

2002 RAR NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Summary Report

Mudgee December, 2002

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Dear All,

Especially those who couldn't make it to Mudgee! The first annual RAR Get-Together was a fabulous event, successful beyond our wildest dreams. We all went home energised, excited - and tired out from an intense and fulfilling day-and-a-half together. Our heartfelt thanks to Mudgee RAR who dreamed up the idea, midwived it and then staged the actual event without a flaw. And thank you to the 150 plus participants who turned up from as far afield as Narrogin in WA, Goondiwindi in Queensland and Port Augusta in SA, and a couple of dozen RARs in between.

SATURDAY

Saturday opened with Anne Coombs welcoming us all and reminding us of our successes and failures and the scope of our future tasks. Then Margaret Piper from the Refugee Council of Australia gave an overview of the world refugee crisis and Australia's particular role in it. Margaret's years of experience and her fine mind made for a powerful and informative address. Margaret also stayed around for the whole weekend, which was immensely helpful as she was able to contribute relevant facts whenever required.

WOMEN ON THE GROUND

The next session had many of us in tears. Four remarkable women who are working closely with detainees and people on TPVs - literally devoting a huge part of their lives - gave addresses that were filled with the distress and suffering they had witnessed and felt, and first-hand vital information. Our thanks to the 'young' ones - Kate Gauthier and Natasha Verco and, the 'veterans', Jacqui Everitt and Trish Highfield. Twelve young Hazara men working at the Mudgee abattoirs came on stage so that we could meet them personally. Eighteen-year-old Abus translated the speech from Persian of Ali, telling us of their lives in Afghanistan, and their situation since they arrived in Australia. The dignity and strength of what they had to say reminded us of what it is we are fighting for - a far, far better deal for asylum seekers who have come to Australia seeking our help.

THE POLLIES

Next came the politicians, and Andrew Bartlett in particular impressed us by not behaving like one. His speech was measured and informative, particularly on the raft of insidious legislation that has been rammed through Parliament ever since Tampa. His speech too will go on the website. Greg Barns, the Liberal candidate dis-endorsed because of his principled stand, gave a fiery, wide-ranging talk, castigating all sides of politics for their lack of vision and substance. The disappointment was Sylvia Hale from the Greens (a last-minute ring-in to be fair), and the RAR audience made their indignation at her playing party politics at our forum very clear indeed.

ALP POLICY

After lunch we all let off steam by roaring out a "Rar Rar Rar" for RAR !! Then Martin Ferguson, Shadow Minister for Regional Development, detailed the recently released Labor Policy on Refugees. Ferguson made no concessions, apart from admitting that he was giving us Labor Policy "warts and all." And the audience made it very clear to him that Labor's continued policy of mandatory detention (albeit reduced to three months) and its retention of TPV's (albeit modified) was simply not good enough. Questions to Mr Ferguson were pointed and vigorous, although he said defiantly at the end that he'd had far tougher times with unionists . . . The following session, "Experiences from the Bush - Possibilities and Tensions in Rural Areas" saw wide participation, with many people sharing experiences and initiatives, successes and failures around the country. We were getting tired, but attention was revived when two excellent speakers took the floor - Grant Mitchell on Policy Alternatives and Nick Poynder on the legal issues - both of whom gave us hard facts and thoughtful frameworks.

THE RAR AGENDA

By the time it came to beginning our own debate - Advancing the RAR Agenda - ideas were flowing. Among the issues flagged for further discussion on Saturday, were:

- the need for a secretariat to help co-ordinate RAR nationally
- the possibility of incorporation because of legal issues
- a national committee to replace retiring convenors from the Southern Highlands a more concerted media strategy
- a co-ordinated public education strategy to schools and service clubs
- better support for TPVs, especially those facing deportation. etc
- tension between the informality of RAR structure to date and the perceived need for a stronger national voice.

SOCIALISING

The wind dropped, so tables were set up outside the large and elegant shed that was our conference centre and the serious networking began. In between courses the Inaugural RAR Journalist's Award went to John Highfield for his consistent and courageous coverage of refugee issues. Bruce Haig presented each of the Mudgee Hazaras with a gift to mark the end of Eid. A lovely night.

SUNDAY

Anne Coombs announced the winner of this year's TAMPA HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD. It went to Mount Isa City Council "for displaying moral leadership in the community by creating a welcoming environment for refugees and promoting the benefits of cultural diversity." In May this year Mt Isa declared itself a 'refugee-friendly city' and the Mayor, Ron McCullough, in particular has been very strong on this issue.

The stylish plaque (thanks again to Michael and Greg of Redback Graphix) was received on the Mayor's behalf by one of the chief Mudgee organisers, Joc Stenson, who read a statement sent by Ron McCullough: "It is a great honour to receive the TAMPA award and we are delighted to accept it. I am sure however there are many deserving recipients within the Australian community. My Council's action was simply a statement trying to redress the stupidity and inhumanity of the treatment of Asylum seekers and Refugees. To offer Mount Isa as a place of welcome and refuge to those in search of a friendly hand is a small way to repay the Migrants and Refugees who made our City what it is, who gave us a splendid diversity of cultures and strengths and taught us to respect all others.

We believe that to bring attention to the inhumane treatment of other human beings is a moral obligation and that Australia is a poorer country for allowing their politicians to lose sight of this. God bless you all for your efforts."

RAR SOUL SEARCHING

Everyone knew we could well be in for a tumultuous session when the future structure of RAR was debated, and Jim Main from Cootamundra RAR did a sterling job of keeping us under control and moving the discussion forward. The key issue was how to find a structure that would retain the 'magic' of RAR - its lack of bureaucracy, its loose criteria for membership, and the autonomy of local groups - the many different ways that different RARs go about things - but that would also capitalise on the phenomenal growth of the last year and give us a united and even more influential voice in the pro-refugee movement. Convenors Helen McCue, Susan Varga and Anne Coombs proposed a model which was an extension of our workable modus operandi to date: i.e. that for the next twelve months another RAR regional group take over the administrative function, but with the help of a small additional national committee from around the country. The new regional group would not in any way be 'boss' - it would act as before as a clearing house/co-ordinating group, and occasionally providing a spokesperson when the need arose. RAR groups around the country would continue to be fully autonomous, including handling their own media. When the next twelve months is up - and hopefully after our

next Annual Get-Together - another group could take over the responsibility. Strong debate ensued, with some expressing fears that a formalised committee could become top-heavy and the initiative and energy could be sapped at the grass roots level. At the end of the session, consensus was reached that a national committee be formed - with three members of that committee being the new co-ordinating group. Who that group will be is not yet certain - two candidates, Castlemaine and Armidale are consulting with their membership. A rough plan, but something to go home with!

STRATEGY SESSION

The final hour, ably facilitated by Natasha Verco, was a dense exchange of ideas for future strategies. Below is a summary supplied by Castlemaine:

STRATEGIES FOR WINNING

- Local education will lead to change
- The movement is growing
- We need a long-term strategy to lead up to the next election, some e.g. Welcome doormat and/or sea of shoes (standing in their shoes)
- Solution focused approach to problem solving
- Identify props that hold up system. e.g. put pressure on rural MPs
- Target Federal Ministers in marginal seats
- Find a new way to influence/change local opinion (speaking to local groups, schools, community)
- Reactive approach. React to what's happening, eg radio talk back, news events
- Look at ways of helping and nourishing people who work in isolation for the cause, e.g. paying phone bills
- Target local Shows even if they're conservative
- Couch the issue in positive terms. No scare-mongering or dwelling on sense of outrage. Benefits of having a compassionate Australia
- Next National conference at Port Pirie or Port Augusta so we can visit Baxter
- National Summit next year.
- Sen. Bartlett can arrange teleconferencing if we let him know in advance

SPECIFIC ACTIONS

- Xmas card to Ruddock (blank card inside and write some facts re refugees and "Can you have a happy Xmas?"),
- Sign the Dissenter's book
- Pads to Ruddock (a campaign for women)
- Rural Day of action for Peace and Justice. (March 15?)
- Daybreak in Detention
- National Ad
- Welcome doormat and/or sea of shoes
- Washing flag day rinse off the stains (Sen. Bartlett's office can supply flags)
- A date for mass action Sun June 22 to coincide with World Refugee Day
- A musical event - local/state wide/ national?
- Visit Tamworth festival and do something there
- A national tree planting day
- A big trip to Baxter at Easter
- Valentine Day cards to Ruddock etc
- International Women's day - pads campaign

ALL IN ALL . . .

The Mudgee Get-Together was a really terrific event and our thanks again to Mudgee RAR and to Bruce Haig and Joc Stenson in particular. And from Anne, Helen and Susan, the three women who 14 months ago thought they 'should do something', a huge thank you to all of you in rural Aust who have made RAR. We might have had the idea, but unless you'd turned up in your numbers and proved to be the energetic, dedicated, passionate people you are, RAR would still be just an idea. We're handing the baton over, but we'll still be around - impossible to leave such a wonderful organisation and impossible to walk away until asylum seekers are released from detention and welcomed into our communities. Here's to a feisty 2003!

Susan Varga
Helen McCue
Anne Coombs
of Southern Highlands RAR