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MEDIA RELEASE

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ALP POLICY ON TPVs: A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The announcement today by the Leader of the Opposition, Mark Latham, of the ALP's new policy on the use of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) for refugees has been greeted with qualified support by the Refugee Council of Australia.

"Obviously we would have preferred to see a commitment to abolish temporary visas for refugees. After all, refugees are, by definition, survivors of severe trauma and they need to feel safe and secure if they are to be able to rebuild their lives" said Refugee Council president, David Bitel.

"This being said, anything that moves away from the current regime which is causing so much harm to the refugees must be supported. The ALP policy does not go as far as we would like, but it is an important step in the right direction" he continued.

The positive aspects of the announced policy are seen to be:

- the clear progression towards permanent protection for those with an ongoing need for protection;
- removing the requirement that refugees who come from countries where there is no significant change must go through refugee status determination procedures again;
- recognising the significance of connections that refugees have established to the Australian community and the contribution that they have been making to the areas in which they have settled.

The Council, however, stresses that there remain serious problems and that the ALP must:

- ensure that the entitlements that Labor will attach to their Temporary Protection Visa comply with Australia's obligations under the Refugee Convention, especially in relation to access to welfare support and travel entitlements;

- recognise that changes in a country of origin do not always mean that it is safe for a refugee to return. Major changes have taken place in both Iraq and Afghanistan since TPVs were granted to people from these countries. Expert opinion is, however, that the structural changes are not yet sufficiently substantial, effective and durable throughout the country, and that it is not safe for all to return. ALP's new procedures must also include an adequately researched assessment of the level of safety and human rights observance in the country of origin if they are to be acceptable.

Since the introduction of the TPV regime in 1999, evidence has mounted about the trauma caused by the ongoing limbo into which these refugees have been cast and by their exclusion from essential settlement services. Change is needed and the ALP is on the right track. "It would be better still if these ideas could be adopted by the Government so that that which is essentially a humanitarian issue can be progressed with bipartisan support" Mr Bitel concluded.

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