



Refugee Council
of Australia

September 8, 2009

REFUGEE COUNCIL WELCOMES PASSING OF IMMIGRATION DETENTION DEBT ABOLITION BILL

Today's passage through the Australian Senate of the Migration Amendment (Abolishing Detention Debt) Bill, rights a significant legislative wrong which caused needless suffering to many vulnerable people, the Refugee Council of Australia says.

Refugee Council CEO Paul Power said the policy of charging former detainees for their time in immigration detention centres was introduced by the Keating Labor Government in 1992 and had proven to be both highly ineffective and heartless.

"Few people encumbered with massive debts had the capacity to repay," Mr Power said. "People were charged for each day they were detained against their will, paying the full cost of any bureaucratic decision to transfer them from one immigration detention centre to another.

"Prior to 2005, children were often detained with their parents and families were charged separately for the detention costs of each family member. It was not uncommon for families to leave immigration detention centres with bills exceeding \$200,000.

"As a cost recovery measure, it was a failure. In the four years to 2008, the Australian Government invoiced 17,335 detainees for amounts totalling \$170 million. Only 2.4 per cent of this money was repaid.

"Politicians attempting to justify the policy would commonly claim that it was designed as a deterrent. However, so few people outside Australia knew about the policy that its deterrence value was minimal.

"Those unable to repay their debts were left with an outstanding debt to the Australian Government which saw them included on a Movement Alert List. This prevented them from travelling or, in the case of permanent residents of Australia, from applying to be reunited with family members overseas.

"Australia was the only country in the world to charge immigration detainees for their time in detention. Few people will mourn the removal of this measure but it will long be remembered as one of a number of very low points in Australian immigration policy."