



Refugee Council
of Australia

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Refugee Council calls for humane and moral response to unauthorised boat arrivals

The Refugee Council of Australia has today called for strong moral leadership on asylum policy and urged the Opposition to abandon its call for a return to the cruel and counterproductive Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) regime, which inflicted intense suffering on people known to be refugees, failed in its attempt to deter people smuggling, and attracted widespread international condemnation.

“As a nation, we cannot contemplate the return to policies that have inflicted so much harm on people who came seeking our protection. The repugnant phenomenon of “people smuggling” is critical to address, but doing this by harshly treating those who are its victims defiles our international responsibilities and reputation.” said Paris Aristotle, a Refugee Council Board member and Director of Victoria’s specialist refugee trauma agency, Foundation House.

The introduction of TPVs in 1999 was followed by a more than two year period of boat arrivals to Australia that was significantly higher than any previously seen and dramatically higher than numbers of recent arrivals. Many of those asylum seekers who were unauthorised boat arrivals such as those on board the SIEV X, for example, which sunk with tragic loss of life, were the immediate relatives of recognised refugees denied the right to seek family reunion under the restrictions imposed by their TPVs.

The Refugee Council called upon commentators to remember the origins as well as legacy of the TPV. The temporary protection policy was conceived by Pauline Hanson. When she raised the suggestion in 1998, former Coalition Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock, described it in Parliament “as highly unconscionable in a way that most thinking people would clearly reject”. The Howard government proceeded to introduce it the following year. “Its consequences have, indeed, been utterly devastating for the individuals concerned, and massively tarnished our human rights record” said Refugee Council President, John Gibson.

The Refugee Council today urged all politicians and commentators to engage maturely with the complex global issues surrounding the arrival of boats in Australia, including tackling the need for significantly improved conditions in countries of first asylum and in assisting UNHCR with support and processing of asylum seekers in countries like Indonesia. Many asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia are immensely susceptible to exploitation by people smugglers because they have passed through one or more countries without finding safety after fleeing life-threatening situations in their home countries.

Mr Gibson said, “The message which we need to send is that Australia is a moral and responsible country. That we are committed to honouring our humanitarian obligations while combating criminal acts, and that we are engaging collaboratively with our neighbours and the UN in the development and implementation of solutions to complex global and regional problems.”

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world