

RESPONSES TO COMMON MYTHS ABOUT REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

There is a lot of confusion about refugees: not just about who they are but also about the impact they have on Australian life. Below are responses to some of the most common myths.

Australia risks being overwhelmed by new arrivals of boat people.

In fact, the vast majority – generally between 85% and 98% in any given year – of people who seek refuge in Australia come by plane. It is only the desperate few that risk the perilous journey by boat.

From July 1, 2008 to May 31, 2009, 749 people entered Australia by boat without a valid visa. Compare that to Italy, which averages around 100 people every day entering the country by boat without visas (36,952 in 2008) or the US, where close to 10,000 people cross the border every week without valid visas.

In addition, the majority of foreign nationals in Australia without a valid visa are not asylum seekers but are visitors from countries such as the US, China and Britain who have overstayed their tourist or work visas. According to Department of Immigration figures, there are about 50,000 visitors to Australia overstaying their visas at any one time.

Asylum seekers are targeting Australia because of changes in Australian policy.

In fact most refugees have little or no idea where they are going and their priority is to get somewhere safe as quickly as possible. Many come to Australia simply because that is what they are offered. They often don't learn about Australian policy until they are already here.

The most likely explanation for more people seeking to enter Australia is that there are simply more people being made refugees.

More specifically, the UNHCR says that the 12% increase in 2008 in people seeking asylum across industrialised nations (383,000, up from 341,000 people in 2007) can partly be attributed to higher numbers of applicants from Afghanistan and Somalia.

Refugees have no right to come here and expect us to help them.

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries freedom from persecution".

It is an accident of birth that we are born in a country where human rights are respected. This does not mean that Australia alone must take the full burden for protecting the persecuted. It does mean that we have to play a part in an international response that includes a wide spectrum of initiatives from addressing root causes to providing asylum to people whose human rights have been violated.

Australia takes in too many refugees as it is.

The number of refugees in the world is a global phenomenon that requires a global response. Every region is affected. Although the Australian government is generous, it is by no means carrying an undue burden.

It is actually developing countries, whose resources are more stretched, that take in the majority of refugees. UNHCR statistics show that, in 2007, more than 85% of the world's refugees sought refuge in countries in the same region as their country of origin. The countries hosting the most refugees currently are Pakistan, Syria and Iran.

In the Western world, it is Germany, the US and the UK that host the greatest number of refugees. In 2007 Germany was host to almost half a million refugees, and the UK and the US hosted almost 300,000 each.

Australia's present policy is to take in around 13,500 refugees each year, with the annual intake increasing to 13,750 in 2009-10. This is made up of refugees successfully claiming protection in Australia and refugees being resettled from countries of first asylum where they cannot remain in the longer term. Among the main source countries of refugees to Australia are Afghanistan and Iraq, countries in which Australia has been involved in military operations.

According to UNHCR, around 4,700 people sought asylum in Australia in 2008, up from 3,980 the previous year. This is still far less than the number received earlier in the decade, when 13,100 and 12,400 claims for asylum were made in the years 2000 and 2001, respectively. The US, by comparison, received 49,000 claims for protection last year, while Canada, France, Italy and the United Kingdom received in excess of 30,000 applications each.

Asylum seekers who use smugglers to bring them here are criminals, queue jumpers and not the kind of people we want in Australia.

It is important to remember the desperate situations asylum seekers are in: they are fearing for their lives; they may not have access to information; they may have spent years in limbo in camps, unable to earn money, support their families and still feeling vulnerable. They make decisions and take risks as a matter of survival.

97% of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia without valid visas are actually found to be legitimate refugees. As such, Australia is legally bound to offer them protection, not punishment. For asylum seekers who enter Australia with valid visas, around 40% to 45% are found to be in need of protection.

Why can't refugees stay in countries like Iran or Pakistan? Why do they need to be resettled elsewhere?

Many refugees do stay in countries such as these, but the countries are often overwhelmed and another solution needs to be found. Many refugees still feel threatened if they are in camps close to their country's border or where host nations are hostile to their presence.

It is only natural for refugees to want to settle in a country that respects their rights and offers them the support and opportunities they need to rebuild their lives. In many parts of South-East Asia, refugees lack the most basic rights, often living without legal status and with the constant threat of being returned to persecution in their country of origin. Many have little or no access to health care, are exploited for cheap labour and are constantly under pressure to pay corrupt officials. This is not a humane solution.

Charity begins at home: we should help Aborigines and other disadvantaged groups in Australia first.

"Charity" is not something that should be considered in terms of "us" and "them". If we are being responsible members of the human community, we should seek ways to assist all those in need.

'Refugees take our jobs' which is balanced by the contradictory myth 'all refugees go on unemployment benefits'.

It is true that newly arrived refugees have higher unemployment rates than the community average. This is not unexpected. Among the refugee arrivals are people who have been tortured and deeply traumatised. This can interfere with employment. There are also a significant number of entrants whose qualifications are not recognised in Australia and they need time to make adjustments. There is also the issue of learning English. Refugees are entitled to 510 hours of free

English language instruction which must be taken in the first 2 years – and it is beneficial that the entrants do this as they are unlikely to do this later.

The fact that refugees "come from behind" in the employment stakes highlights the need for specifically targeted intervention programs that recognise issues such as their trauma, their unrecognised qualifications and their lack of English. Targeted programs that do this have shown that they are very successful at placing refugees in the workforce. If we are to bring refugees to Australia (and it is Australia's decision that we do so) it is important that we recognise their specific needs and address these. If we do this, we will reap the benefits. Most refugees want to work, both to restore their damaged sense of self esteem and to repay what they see as their debt of gratitude to Australia for providing them with protection.

Whether "refugees take our jobs" is the sort of question that has no easy answer. Refugees do compete for jobs but they are also consumers. Because they arrive with nothing they have to purchase household goods, clothing etc, all of which provides jobs for the people who make and sell these commodities.

Refugees are economic migrants who come here to get a better life.

The terms "refugees" and "migrants" are frequently used interchangeably; however the two words refer to very different groups of people.

Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their home country because they fear persecution. They often have little idea about where they are going. They are running away, not moving to.

Migrants make a conscious choice to come to Australia. They are able to read about the country and learn about it from friends and families. They have time to study the language and explore employment opportunities before they make a final decision about whether to come.

Refugees get all sorts of handouts from the government.

Refugees essentially have the same rights and entitlements as permanent residents. Any Centrelink benefits they receive (e.g. unemployment benefits, aged pension, family tax benefit) are paid at the same rate as any other Australian in the same situation. On arrival, refugees do get access to the Adult Migrant English Program and some receive short-term post-arrival assistance. This is in recognition of their particular needs and aimed at assisting them to make their contribution to Australian society.

If we let one in, they will come in floods.

Australia is one of the most difficult countries in the world to get to. We have no common borders and there are universal visa requirements and carrier sanctions. Because of this it is highly unlikely that we will ever see the large numbers of asylum seekers other countries experience.

There is also the erroneous perception in the public's mind that everyone in the world wants to come to Australia. We are little known in the total scheme of things and far less of an incentive than countries such as the United States.

It is realistic to expect that asylum seekers will keep coming to Australia but unlikely that there will be "floods" of people with the wherewithal and inclination to make the journey by irregular means. The best way for Australia to deal with asylum seekers is to process their claims expeditiously. This way those in need of protection receive it and those whose claims are without merit can be returned to their country of origin to "send a message" to others in similar circumstances that it is not so easy to get to Australia.

One of the things that is important to recognise in this debate is that any response a country makes must protect those in genuine need of protection ie there must be the presumption of a genuine claim until it is determined to be otherwise, not the presumption that the person is rorting the system.

Refugees cannot possibly contribute anything to us.

It is a myth that all refugees are illiterate peasants. The majority that come to Australia are educated middle class people – whose education, profession or political opinions have drawn them to the attention of the authorities and resulted in their persecution.

By definition refugees are survivors. They have survived because they have the courage, ingenuity and creativity to have done so. These are qualities which we value in Australia. The challenge for Australia is to assist newly arrived refugees to process the experiences of their past and rebuild their lives in Australia. If we do this we will reap the benefits of the qualities and experiences they bring to Australia.