

Rural Australians for Refugees making a statement in rural communities. Marie Sellstrom.

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There is a growing consciousness in rural and regional Australia.....it is centred in NSW and Victoria and is spreading through Queensland to Cairns and moving south through to Tasmania and South Australia and across to Albany. It is the responsiveness of men, women and children in country Australia who support people seeking refuge and asylum on Australian shores and who are raising their voices in anger at the government's treatment of these men, women and children.

Rural Australians pride themselves on offering a helping hand to those seeking support and are shamed by the poisonous rhetoric of some of our politicians and sections of the media. This rhetoric promotes fear of the unknown in uninformed parts of our communities eg. linking refugees with terrorism, language such as 'border security', 'keeping our borders safe', 'keeping Australians safe'.....safe from what we should ask.

People seeking our protection, particularly those on temporary visas, tell me that there is not a day that they do not feel fear, fear of the knock on the door and a visit from the Federal Police or Border Force and having to face indefinite detention or deportation. In this country that we all love, this 'lucky' country, we have people who live in fear, fear of the unknown generated for political gain.

Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR) was founded in the Southern Highlands of NSW as the result of the 'Tampa Affair' in 2001. Armidale in NSW and Aireys Inlet in Victoria formed branches immediately and many country communities followed suit. With the election of the Rudd Labor Government the urgency around asylum seeker issues lessened and many groups went into recess. The 'Stop the Boats' campaign by the Abbott Coalition saw a resurgence of action in rural communities and currently there are approximately 100 groups across regional and rural Australia.

RAR is a grassroots movement of regional and rural community groups supporting and advocating for people seeking refuge and asylum. The membership is diverse: farmers, many church groups, retirees, teachers, doctors, lawyers with many of the community shires declared as Refugee Welcome Zones. RAR has a central coordinating committee which communicates with local branches, coordinates national campaigns and works with government at all levels and with other major refugee organisations. Currently major projects that RAR is involved in are rural resettlement, sponsorship and home hosting.

Broadly RAR works to inform ourselves and the public, supports refugees and asylum seekers and lobbies government to change their current cruel policies relating to refugees and asylum seekers. Local groups organise guest speakers including legal experts and people with lived experience, films, information stalls at local markets, articles in local newspapers and a vast social media network.

Support for refugees and asylum seekers takes many forms from basic material support such as linen and furniture, food drives, fundraising for legal support and scholarships, community engagement and home hosting. Home hosting is provided for weekends of respite and enjoyment in relaxed rural and seaside environments.

Lobbying government for change is undertaken locally and nationally with local groups building relationships (or trying to) with their local members of parliament to persuade them that we live in a welcoming country for people seeking safety who in turn have contributed hugely to our culture and economy for generations.

The National RAR Conference in Albury/Wodonga in April 2018 unanimously called for an Australian Charter of Human Rights that recognises all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. RAR believes the Parliament of Australia has a responsibility to protect and uphold our legal and moral obligations under International Human Rights Conventions and law. This is essential in regard to children born in Australia being Australian citizens and the re-unification of families.

At the conclusion of the Conference the objectives of RAR were confirmed:

- To receive all asylum seekers in accordance with Australian obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees;
- To abolish mandatory detention, close all detention centres and process all claims for asylum in a humane and compassionate way under our UN obligations;
- To abolish the Temporary Protection Visa system;
- To increase Australia's refugee intake and at least double our quota;
- To end offshore detention and resettle in Australia those found to be refugees;
- To end mandatory detention of asylum seekers, while allowing for detention if exceptional circumstances are shown; to treat detainees with respect, not as criminals; not to separate families unless exceptional circumstances exist;
- To process refugee and visa claims in a timely, efficient and consistent manner; to simplify the visa system and grant only permanent visas;
- To use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 as a guiding principle in framing refugee policy;
- To use the UN Refugee Convention 1951 as the yardstick for determining refugee status; and
- Never to deport asylum seekers to danger.

RAR offers three alternatives to Australia's current deterrent policy:

(1) Our government must address the causes for people becoming refugees by using diplomatic, trade and aid muscle to leverage better treatment of persecuted minorities in our region and by increasing our refugee intake.

(2) Work with our regional neighbours currently hosting refugees, to provide Australian aid for safety, support, education and work rights. Support the 2018 UN Global Compact on Refugees.

(3) The Andrew Wilkie Private Member's Refugee Protection Bill to establish a network of centres, located in and run by Asia Pacific countries including Australia, where asylum seekers could go to be registered, have their immediate humanitarian needs met and lodge a preference for country of re-settlement. This Bill is an excellent way forward although I was informed by the Shadow Minister, Shayne Neumann, that Labor could do better. We are still waiting to see if they can.

The Wilkie Bill specifies that if an asylum seeker selects Australia, and is within the specified quota, a process is described for assessing their claim in Australia with appropriate oversight, limited time frames and judicial review. The Bill does not allow mandatory detention and prioritises the applicant's immediate needs in accordance with refugee and international human rights law.

It takes courage to make a stand in the face of strong government opposition in conservative rural communities. Rural Australians for Refugees have that courage and a large dose of determination.

Marie Sellstrom is National President of Rural Australians for Refugees.

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