

2010 RCOA ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Senator Kate Lundy, Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship

Brisbane, 16 November 2010

Let me begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the past and present Traditional Custodians of this land on which we meet today, the Jagera people.

I pay my respects to their elders past and present and I thank them for their continuing contributions to the Brisbane community.

It is a pleasure to be here with you all at this Annual General Meeting of the Refugee Council of Australia.

It is particularly timely that I am speaking to you on the United Nations International Day of Tolerance.

This day is about how we relate to each other – the respect we accord, the humility we demonstrate and the understanding we foster.

Since coming to the portfolio I have had the opportunity to travel and to meet refugees from around Australia and to hear their stories.

This portfolio is one of the most rewarding areas of Government. It is an area that is about people – people who have demonstrated unimaginable strength and resilience in the face of adversity and have overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Australia's Humanitarian Program

We can now count over 750 000 refugees and people in humanitarian need that Australia has welcomed since the end of World War II.

As a founding and active member of the United Nations we are part of the global community. We are one of a few countries that operate an annual well-established resettlement program. According to the UNHCR, Canada, the United States and Australia are the top three resettlement countries in the world and our resettlement and settlement programs are world-class.

I would like to emphasise that protection underpins our Humanitarian Program. Australia was the sixth country to ratify the Refugees Convention, and it ratified the 1967 Protocol in 1973. This means that the Convention and its definitions are reflected in our domestic laws.

We offer protection to people who are already in Australia (whether they arrive by plane or by boat) who are found to be refugees according to the Refugees Convention.

Reframing the national discussion

Many of you would have been struck by media commentary on community reactions to the proposed immigration detention facility for Inverbrackie.

Watching the reports, it would have been easy to assume that that the voices of a minority were representative of the views of the majority. I do not believe this to be case.

Yet how the Australian Government manages people seeking protection has been pushed to the front of national discourse.

'*Stop the boats*' has become the slogan of choice for the opposition and asylum has become a tool for political point scoring.

This three word slogan ignores our national and international responsibilities and deflects attention from the purpose of the humanitarian program; the 13,750 people we welcome to Australia.

This three word slogan is designed to strip the humanity from the act of seeking asylum and deliberately sidelines the suffering that motivates such dangerous journeys.

Perhaps at one level it is not surprising that this issue receives media attention and thus enlivens debate and discussion in the community.

How the Australian Government manages people seeking protection defines, in part, our values as a society and our identity as a nation.

Our humanitarian program is about people. It is also about Australia's commitment to uphold the tenants of international human rights treaties and obligations.

Australia has a long standing commitment and proud history of resettling refugees and offering protection to those in humanitarian need.

It is a reflection and expression of our deepest values; our belief in justice and dignity. It is a demonstration of the principles that guide us.

The program is evidence that Australia is a generous and proud nation; a country that looks beyond its own community to contribute and participate in a global society.

We know this – but perhaps we need to articulate it more.

As a Council you represent the views and concerns of over 130 members and the extent and reach of your networks are critical to bringing issues to the table at a national level.

As refugees advocates you assume a key role in how we frame the discussion.

There is a need to acknowledge community concerns about irregular maritime arrivals.

Equally, we all have a responsibility to present the facts and address the fears. And, we need to do so with reference to the universal values that underpin our approach.

In this endeavour, the non-government sector can work with the Australian Government.

While we may not always be in agreement— and certainly there are issues over which we will have robust conversations— I think we can agree that our goals converge.

We care about the people for whom our Humanitarian Program provides a lifeline, and we share a commitment to offering protection, and to resettling those who have no other options. We are always trying to improve how we do this.

A research agenda

The success of Australia's Humanitarian Program is measured not only by how many people we resettle, but also how *well* refugees settle, rebuild their lives and contribute to the Australian community.

We are still in the process of gathering information on the economic, social and civic contribution that refugees make to our country.

We can all cite very quickly some amazing people that we know personally – people who came to Australia as refugees and who are now doing amazing things with their life and making a great contribution to this country.

As many of you here today will know, the Government has recently commissioned a major piece of research that looks at the economic, social and civic impact of refugees and other humanitarian settlers to Australia.

We commissioned the Refugee Council of Australia to conduct an initial literature review as a precursor to this research.

The research looks at first and second generations of people who have come to Australia under the Humanitarian Program. The researchers interviewed many people and charted the progress they made settling into the Australian cultural landscape.

This research will provide a new evidence-based direction for future policy making in areas related to humanitarian migration.

While the final results of this research will be released in the next month or so, I would like share with you some of the broader findings.

The results so far show that people who have come to Australia under the Humanitarian Program have provided an important demographic dividend; they are younger and more likely to pursue secondary and tertiary education.

They are quite entrepreneurial – and I know that this was borne out in the literature study carried out by the Refugee Council of Australia.

They also have a great propensity to volunteer – to help their own communities, and the wider community.

And finally a point which is often made – remarkably, your research revealed that five of the eight Australian billionaires in the year 2000 were from refugee families.

We know that as a result of their refugee experience, many people encounter difficulties in the early years of their settlement, and this has been confirmed by other academic studies.

We do provide a range of services to address these difficulties, however most people are able to adjust effectively. The research is showing, perhaps obviously, that the second generation is achieving higher levels of success, indeed higher than the Australian-born population.

Conclusion

Resettlement is an opportunity for refugees – for safety and for a new life.

It is also an opportunity for our country. A growing proportion of people settling in Australia under the Humanitarian Program are young people; in 2009-10 around 60 per cent were under the age of 25 years.

They will study and work in Australia, they will join their local community, and they will contribute to our culture and our economy.

In closing, I would like to send my regards and best wishes to John Gibson and Kevin Liston. I acknowledge their leadership and yours.

Your contribution continues to change lives and to save lives. Your work gives people hope.

It provides a social dividend from which all Australians benefit – a truly multicultural nation that is informed by principles of social justice and motivated by the pursuit of fairness and respect.

Thank you.