



# Refugee Council of Australia

## **SPEECH FOR CAMPBELLTOWN CELEBRATION OF REFUGEE WEEK 2019**

I would like to thank MDSI for the invitation to speak at today's celebration of Refugee Week. I'm a resident of the Macarthur area and am privileged to live on the land of the Dharawal people, whose elders past, present and emerging I acknowledge. My family connections to this district go back 195 years but that is just a small moment in time compared to the tens of thousands of years of indigenous custodianship of this place.

Refugee Week is a week of acknowledgement and celebration. Just as we are slowly growing in our understanding of our nation's connection to the world's oldest living culture, we must also develop our understanding of how much our nation has gained from giving refuge to persecuted people.

Refugee Week was first celebrated in Sydney in 1986 and the following year became the world's first annual national celebration of the contribution of refugees. It predates World Refugee Day by 15 years.

Since Federation, 900,000 refugees have settled or been given protection in Australia – 550,000 over the past 40 years. There would be more than 2 million living Australians who have been refugees or who have a parent, grandparent or great grandparent who was.

Refugees are ordinary people who have gone through the extraordinary difficulty of being forced out of their home countries because of persecution. This experience of persecution and displacement is a low point in a person's life – not something that should define the person forever. However, it's clear that the experience of being forced to leave home against their will, and then begin again in a new and previously unknown place, inevitably shapes the person's outlook. We can see this in the national statistics which tell us that people who have been refugees are more likely than Australian-born people to establish and run their own businesses and are more likely to study at tertiary level and encourage their children to do so. Anyone who has spoken to a former refugee about the experience of becoming an Australian citizen knows that a person who has lived without freedom understands the value of living in a peaceful democracy far better than a person who has taken it for granted since birth.

This year, we are continuing Refugee Week's connection with the World Refugee Day call to stand "With Refugees". The UN refugee agency UNHCR is promoting the cities of solidarity movement, encouraging cities to sign a statement of solidarity to declare their commitment to promoting inclusion, supporting refugees and bringing communities together. At a national level, since 2002 the Refugee Council of Australia has been encouraging councils to declare themselves Refugee Welcome Zones. I'm pleased to acknowledge that the City of Campbelltown is one of 165 local government authorities to have taken this step.

On a more personal level, we are encouraging Australians to learn about and honour the World of Stories people who have been refugees have brought to this country. We are using food as a way of building connections, encouraging businesses, community groups, schools and individuals to host a "Share a Meal, Share a Story" event, at which they hear the stories of our Refugee Week Ambassadors and cook and share some of our Ambassadors' favourite meals. There are helpful videos, recipes and other resources on the Refugee Week website.

But Refugee Week is not only about celebrating the stories of people who have been refugees in the past; it is also about drawing attention to the pressing needs of people who are seeking protection from persecution today. Around the world, 25 million people are refugees and 3 million people are seeking asylum, the highest

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numbers since the end of World War II. Another 40 million people are forcibly displaced within the borders of their own countries.

These numbers seem large but the proportion of all forcibly displaced people remains at less than one percent of the world's population. The number of refugees and asylum seekers – those displaced outside their national borders – is less than 0.4 percent. And yet, in so many countries, political leaders are exploiting fears and misunderstandings about refugees, portraying people who are escaping persecution as somehow a threat to the nations they are fleeing to.

Sadly, despite our long and positive history as a nation which has resettled many refugees, Australia has developed a very negative international reputation for our treatment of people seeking asylum. With the Federal election now out of the way, we as citizens and permanent residents have a few searching questions to ask our Parliamentarians.

How much longer must refugees sent to Nauru and Manus Island suffer so that the Australian Government can make its point about not wanting people to enter our country by boat to escape persecution? All of the 1700 people who are still subject to this so-called “offshore processing” policy have been in this extended state of limbo for well over five years. It is painful to watch the psychological agony this policy is causing. When is some sensible, pragmatic political leader going to declare that the point about turning back boats has been made clearly and that it is not necessary to continue holding these 1700 people hostage?

And why hasn't there been greater public controversy about the Federal Government's stripping away of the most basic of financial safety nets for people who are seeking asylum in Australia? Over the past 18 months, the Department of Home Affairs has removed more than 6000 people living on Bridging Visas from access to its Status Resolution Support Services program. This program provides basic assistance, lower than the lowest Centrelink benefit, to people seeking asylum who have no income and cannot find work. Without it, thousands of people have been forced into destitution and homelessness. The impact of this policy is keenly felt in many parts of Western Sydney, in Melbourne and other Australian cities – and yet no one has been able to convince the Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton to reverse this very damaging policy which he has insisted on.

We cannot give up. We at the Refugee Council of Australia are redoubling our efforts to push Australia's political leaders to address the human suffering being caused by this policy of forced destitution of people seeking asylum, the offshore processing policy and the long-term impacts of temporary protection of refugees. We realise that the current government is unlikely to change its official policies on these matters but it can choose to apply them in a way which reduces harm to highly vulnerable people – just as the Howard Government did during its final term in office under pressure from its own MPs.

We need people of principle to join us in saying that enough is enough. For some months, we have been running a campaign called “I choose humane” which calls on the government to “treat people seeking asylum like people”. The campaign outlines ways in which Australia can improve its treatment of people seeking asylum while also playing a more constructive role in working with countries in our region to better address the needs of refugees. We need people to sign up to the “Choose Humane” campaign (just search “choose humane” on the internet to find out more) – but we also need individuals and groups to join us in applying longer term pressure to help Australia treat people in need with basic decency.

In closing, I would like to encourage all of us to use Refugee Week as an opportunity to do two things. The first is to learn more about and celebrate the achievements of Australians who have been refugees. The second is to recommit ourselves, as citizens and residents of Australia, to speaking up for decent treatment of people seeking protection from persecution.

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