

AUSTRALIAN ATTITUDES TO THE ACCEPTANCE OF REFUGEES

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Introduction and background

I would like to thank Dr Noel Nannup for the moving and inspiring welcome to country this morning. It is a privilege to be on Wadjup and Noongar land. I also appreciate the invitation from Murdoch University and the organising committee for the opportunity to be able to speak at this conference. I was really pleased to be present yesterday for the official launch of the African Women's Council. The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) looks forward to working in any way we can with the new body. I'm also conscious of, and would like to acknowledge, those in the gathering here who have come to Australia as refugees. My views and understanding of Australia's refugee program have been formed by seeing how those who have come to Australia as refugees have contributed to national life as residents and citizens.

RCOA is a national umbrella body which has been around for nearly 30 years and has a broad membership, including some of the organisations represented here today. We're involved in research, policy analysis, advocacy with the Australian Government and UNHCR and also in public education. Whenever I speak I make reference to the official definition of "refugee". It amazes me how often misunderstood this term is. It is, in fact, a term with a very restrictive legal definition. The Refugee Convention focuses on protection from persecution on five grounds – race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group and political opinion. Anyone seeking protection under the Refugee Convention must be outside his or her country of origin and unable to seek the protection of that country. Much of the negative discourse in Australia about refugees occurs in ignorance of the restrictive nature of that definition.

Australia's refugee program

The extent of the contributions of former refugees to Australian life is one of the rarely-told great stories of post World War II Australia. Since Federation, we have had more than 750,000 refugees settle in this country from many parts of the world. The current program consists of 13,750 places per year but, unfortunately, it has in it a tension which is used for political advantage. The 6000 refugee places are allocated each year through consultation with UNHCR but the 7750 remaining places are divided between the offshore Special Humanitarian Program and the onshore Protection Visa process. This policy was created in 1996 and it enables politicians and people of ill-intent to say that every time we recognise an asylum seeker as a refugee in Australia a place is taken away from a deserving refugee offshore who is in need of resettlement. The Refugee Council has argued against this policy every year since 1996. We will continue to do so because the policy undermines Australia's core commitment to refugee protection as defined in the Refugee Convention. Refugee resettlement is vital but it should not be put in opposition to the process of recognising people who require protection under the Refugee Convention, as this process is at the core of the international system of refugee protection.

In 2008-09, the top source countries for refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia were Iraq, Burma, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, Somalia, Liberia, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone. The Humanitarian Program is only a small part of Australia's migration program and, as the migration program has grown, the humanitarian program has become a smaller proportion. In 2008-09, the humanitarian program made up just 6.6% of overall migration (out of 224,600 permanent additions)

Australia's role in global refugee protection

Australia's share of global responsibility for refugees is very small. In 2008, Australia received just 0.65% of the world's asylum applications (4771 out of 744,853) and was responsible for offering protection to just 0.3% of the asylum seekers recognised as refugees (1845 out of 535,950).

Australia plays a comparatively significant role in refugee resettlement. In 2008, 12.4% of the refugees resettled were resettled to Australia (11,006 out of 88,800). But that percentage is high because of the lack of commitment to resettlement in many other countries. Of the world's 15.2 million refugees,

only 0.6% were resettled in 2008. This means that, if all refugees were neatly lined up waiting for resettlement, anyone joining the resettlement “queue” today would be resettled in 171 years’ time.

Concerns raised in RCOA’s 2009 community consultations

Each year, RCOA conducts community consultations across Australia in preparation for a submission to the Australian on the coming year’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The comments I am making today are based on information gathered in the consultations conducted in November and December 2009. We held face-to-face and teleconference consultations with more than 430 people in 33 cities and towns across the country. We sought views on planning of program, visa processes, pre-departure and post-arrival orientation and settlement challenges faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants. We also sought views on how the Humanitarian Program could be better promoted to Australian public. On that last question, people raised many concerns.

- The foremost concern related to the impact of negative leadership from many politicians in shaping public opinion and the media agenda. There was a strong view that many of the problems associated with public acceptance of the refugee program have their basis in the political divisions on asylum seeker policy. When you analyse the media agenda on refugee policy, you see that, overwhelmingly, the media agenda follows the political agenda. The tone of political debate is the single largest factor in the public debate about refugees.
- As part of that negative political debate, we see the linking of asylum seekers to illegal immigration, supposed border protection threats and the spectre of terrorism. The demonisation of “people smugglers” is, in many ways, a de facto demonisation of the asylum seekers who have used “people smugglers”.
- People also spoke about the lingering impacts of Kevin Andrews’ criticism of Sudanese settlement prior to the 2007 election. That still remains a factor in the thinking and the confidence of African communities in Australia. Fortunately, this has been repudiated by the current Government.
- The lack of balance in media coverage of refugee issues is a real concern to communities, as is the media portrayal of refugee young people.
- There were also concerns about the relative silence of political, religious and community organisations which are supporters of refugee program. There is a feeling that many of these organisations are fearful of getting involved in what is seen as a divisive debate. Participants in our consultation expressed a wish that these organisations be more active in speaking up in defence of refugees and asylum seekers.

Deficit view of refugee entrants

Participants in our consultations expressed concern about the widely held deficit view of refugee and humanitarian entrants. People spoke about their concern that the negative debate about asylum seekers has a negative impact on the views of many Australians about all refugees, regardless of whether people sought refuge here or were resettled from elsewhere. Even though the politicians who are taking a tough line on asylum seekers may wish to pretend that it is otherwise, it is clear that their criticisms are having a very negative effect on public acceptance of the whole refugee program.

There is concern among refugee entrants that they are all too often viewed as vulnerable victims in need of assistance, even by many of those involved in service delivery to refugees. One consultation participant very articulately expressed his concern that new arrivals are expected to be given a hard time in Australia. In a written submission, he wrote about an event at the time of Kevin Andrews’ comments about Sudanese settlement: “I spoke to [an] Immigration official in Canberra about three years ago about the negative media coverage of humanitarian entrants in the context of Sudanese humanitarian entrants. I was shocked when the response from the Immigration official was that all waves of immigrants in Australia get negative media coverage. It was cited that the Greeks, Italians and the rest got it bad from the media but with time the focus shifted. My question was: Why was this allowed to go on?” There was a clear view from our consultations that little will change without strong and positive political leadership to challenge misinformation

Australian opinion polls

In preparing our submission to the Australian Government, we also looked at what Australian opinion polls told us, noting that the polls have fluctuated wildly on questions related to the public acceptance of refugees. Over the past decade, the polling on refugee issues has focused heavily on the politics of

refugee policy and very little on community attitudes to refugees. We looked at 38 polls over past 60 years, many of them conducted in the past 15 years. At first, it was very difficult to work out why the polls varied so much – until you looked at the wording of the question being asked in each case. What became clear was that the wording of the question was the single largest factor in determining the response. It appears that many Australians are largely unaware of refugee questions and tend to view pollsters' question according to what appears to be "fair".

Opinion polls which drew negative responses

Here are some examples of some polls where the majority of responses were negative towards refugees.

- In July last year, the Lowy Institute asked participants in its poll: "Are you concerned or not concerned about *unauthorised* asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat?" Put yourself in the situation of a person who knows little immigration and refugee policy who, quite understandably, is focused on financial survival, work and family. If you are asked whether you are concerned about people arriving in an unauthorised manner, you think that doesn't sound fair, so you respond negatively. And the Lowy found that 76% of those polled were concerned about "unauthorised asylum seekers", 21% were not concerned and 4% didn't know.
- Essential Research conducted a poll in November last year with a series of questions, most of them negative. They asked people to say whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "There is a real prospect that *terrorists* are on board these boats so the Federal Government must prevent them from entering the country." And 56% agreed, 16% disagreed and 28% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- In July 2006, the Lowy Institute poll asked for a response to the following statement in a poll: "Below is a list of possible *threats* to the *vital interest of Australia* in the next 10 years. Please say whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat all." In response to the threat of "*large numbers of immigrants and refugees* coming into Australia", 75% thought that this threat was critical or important, 24% thought it was not important and 1% didn't know. When people are asked opinion poll questions framed in a very negative way, people are more likely to give a negative answer.

Polls which drew more positive responses

Other polls, however, drew much more positive responses.

- In the middle of the Essential Research poll of November last year (mentioned earlier), people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "The Federal Government should be allowing *legitimate* refugees to enter the country and contribute to our nation." This question came in the middle of a series of very negative questions. Nearly half (45%) agreed, 25% disagreed and 30% didn't know, probably because they were confused by the context of the question.
- Nielsen conducted a poll for Amnesty International Australia in July 2009 which asked: "Should asylum seekers arriving by boat have more legal protection, less legal protection or *the same* legal protection as asylum seekers arriving by plane?" The great majority (69%) agreed that people arriving by different modes of transport should be treated the same way – a matter of fairness. 6% said boat arrivals should be given more protection, 19% supported less protection and 5% didn't know.
- The results of a 2003 survey conducted by JOBfutures and Saulwick were really quite interesting. People were asked: "Would you say that over the past two or three years the number of refugees has represented a very serious threat, a quite serious threat, not a very serious threat or no threat at all to the country?" Given that the two or three years prior to 2003 were the most controversial and divisive in the history of Australian refugee policy, it was fascinating that 61% felt that the number of refugees posed no threat or a not serious threat and only 36% felt the threat was very or quite serious, while 4% didn't know. Occasionally, you come across an opinion poll which asks people questions in a quite open way which elicits some unexpectedly positive responses.

Polls which illustrate public confusion

There were also some interesting examples of pollsters asking people to respond to conflicting statements in the same survey and receiving quite different responses. In a 2002 NSW Labour Council

survey, conducted at a time of high controversy, people were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements.

- In response to the statement: “If people want to come to Australia because they are fearful of being persecuted in their own country, they should *go through the proper channels* or face mandatory detention”, 81.1% agreed, 13.8% disagreed and 5.1% didn’t know.
- However, when people were asked to respond to a much more positive statement, the pro-refugee sentiment was much stronger. In response to the statement: “The overwhelming majority of asylum seekers are *genuine refugees who are fleeing persecution* for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social or political group”, 49.6% agreed, 33.5% disagreed and 16.8% didn’t know.
- The response to another negative statement in the same poll was also negative. The statement “Any softening of Australia’s current policy on border control would lead to a massive *influx of illegal immigrants* and would be *unfair* to those who are waiting their *rightful turn in the queue*” was supported by 77.7%, while 18.8% disagreed and 3.4% didn’t know.
- However, in the same survey, 53.4% of people agreed with this statement: “Seeking asylum in Australia or a country other than one’s own is *not illegal*, nor is it queue jumping. It is the *fundamental right of any person experiencing persecution* in their country of origin.”

These polls really point to large-scale public confusion about refugee policy, with people’s opinions being shaped by what, from the limited information supplied to them, appears to be “fair”.

Public attitudes to immigration

In his 2009 Social Cohesion study, Professor Andrew Markus noted some quite positive public attitudes to immigration. He noted that 68% of Australians agree that immigrants make Australia stronger. He also noted that Australians are more positive than Europeans and North Americans about the economic and cultural benefits of migration but are somewhat less tolerant than others of ethnic diversity. Professor Markus believes that 10% of Australians are intolerant, 10% are highly tolerant and 80% are either ambivalent or passively tolerant.

The importance of political leadership

When you look at what answers there are to improving public support for Australia’s refugee program, one cannot underestimate the importance of political leadership. Political leadership has always been fundamentally important in shaping national opinion regarding immigration and refugees. Polls which record responses by voting intention generally tell us that, on refugee or immigration issues, most people support the public view of their favourite party. Polls also appear to indicate that the views of party supporters shift as the position of their favoured party shifts. As mentioned earlier, most media coverage of refugee issues relates to the politics of refugee policy, not the substance, and largely shifts with political debate. On issues on which the majority of voters do not have direct experience, political leaders are in a strong position to shape public opinion.

There are, however, some notable examples of where politicians have won increased electoral support after taking principled public positions in support of refugees. In the 2001 Federal election, the Independent MP for the seat of Calare in central western NSW, Peter Andren, took a very public stance against the Howard Government’s response to the Tampa issue, despite being aware that the Government’s approach had wide support in his electorate. In the November 2001 election, Mr Andren increased his primary vote by 15.1%, defying a 3.5% national swing to the Coalition. Similarly, in the November 2007 election, the only Liberal Party MPs in Victoria to increase their primary vote were Petro Georgiou, the MP for Kooyong, and Russell Broadbent, the MP for McMillan, two of the most vocal critics of the Howard Government’s asylum seeker policy. On a two-party basis, the swings against Mr Georgiou and Mr Broadbent were just 0.05% and 0.2% respectively, while the statewide swing against the Coalition was 5.3%. Voters respect what they see as principled positions, particularly those taken in the face of base populism.

A positive response: Key messages about the refugee program

Participants in our consultations put forward a series of key messages about refugees they would like to see promoted to the Australian public. These messages include:

- Being refugee is not a choice.

- Australia's Refugee Program is a national commitment based on our belief in freedom and human rights.
- Australia's Onshore Protection program is the key commitment which flows from our ratification of the Refugee Convention.
- It is never illegal for a person to enter Australia to seek protection under Refugee Convention, regardless of whether they arrived with some form of temporary visa or no visa at all.
- Asylum seekers are no threat to Australia's borders.
- Our resettlement program is an important voluntary contribution to global sharing of responsibility.
- Former refugees have contributed significantly to Australian social, economic and cultural life.

Ideas for accountability and engagement

Participants in RCOA's community consultations also put forward ideas for strategies which could be adopted by NGOs, groups and individuals seeking to defend and promote Australia's refugee program. These ideas included the following:

- Challenge politicians who make negative public statements about refugees and asylum seekers. Calling politicians to account is a shared responsibility of organisations and individuals committed to humane refugee policies.
- Praise politicians who promote understanding of refugees and asylum seekers, letting them know that you appreciate the stand they are taking.
- Challenge negative media coverage, responding through letters to editor, internet blogs, opinion pieces, contacting media organisations to demand balance in news coverage and offering to brief journalists on matters of refugee policy.
- Create opportunities for former refugees to speak publicly, including through the media, to tell their stories and to act as official spokespeople for organisations defending and promoting the refugee program.
- Acknowledge positive media coverage, through letters to the editor, comments on internet blogs, promotion of good coverage (news, internet and documentaries) to others and through official acknowledgement (e.g. awards for good media practice).
- Make better use of opportunities such as Refugee Week and Harmony Day to promote awareness of the experiences of refugees and the contributions made by former refugees to Australian life.
- Promote community education through local celebrations, cross-cultural training and programs to bring people of different cultures together.

Participants in RCOA's also saw an important role for schools, universities, local government and networks such as churches, in public education on refugee issues and in supporting awareness-raising initiatives.

Government agencies have a particularly important role in supporting Australia's refugee program. This includes providing the means for public messages to be disseminated through sponsoring public campaigns and funding educational initiatives in which community networks take leading role. Government agencies are vital, too, to providing credible information and statistics for communities and NGOs to argue the case for welcoming and supporting refugees.

The ideas in this presentation are developed in greater depth in RCOA's recent submission to the Australian Government, "Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program 2010-11: Community views on current challenges and future directions" (see Section 6, pages 93 to 105). This submission can be viewed at <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/resources/consultations.html>