

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

24th September 2001
ASYLUM SEEKERS USED FOR ELECTION GAIN

The Refugee Council of Australia denounces the attempt to push through seven migration bills tonight in the Senate as election opportunism rather than good law, or well reasoned politics. "These bills undermine Australia obligations to protect people fleeing protection, and would not be introduced if there were not an election in the offing" said Associate Professor William Maley, Chair of the Refugee Council. "These proposals will not stop people in desperate circumstances from seeking to reach Australia".

"The movement of people to Australia via smuggling networks is a complex problem, demanding long-term solutions rather than knee-jerk reactions. There is no evidence that deterrence actually works. The truth is, those being smuggled don't know about 'Migration Zones', and those who run the networks are unlikely to care. Setting up categories of 'second class' and 'third class' refugees will not deter refugees from seeking to find protection from persecution: it will simply make life a burden for people who have already suffered. This in turn will be burdensome for the taxpayers who will have to fund the long term social implications of deliberately excluding a group of traumatized people from the community".

"If anything, the politicizing of refugees and asylum seekers issues in Australia has demonstrated the need for judicial review. It is in the public interest to have bureaucrats and officials abide by the law—irrespective of whether the immediate litigant is a citizen or non-citizen. Where a wrong decision can result in a person's death or torture, the rule of law must take precedence over party politics".

"What the legislation does is weaken the rights of vulnerable people. It attempts to displace Australia's responsibilities to those in need onto others. It is mean-spirited legislation that deals off-handedly with life and death matters. Legislation of this importance requires proper scrutiny; it must be referred to an appropriate Senate Committee for consideration".

"The Refugee Council of Australia," Dr Maley concluded, "is not opposed to proposals to alleviate the circumstances which drive people to flight. Indeed, well-thought-out proposals, devised in cooperation with UNHCR, lie at the heart of any sensible measures to address the issue of people-smuggling. Introducing rushed legislation which violates our responsibilities under international law, stains our legal system, and risks the lives of people who have escaped oppressive regimes is not good leadership. Refugees deserve better treatment, and Australia deserves more mature leadership".