

The 2004 RAR National Conference

Summary Report

Albury Wodonga 6 – 8 February, 2004

In this issue

- [Overview](#)
- [Workshops and Speakers](#)
- [Future Directions](#)
- [Closure](#)
- [Resolutions of the Conference](#)
- [RAR's 10 Point Plan](#)
- [Contact details for keynote speakers, workshop leaders](#)



Overview

On all counts, the second National RAR Conference was a great success. Registrations far exceeded expectations, with the three hundred plus people who attended sometimes stretching the venue to capacity. Nobody seemed to mind; the workshop program provided ample choice for different interests, and there was plenty of time for networking.

Networking was certainly one of the major benefits of the Conference - people meeting others who they'd come to know well through e-mail or telephone but had never (or rarely) met face-to-face, the strengthening of friendships and camaraderie. Those who were unable to come were certainly felt to be there in spirit, helping to make the conference a fantastic experience. Everyone came away with a renewed commitment to the basic RAR agenda - to get asylum seekers out of detention, achieve permanent residence for those out in the community and secure a more expansive and humane refugee program for Australia.

Anyone who was there will acknowledge the huge debt of thanks owed to Albury-Wodonga RAR for an impeccably organised event. Not only did all members of the organising committee work extremely hard in the lead up to the conference, but they kept their cool, cheer and helpful manner throughout the entire hectic weekend, making everyone feel welcome. Thanks also to the caterers, who managed to cope with the unexpected pressure.

Workshops and Speakers

[Note: Contacts for keynote speakers, workshop leaders and activities appearing in bold in the text below are given in Section 7 of this report.]

Saturday

After some early-bird workshops on Friday afternoon (Jack Smit - "The RAR Website"; Nicholas Procter - "Delivering on Trust - Working with Refugees") and a short official welcome on Saturday morning, the conference program began Saturday with Fr. Frank Brennan, who makes public speaking look as easy as falling off a log. Frank's talk, "How we can stop tampering with asylum", gave renewed logic and passion to the pro-refugee arguments. He proved a good match with the other silver-haired star of the refugee circuit, fellow lawyer Julian Burnside QC, who gave a clear-headed and chilling account of legal obstacles surrounding asylum seekers and TPVs.

"Grassroots" RAR speakers followed. Helen McCue from Southern Highland's RAR, one of the network's founders, summarised RAR's history, from its start with a depressed conversation between three women in a lounge-room in September 2001 to the seventy-odd RAR groups throughout Australia today. The audience enthusiastically endorsed Helen's contention that RAR is now a real force in the pro-refugee movement, with great respect in the general community. They also confirmed, through their appreciation at the end of the presentation, that the direction for RAR proposed by the founders - a national, locally based network - had been the right one.

Sally Rose from Bright RAR then gave a thought-provoking account of how we all feel sometimes when working in our local communities, and the questions that haunt us - 'Is my group doing enough?' 'Are we getting anywhere?' She also talked about the challenges of distance and finding a focus, as well as the group's "holiday" initiative. Ian Skiller from Kerang RAR recounted how his indifference to refugees changed utterly the day a few young Hazara men came knocking at his farm door. He now employs thirty asylum seekers, and has become a strong advocate for their interests at both local and national level. Kate Grealy from Albury-Wodonga RAR presented another aspect of RAR's broad support base; that of committed youth. Kate spoke of her friendships with detainees and TPV holders, and underlined the important role of young people in the movement. Marilyn Webster, a relatively new member of the Albury-Wodonga group who described herself as a "normal" Australian, highlighted the crucial role of effective communication, not only among network members but with detainees and the public.

A series of workshops followed on the specifics of working with refugees and asylum seekers. Jenny Bourne (Port Augusta RAR) and Emma Corcoran (Port Hedland) related their experiences working with people inside the detention centres, and discussed some of the issues that arise in that work. Peter Job provided expert advice on how to prepare 417 applications and RRT submissions. Jack Smit's session generated healthy debate on the role of activism within the movement, while Kate Gautier's workshop on advocacy skills provided excellent resourcing advice and a powerful and practical insight into this demanding task. All workshops were well received, with the only criticism being that there wasn't enough time for more in-depth discussion and information exchange.

After lunch the pollies did their bit in a "Political Round Table". Margaret Reynolds, ex-senator and President of the UN Association of Australia, chaired a futuristic 'hypothetical' in which the representatives of the Liberal Party (Susan Ley), Labor (Roger Price), Greens (Kerry Nettle) and Australian Democrats (Andrew Bartlett) were asked to comment on various aspects of immigration, border protection and related policy as part of a future 'National Government of Reconciliation'. Audience reaction was divided as to how useful this exercise was; some seemed quite satisfied that the approach made the debate manageable; others felt that a more direct approach, with more time for questioning from the floor, would have been more effective. All the invited party representatives handled themselves well; even local MP Susan Ley managed a plucky performance, despite a dire and pre-emptive front-page headline in the local newspaper that morning predicting an impending "Refugee Showdown" at the Conference.

Two challenging keynote addresses were offered in the latter part of the afternoon. Cheikh Kone, a journalist and teacher from the Ivory Coast, gave an account his experience as a refugee, drawing a chilling comparison between the censorship laws that forced him from his country and the response of ACM and DIMIA to his attempts to publish a newsletter inside Port Hedland detention centre. Cheikh also emphasised the crucial importance of support to the refugee. Dr. Louise Newman of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists shocked many with the findings of her organisation's research into the psychological trauma suffered by detainees. Among the figures she presented were rates of trauma-related disorder in detention centres ten times higher than the national average, the progressive onset of development delays and disorders among children and instances of pre-pubertal suicide, a phenomenon virtually unknown in the general community. While they may be shocking, the statistics make an impressive case against long-term detention, and provide an effective tool in local presentations or approaches to MPs.

Following afternoon tea, conference delegates again had a choice of workshops: Pamela Curr addressed issues of detainees' rights and the lack of accountability of officials; Lara McKinley (RAR National) outlined the development of the highly effective TPV campaign; Ainslie Hannan (Brotherhood of St Laurence), Lorna Hannan (Justice For Asylum Seekers) and Jacki Whitwell (Refugee Council of Australia) introduced local lobbying and public information techniques, with a focus on the upcoming federal election; and author and psychologist Steve Biddulph gave an enlightening perspective on changing public attitudes and his national SIEV-X memorial project.

In the evening, over dinner at the on-campus "Sloshed Cod", Michel Gabaudan of the UNHCR - who'd travelled by Greyhound bus that day to get to Albury and was returning that night to catch an international flight - gave a highly informative perspective on the worldwide refugee situation, and in particular the impact of the exponential explosion in refugee numbers since the early 1990s has had on agency functioning. He highlighted the need for an alternative, global approach to dealing with refugees. Following Michel's address, Anne Simpson presented the second RAR Tampa

Human Rights Award to Elaine Smith for her 'passionate and unremitting work on behalf of asylum seekers detained on Nauru.' For those not familiar with Elaine's work, she maintains contact with over 100 people on Nauru. With the help of Geoff, her husband, she has set up and maintained the 'Nauru-wire' website (www.nauruwire.org), a vital link in connecting RAR and others with the most isolated victims of current Australian detention policy.

Sunday

After a welcome to the day by Dr. Penny Vine, chair of Albury-Wodonga RAR, Sunday morning began with another choice of keynote speakers: Pascale Allotey (Victorian Foundation for Health Promotion) on "Reconceptualising Racism" and Tony Kevin (former Senior Australian diplomat) on "Why SIEV X still matters"; Pascale's presentation focused on the results of her research into the treatment of asylum seekers in rural communities, challenging traditional conceptions of racism, while Tony's expose on the sinking of the SIEV X re-affirmed the need to have the Australian government's role in the tragedy fully examined. In a second round of addresses, Dr. Morag Fraser (School of Humanities and Social Science, Latrobe University) spoke about the role of the word in literature and the media in changing attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees, while David Manne, a solicitor and migration agent working with the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre, offered useful practical suggestions on different aspects of immigration processes and sources of service support. Again, the only criticism of the presentations was their duration, with many acknowledging the merit of doubling the time allocated.

The latter part of the morning again featured workshops: Sr. Carmel Leavey from the Edmund Rice Centre reported on the results of her work in tracing and maintaining contact with returned deportees. Jill Singer (A Just Australia) and Lara McKinley provided an overview of media dynamics, and some well-tested insights into developing an effective media strategy. Associate Professor Nicholas Procter and Dr. Penny Vine addressed the personal and interpersonal factors inherent in working with released asylum seekers; while Ainslie, Lorna and Jacki concluded their lobbying workshop. Howard Glenn (A Just Australia) gave a concise summary of the platform, priorities and activities of his organisation during the following plenary session.

Future Directions

[For formal outcomes of this session, see 'Resolutions of the Conference' below.]

On Sunday afternoon, the Conference convened for an all-too-brief session to discuss future directions for RAR. The discussion focused first on administrative matters, with Rob and Anne Simpson giving a summary of the work they have done since taking on the 'RAR Admin' role in October 2003. Their initial focus was on upgrading RAR's communication processes. This initially involved updating contact lists, then producing regular action bulletins, information updates and newsletters for circulation to RAR supporters and group contacts. Rob emphasised the crucial role of local group contacts, who had responsibility for distributing RAR communications to local members, in this process. Anne and Rob's immediate priority is the rejuvenation of the RAR website, due to be completed by the end of February with the assistance of Michael and Greg from Redback Graphix.

It was proposed that, rather than a formal national steering committee, which was found to be unworkable last year, an ad hoc consultative group be available to support RAR Admin, along the lines of the already existing media group supporting Lara McKinley's excellent media effort. There was agreement from the meeting to have Rob and Anne, with the help of Bellingen RAR, continue in the administrative role until February 2005, the time agreed for the next annual conference. It was also decided that a call should be put out to all RAR groups for expressions of interest in planning and running next year's gathering.

The second topic of discussion was RAR strategy for the coming national elections. There was strong support for RAR maintaining its non-party-political stance and concentrating on promoting public awareness of the refugee issue. Among the proposals considered were holding public meetings, to which local candidates would be invited, in every rural and regional electorate, with the aim of highlighting refugee-related issues. Groups in towns where a public meeting may not be effective were encouraged to contact their candidates, record their views and publicise them widely. RAR groups in marginal seats would have the option of adopting a more intensive electoral

strategy. There was enthusiastic support for the development of a 'Lobbying Resource Kit', incorporating Jenny Bourne's 'policy checklist' (indexed against the RAR 10 Point Plan), information on vote distributions and margins in all electorates from Margaret Rasa, and Project SafeCom's repository of MPs comments on refugee-related matters.

The third and final section of discussion dealt with future actions, and encompassed a number of different proposals. These included expanding the existing campaign for permanent residence for asylum seekers, possibly using slogans such as "Let Them Stay" and "Refugees Deserve a Permanent Future"; presentations focused on local Rotary, View clubs, schools, etc on refugee issues; establishing 'sister group' relationships among RAR groups to support the activities of frontline groups such as those servicing Baxter, where costs of support run at around \$500 a month; attempting to generate new RAR groups, with a target of doubling our numbers within a year; and a range of activities around this Year's World Refugee Day on 20 June. These activities included a "Grove of Hope" - the planting of 10,000 trees throughout Australia for every detainee and TPV holder; supporting the SIEV-X Memorial Project, especially by approaching school art teachers and principals; a "People in Cages" initiative, along the lines of Amnesty International's 'Daybreak in Detention'; and a 48-hour nationwide hunger strike. The World Refugee Day focus did not preclude RAR groups from supporting other pro-refugee initiatives such as those of RAC groups (including a convergence on Canberra, tentatively planned for August or early September). There was a renewed commitment to the RAR 10 Point Plan as a worthwhile and achievable charter, particularly in regard to its key points of ending mandatory detention, abolishing TPVs, dismantling the Pacific Solution' and doubling Australia's current refugee intake.

Closure

The 2004 Conference closed with a ceremony featuring a 'montage of comments' often heard in the course of RAR work, reminding the audience of its common purpose. This was followed by a poignant original song from Fay White. Once recognised as an ideal rather than a reflection of current reality, the sign off - a group rendering of two verses of the Australian anthem - was enjoined enthusiastically by most of those present.

Initial evaluations of the Conference undertaken by the organising group indicate a strong consensus that the event met and exceeded most expectations. Everyone indicated that they'd got something worthwhile out of it - better knowledge, renewed energy, practical ideas and skills, a sense of solidarity, contacts and networking opportunities. Apart from the points mentioned above regarding the "Round Table" format and the tight time constraints within the program, there were one or two other suggestions for next conference, including more direct representation of refugees and asylum seekers on the program and an orientation session for those new to refugee advocacy and activism.

Again, thanks to all - organisers, speakers, those who attended and those who were there in spirit - for a successful 2004 Conference. Let's hope the information, sense of common purpose and renewed commitment generated by this year's event will make the 2005 RAR Conference a time for celebration.

Resolutions of the Conference

The following resolutions were considered and approved by the Conference meeting on Sunday.

1. Administration

1.1. The conference requests that Rob and Anne Simpson of Bellingen RAR continue their role as RAR Admin until the appointment of a new group at the next national conference.

1.2. The next RAR national conference be held in the third week of February 2005 - expressions of interest welcome.

2. Federal Election Strategy

2.1. That RAR groups endeavour to undertake to hold a public meeting in every electorate to canvass the views of local candidates on refugee issues in the lead up to the federal election

2.2. That RAR Admin prepare a resource package to support this strategy

3. Future Directions

Recognising that refugee issues and refugee rights remain a significant factor in Australian national political life it is resolved that:

3.1. RAR undertake a national campaign calling for permanent protection for all TPV holders.

3.2. RAR aims to double the number of RAR groups across Australia by the next national conference and to implement a "sister" RAR program to support frontline RAR groups.

3.3. Each RAR group continues its educational and awareness campaigns by any of the following strategies:

- UN World Refugee Day, 20th June 2004 - Planting a "grove of hope" for refugees with a target of 10,000 trees representing every TPV holder.
- Support for the SIEVX Memorial Project – visiting local high schools and encouraging participation in the project (see www.sievxmemorial.com).
- Developing a local "People in Cages" awareness program
- Undertaking a 48-hour hunger strike

The meeting reaffirmed its commitment to the four key points of RAR's 10 Point Plan; ie, that Australia should have a policy for the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees that will:

meet international refugee obligations

abolish TPV's

end mandatory detention

at least double Australia's refugee intake

RAR's 10 Point Plan

(September 2003)

Rural Australians for Refugees call on the Australian Government to:

1. Receive all asylum seekers in accordance with our obligations under the UN Convention on Refugees which Australia signed in 1954. After being assessed, asylum seekers would either be accepted as genuine refugees or deported, according to long-established criteria.
2. Grant amnesty and permanent residency in Australia to all those asylum seekers currently in detention in Australia and in "Pacific Solution" centres.
3. Abolish existing holding centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea and abandon any further plans for new offshore centres including that on Christmas Island.
4. Stop military intervention against boat people. Using Australia's military against the victims of oppression is totally inappropriate.
5. Abolish the Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), and give the right to permanent residence to all those assessed as refugees so that they can rebuild their lives. TPVs leave people in limbo, denying them the possibility of secure settlement in Australia, preventing reunion with spouses and children and denying access to critical services.
6. Close all detention centres in their present form. Asylum seekers should be held in detention only to establish their identity and for criminal clearance, along the lines of the

Swedish model. As in Sweden, children should only be held in detention for a maximum of six days.

7. Take any detention facilities out of the hands of private enterprise. Such facilities should be publicly accountable and open to scrutiny, rather than be left to the mercy of the profit motive.
8. Recognise that there is an international humanitarian crisis of huge proportions which Australia cannot ignore, involving the mass migration of refugees and displaced people. Australia should lead an international search for co-operative solutions and support a world-wide increase in aid for refugees.
9. Promote the establishment of an international conference to review the International Conventions and revise current inadequate procedures for resettlement of refugees.
10. Recognising how small our current quota of 12,000 refugees per year is, Australia should double the quota to 24,000 per year.

Keynote speakers, workshop leaders and projects at the 2004 RAR National Conference (Listed in order of appearance on the program)

Fr. Frank Brennan - PO Box 522, Kings Cross 1340 NSW; phone (02) 9356 3888

Julian Burnside QC

Jenny Bourne (Port Augusta RAR)

Emma Corcoran

Peter Job

Jack Smit (Project SafeCom); Project SafeCom website www.safecom.org

Kate Gautier (ChilOut)

Sussan Ley (Liberal, MP for Albury-Wodonga)

Roger Price (ALP)

Kerry Nettle (Greens)

Andrew Bartlett (Australian Democrats)

Cheikh Kone

Dr. Louise Newman (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists)

Pamela Curr

Lara McKinley (RAR National Media, TPV Campaign)

Ainslee Hannan (Brotherhood of St Laurence)

Lorna Hannan (Justice for Asylum Seekers)

Jacki Whitwell (Refugee Council of Australia)

Steve Biddulph (author and psychologist; sponsor of SIEV-X Memorial project); SIEV-X website www.sievxmemorial.com

Michel Gabaudan (UNHCR); phone (02) 6290 1355

Elaine and Geoff Smith (Nauruwire); Nauruwire website www.nauruwire.org

Pascale Allotey (Victorian Foundation for Health Promotion)

Tony Kevin (former Australian ambassador to Poland and Cambodia) Visit Tony's homepage www.tonykevin.com/usievx.html

Dr. Morag Fraser (School of Humanities and Social Science, Latrobe University)

David Manne (Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre)

Sr. Carmel Leavey (Edmund Rice Centre); phone (02) 9746 1292; fax (02) 9746 0400. Edmund Rice Centre Appeal www.erc.org.au/aboutus/appeal.htm

Jill Singer - A Just Australia Website www.ajustaustralia.com/home.php

Assoc. Prof. Nicholas Procter

Dr. Penny Vine

Howard Glenn (A Just Australia)

Other Contacts:

2004 Conference organising group, Albury-Wodonga