the Labor and Coalition parties vowing to take a stronger stance on border protection and people smuggling. With the Labor party proposing a new regional processing centre and the Coalition intending a return to the inhumane policies of the Howard era now is the time to voice your support for the wellbeing of asylum seekers and our international responsibilities to them.

The intensification of conflicts around the world in recent years has led to 15.2 million refugees and 826,000 asylum seekers (those waiting for their refugee claim to be processed) globally. Therefore, it is vital Australia honours our obligations as a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention and related treaties to treat humanely those who arrive in Australia seeking our asylum.

The Coalition Party's proposed policy directions include reinstating several of the negative past policies that many individuals and organisations fought for so long to change. These include:

- Bringing back Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). TPVs left individuals and families in a state of uncertainty for years at a time which often resulted in psychological and emotional damage.
- Restoration of 'the 45 day rule' which prohibited work rights and access to Medicare for anyone who submitted their claim for asylum after 45 days of arriving in Australia.
- 'Turning back the boats'. The Opposition leader, Tony Abbott repeatedly claimed that if the Coalition were to win the election they would return boats carrying asylum seekers to their point of departure or an alternative third country destination. He has recently confessed that turning back the boats is probably not a feasible course of action but changes have not been officially made in Coalition policy.

Rev Alistair Macrae, President of the Uniting Church in Australia recently stated that "The Opposition utterly fails to recognise the dire situations of persecution and conflict that cause people to flee. These backwards policies are callous and punitive and will inflict further harm on already traumatised people." Uniting Church members and agencies were strongly involved in the movement against these cruel policies that stood against our integral Christian belief in sharing God's love and hospitality with all of humanity and creation, especially the stranger and those in need.

Recently Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced Labor's intentions to pursue the creation of a regional processing centre with East Timor (one of the poorest countries in our region) earmarked as a potential host. One of the first moves the Labor Government made when it took power in 2007 was to abolish the 'Pacific Solution' detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. At the time Labor claimed that they were a waste of tax payer money and tarnished Australia's international human rights reputation.

Despite the Prime Minister's statement, that she was in conversation with the Government of East Timor on the regional processing centre, the Parliament of East Timor recently voted against hosting the centre. A regional approach to asylum seekers will not be beneficial if it is not created in partnership with our neighbours and repeats the damaging mistakes of the Pacific Solution.

In a recent speech at the Lowy Institute, the Prime Minister stated, "Last year, Australia received 0.6 per cent of the world's asylum seekers." and "Refugees, including those referred for resettlement by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, make up less than 8 per cent of migrants accepted in Australia." With the enormous amount of people displaced and needing refuge worldwide it is clear that our annual humanitarian intake (made up of onshore asylum seekers as well as refugees resettled through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) of 13,750 does not go far enough. A progressive increase to 20,000 per year is one way Australia can work towards doing our fair share in providing protection for those in need globally.

What you can do

The election on the 21 August is fast approaching. Write a respectful letter now to:

Senator the Hon Chris Evans MP

Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
minister@immi.gov.au

Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr Scott Morrison MP

Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
House of Representatives
PO Box 6022
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
scott.morrison.mp@aph.gov.au

Salutation: Dear Shadow Minister

Important points to express in your letter:

- The treatment of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia is a humanitarian concern and part of our international responsibilities and should be treated as such.
- The past policies that the Coalition party are proposing to return, such as TPVs and 'the 45 day rule', were found to be psychologically damaging and should not be re-implemented under any circumstances.
- A regional approach to asylum seekers will not be beneficial if it repeats the damaging mistakes of the Pacific Solution.
- Detention should be the last resort for people in the asylum seeking process and onshore community based processing should be favoured and expanded.
- A progressive increase in our annual humanitarian intake from 13,750 to 20,000 is one way we can do our fair share to support refugees around the world.
- Australia can and should be doing more to address the situations of persecution that are forcing asylum seekers to leave their home countries.