

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

6th June 2005

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA CALLS ON ALL POLITICAL PARTIES TO SUPPORT DETENTION BILLS

When it met today, the Board of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) gave careful consideration to the two Private Members Bills proposed by Melbourne MP, Petro Georgiou, that are currently the subject of negotiations within the Federal Coalition and are being considered by other parties.

“The current detention regime is clearly unsustainable,” said RCOA president David Bitel reflecting on the Board’s deliberations. “Each day evidence mounts of serious abuses of people’s rights within immigration detention centres, and amongst the victims are asylum seekers who have come to this country seeking protection from the persecution they experienced in their homeland. That they are being exposed to further trauma and abuse in Australia is a tragic indictment on our country.”

Since the current policy of mandatory non-reviewable detention was introduced in 1992, the Refugee Council has called for reform and has made concrete proposals about how this reform can be enacted without compromising the government’s legitimate desire to control entry. RCOA accepts the need for the use of short-term detention of unauthorised arrivals to determine the identity of asylum seekers and to allow health and character checks to be conducted. We have argued, however, that when it is established that they pose no risk, asylum seekers should be released into the community while their substantive claims are being assessed. Further, RCOA has stressed the importance of having some form of independent review of the decision to detain to ensure that incarceration is not unnecessarily prolonged.

It is the view of the Refugee Council that the two Private Members Bills are consistent with this framework and represent a pragmatic and well-considered response to the flaws in the current system.

The Board calls on all Federal MPs and Senators to support the Bills. In so doing, the Council urges politicians not to be swayed by the scaremongering coming from some quarters about the Bills. The Bills:

- * are not a radical departure from the current practice. Rather, they put in place essential checks and safeguards to ensure that detention is being employed in a humane and legally defensible manner;

- * will not lead to a flood of new arrivals. It can be clearly demonstrated that detention did not deter unauthorised arrivals. In fact, the number of arrivals increased steadily after detention was introduced;

- * protect against absconding and abuse;

- * will not pose a threat to Australia's security.

Importantly too, the Bills also address another of Australia's great injustices to refugees, the Temporary Protection Regime which, like detention, has not been successful as a deterrent. If the Bills are enacted, refugees to whom Australia acknowledges its protection obligations will be provided with certainty and security to enable them to begin rebuilding their lives.

"Now is the time for courage and decency," Mr Bitel urged. "It is a time to acknowledge the need for change and to recognise that in the two Bills, there is a solution worthy of support."

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