

2010 REFUGEE WEEK LAUNCH, VICTORIA

Mr John Gibson, President, Refugee Council of Australia

Speech for Refugee Week launch, Victorian Parliament House, 21 June 2010

Thank you. I'd like to first of all acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I'd like to acknowledge my fellow speakers, all of whom have had extraordinary journeys in life. I'd like to particularly acknowledge Malcolm Fraser who has played the most extraordinary statesman-like and principled role in very dark times in the last decade. We owe him a great debt for that. I'd like to thank our sponsors, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, VMC and the Adult Multicultural Education Services, AMES. We'd also like to thank FECCA. It is great that FECCA and RCOA are sharing this platform to launch Refugee Week. We will continue to work collaboratively and cooperatively. I'd also like to thank all the RCOA individual and organisational members for their support.

The theme of Refugee Week is *Freedom from Fear*. Yesterday was World Refugee Day, this week is National Refugee Week. We acknowledge the extraordinary journeys that refugees and asylum seekers have taken. They come here because of the extraordinary experiences that they have had. We have embraced them, and they have, let us not forget, made extraordinary contributions to Australia and the Australian way of life. Like Malcolm Fraser said about the people that came at all different times throughout our history, not least during the period when the Indochinese came here.

I think there are two very important messages that the Refugee Council and the refugee community would like to send to all Australians. The first is that we should shift our focus from the shameful obsession with numbers of boat people, numbers of boats arriving on our shores and the slide to a punitive, deterrent, demonising approach. We should change that. We should shift our focus to one appreciating the reasons why people come to Australia. Why they leave their countries, the places where they've grown up, the places that are home to them. Why they leave them or why they move on from countries where they have resided for a long period of time because of lack of safety or lack of permanent security. That is the most important thing that we can communicate during Refugee Week. I ask all people, all Australians to think about that. To ask themselves, "what would I do if I was in that situation?"

We should, as Australians, all of us, put ourselves in the shoes of asylum seekers, even for five minutes. What would Australians do? What should they do if they have concerns about the movement of people, of unauthorised arrivals on our shores? What would they think if of the over 5,000 Somali men, women, and children who arrive every month Dadaab camp in Kenya, what should they think if those people were part of the boat arrivals that came to Australia? What about the half a million women and girls that have been raped and tortured in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the last 10 years? What would we do? What would Australians think if they were to arrive on our shores? Or just three days ago, the hundreds of thousand ethnic Uzbeks who fled in terror across the border from Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan, not to mention the 300,000 displaced people who are still in severe risk within the country? Or the Burmese minorities in Malaysia who fled from one of the most egregious human rights abuses in the world, who are in constant danger of being returned to further human rights violations? They who live in constant insecurity and may be tempted to move on to a country like Australia? What about the people from former Yugoslavia

during the period of the worst ethnic cleansing, when 5,000 people a day fled into Hungary and Austria? Day in, Day out.

Remember this: our obligation as a civilised country, our primary obligation is to consider the claims by spontaneous arrivals – people who arrive on our shores – like the 150 other countries that subscribe to the Refugee Convention. It is not surprising that people want to come to Australia because it is a place of safety. It is the only Refugee Convention country (other than Cambodia and Timor Leste) between Afghanistan and here. So that is the first message that we would like to send. For Australians to put themselves in the shoes of asylum seekers and refugees and seek to understand why it is that people leave their homes.

The second point is simply to support what Malcolm Fraser said about the need for bipartisanship, something that was a feature of our political system for many, many years. We should not go back to the rhetoric of turning boats back, of Nauru-like solutions, of desert camps, of re-instating Temporary Protection Visas (which were a positive inducement or incentive for women and children to make perilous journeys. Instead of that, we should do what has happened in the past: we should focus on regional and global solutions. We should urge our Government and the Opposition to work together in a bipartisan fashion to increase resettlement numbers worldwide; to address significant gaps in protection in our region; to increase protection space; to assist and support the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in everything that it does in very difficult circumstances. And there is a model: as Malcolm Fraser spoke about, the Comprehensive Plan of Action. There were boat arrivals, large numbers of boat arrivals, and because of regional and global cooperation among resettlement countries including Australia, we had one of the most extraordinary periods of resettlement in our history with the Vietnamese refugees.

I would like to finish with a story that some of you may have heard. It was told by Mr Hieu Van Le AO, Lieutenant Governor of South Australia. His story is quite an extraordinary one. He came to Australia in the 1970s as a boat person, and he's been the Lieutenant Governor of South Australia for several years. And this, in brief, is his story of coming to Australia.

He was minded to leave Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, and with his child and his wife, he went to a beach and hid in the sand dunes. At the pre-arranged moment, the signal was given, and he rushed towards the boat. Fifty other people came out of the sand dunes, and they too rushed towards the boat. They boarded the boat which was capable of taking ten people, but now 50 of them aboard. They spent 4 ½ weeks on that boat. They went to two countries on route, and they were re-provisioned and sent back out to sea again. This little boat full of asylum seekers, 50 people all pressing into the deck, arrived on the outskirts of Darwin Harbour in the early hours of the morning as the sun was rising. Coming towards them was a tinny with two Australians wearing T-shirts (and carrying a bit of weight) and having their first beer of the morning. As the tinny came up to the boat of asylum seekers, the Australians lifted their stubby holders, and they said, "Welcome to Australia, mate!" and kept on going. I think that story illustrates the attitude that we would like all Australians to have towards asylum seekers.

Thank you all, and please spread the messages.