

RAR 2005 Conference Report

CONFERENCE REPORT
Bundanoon, NSW
March 19-20 2005

The conference was organised by a small group of Southern Highlands RAR members. The weekend started on Friday night with drinks at the "Keil-na-nain", the home of Anne Coombs and Susan Varga.

RAR National Gathering 19-20 March 2005

Saturday March 19

Welcome to Country

Val Mulchahey welcomed delegates to the Southern Highlands, the traditional land of the Gundungara people. Val outlined the parallel between Aborigines and refugees and the treatment they suffered at the hands of Australian governments.

She said many Aboriginal people, particularly the older generation, can relate to refugee situation. Many can remember the time when they had to get permission for everything - to travel - to move away from an area, no passports, and no access to white schools. She said refugees have dreams like us all and should be welcomed, bringing their own cultures to mingle with all the other cultures already co-existing here.

'You are all welcome on our traditional land. Respect and love it for its beauty,' she concluded.

Challenges and Achievements

Chair: Anne Simpson, Bellingen RAR

Apologies from RAR groups at Lismore, Latrobe, Tweed & Gold Coast, Gloucester and Great Lakes

A panel comprising Elaine and Geoff Smith from Hastings, Irene Wallin of Bellingen, Bernadette Wauchope of Port Pirie, Mira Wroblewski of the Central Coast, and Ian Skiller of Kerang (Swan Hill) spoke about the successes and failures assisting refugees both in the community and in detention.

Elaine & Geoff: In an amusing dialogue between the two of them, Elaine & Geoff told how they gave they became involved and how it took over their life, particularly with the hundreds and hundreds of letters that Elaine wrote to refugees on Nauru. Geoff became known at their local post office as 'Mr Nauru' as here was there every day sending letters and parcels.

Elaine said her own family thought she was going too far but she was unable to stop. Their journey has not been easy and many of the people they came in contact with have been deported. One family stayed with them for a year after release from detention and they have been to Iran to attend the wedding of one of their friends who was deported. Compared to their safe, predictable life of five years ago their world has expanded beyond belief. The joys and sadness have made it all worthwhile.

Irene Wallin said there had been a mixed reaction to the RAR message in the Bellingen community but the group got started in about September 2001 and one of its main strengths was getting our message out. One of their main claims to fame was to produce Anne and Rob Simpson and Walter Schwarz. There is a lot of mutual support among members of the group which meets twice a month, plus their work at the community market.

One of the highlights was the Global Carnival with Julian Burnside and others doing a 'hypothetical' on the issue. She said they have fundraised through films etc but our strength is ongoing support of individual refugees, particularly those on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVS). Also visits to Hedland and Baxter. She said that they don't seem to have set future plans but stagger from one

thing to another as the need arises. Their way of educating the community is via forums with some entertainment. At present they are financially destitute, and will actively work on fundraising to give support for those groups around detention centres.

Bernadette Wauchope spoke about her amazing personal journey, and about the support from all round Australia, and people on the end of the phone who were always there.

It was the injustice of the whole situation that got them started and she, her husband and mother got together information about what was happening and started with a group of twelve people. They started to visit Baxter. At first they were very fearful, but then started meeting parents and children and organised a sports carnival at Port Pirie sports carnival so they could participate and start to meet people as well as meeting other refugees. She said RAR in Port Pirie has been successful talking individually to mayor, councillors - taking individual refugees to have coffee in a café like anybody else and that 'normalcy' helps change attitudes. Community spirit has grown and been drawn out by the RAR movement.

They have had success with the media, taking them into Baxter helped, particularly one ABC radio journalist. They have been very hands on networking, assisted by a positive media.

Because people in their community are getting the real story changes are happening. Bernadette saluted her partner Steve who has kept the home front going for her, "he's the glue that keeps us all together". People know the heartbreak that working with RAR can bring. What waste of human life these policies - 4 years 'inside'. She has been lucky that none of the refugees she had worked with have been deported but lamented the damage that was done while they were incarcerated. Future plans include helping these people to mend when they do come out.

Steve and Bernadette were this year made Citizens of the Year in Port Pirie, reflecting the impact they have had on their community.

Mira Wroblewski told of her journey in asylum seeker support. Her initial contact was going to the Woomera protest. She was totally unprepared but felt called to go there. When the fence came down she was suddenly confronted with police, and her first thought was the camp looked like Dachau and knew it was wrong. It was a life-changing weekend. She gave up her studies and moved out to Woomera, where she worked as a toilet cleaner. There was pressure to have her fired because she visited refugees, mainly older women in the hospital, in her time off. She was forbidden to put flowers on their food trays and bring in little food treats like a Cherry Ripe bar. She worked there for six months and being a friendly face was all she could do.

When she returned to the Central Coast she wrote to the local paper about the HEREOC report on children in detention. The Central Coast is predominantly white area, with a fair degree of social problems, but one of the journalists wrote a front-page article about Mira's experience in Woomera. All of sudden people knew her face and not all the reactions were friendly. An email address was included in the article and many people approached her asking what they could do. People came out of the woodwork and she said it revived her faith in white Australians. A RAR group was formed and one person contacted the House of Welcome in Sydney and now has asylum seekers visiting her house regularly.

Mira said political action will be an issue in the Central Coast as it is a marginal seat. Direct contact with asylum seekers will be the way to go and locals are fired up to meet them.

Since the coalition election win membership dropped like a stone, but she said that no matter how depressed we get we have to persevere. She is trying to think of fun things rather than having meetings which can be quite depressing. She is also asking members to take on specific tasks and they are responding well.

Ian Skiller said they now have over 400 refugees in his area. The RAR group there provides regular legal advice and now runs English classes twice a week. There are two teachers and a lot of community support. Refugees are helped with basics such as filling in Medicare and other forms. There is good feedback from the community about how the "boys" are coping. Picnics are held and have become a meeting place for refugees and the community and a point for donations. One

hundred and sixty people attended the last one with groups like churches approaching Ian to make donations for these 'get together' picnics. The 'boys' also find employment avenues this way.

They get great support from their local Federal member for Farrer. The other politician who is on RAR's side is John Forrest. Ian will report to John on the recommendations coming from this weekend. He is Ian's backdoor into influence.

Ian also spoke about his involvement in Australian Story which was shown on the ABC last year and which won a humanitarian award. It has also resulted in more legal support for Ian's RAR group and he has been invited to speak at all sorts of events.

Ian said he felt what was needed was a one stop shop, where employees, refugees, etc. could get the stuff together to mutually find what they wanted for employment. Swan Hill was selected as one of eleven towns, and is now receiving funding for three years to set up this project. Hospital workers, social workers, and employment agencies formed a group formed to get this finance. Ian negotiated with Swan Hill Shire which has on RAR's behalf applied for and received the grant, and in addition gave an office and phone. 'We now have an employment settlement and services officer and the one stop shop is up and running. Government agencies can use it, and so can refugees and employers, all centralised in our Swan Hill Shire.'

Ian said there was a real need for settlement services, the farming community is struggling anyway and things we take for granted refugees require.

He pointed out that mental health is a huge issue, refugees are adding to the strain mental health services provide which are limited in rural areas anyway. So he approached asked Hotham Mission (an organisation run by the Uniting Church in Melbourne to assist people without work rights) to come up and educate the local mental health workers and other groups to understand the issues involved. Ian and his group has also become involved in GROW the self-help mental health group which now runs group therapy for refugees and member once a week.

They will hold another a forum this year, inviting Ferguson and Beasley. Another refugee challenge this year is heading off the problems which can arise from families with possibly troubled youngsters/teenagers, coming into the community. 'All through RAR, you can't do it on your own,' he said.

NB: Refugee Sponsorship - Ian currently has seven job vacancies. Jobs available are for a quarry worker, and six people who can operate overlocking machines in regional Victoria phone: 03 5030 5452 for more information

The Current Situation

Chair: Rob Simpson, Bellingen RAR

Rob Simpson said RAR had gone through various stages and in many ways was now moving into the final stage. RAR needs to look to the future and decide on future directions. Currently we are still in the middle section, and this session will look at where we are now and look at the ups and downs of the experience.

Mark Green, Refugee Advice and Casework Services in Sydney.

His organisation is a community legal centre in NSW which provides legal advice for 650 clients from 75 countries each year.

Mark outlined the current world refugee scene. During 2004, 16 to 17 million people were of concern to UNHCR. Another 25 million were internally displaced. Applications for asylum in industrialized countries dropped to lowest in 17 years. This contrasts with increased acrimony in these countries, which were intent in keeping people out. He said Australia was not isolated from this and pointed out that our policies and achievements can have a global impact in both a positive and negative sense.

A huge development that will have an impact are the ten new countries going into the EEC. There had been several years of decline in resettlement but in 2004 there a significant increase in numbers being resettled in countries such as the US. There are seven million people in prolonged detention centres or camps for ten years or more.

In Australia, statistics are being highly politicized. Some are released other others are unavailable for public scrutiny.

Some available statistics are:

- 13000 per year are admitted under the humanitarian program.
- Currents TPVs are mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Nationally, as of January 399 were here on permanent protection visas
- 142 TPV denied full settlement services
- total 541 for that period, means TPV problem are not going away
- Up to a fifth of the people his group works with will have to go through the process again in three years.

He questioned the sanity of putting people on a three-year visa when ultimately they will be entitled to full protection visa. Regarding 417s, he said it was obvious the new minister (McGauran) did not understand the situation and was unaware of international conventions. Time need to be expended trying to educate new minister. He felt there should be complementary protection for people who would suffer gross human rights if returned to their country of origin.

Kate Gauthier from A Just Australia

Kate is on the Board of Chillout and was involved in the freedom bus. Major parties don't know what the community attitude is. There is an opportunity for lobbyists to go in there and put a case.

She said that now the 2004 election is over, and the emotion taken out of the situation, we can take a breather and take a more positive look at the situation. Some supporters negative about loss but in fact we now have opportunities to be more positive. As they no longer have to put on a united front or pander to public opinion.

A lot of agencies are working on different aspects. Churches are concentrating more on visas and working together we can work to achieve better policies to bring about a solution for those in long term detention.

Many backbencher believe in border protection and as the boats have now stopped there is no reason for mandatory detention. Talks with Vanstone and Howard seem to be creating cracks. We all need to look at who you are talking to and work on them. Tell them that their policy on keeping refugees out has worked but the repercussions of this policy now need to be dealt with.

She said that as RAR was now the strongest grass roots organisation it could do a do a lot with policy formulation.

Jane Keogh RAC Canberra

Jane said RAC had done a lot on the legal landscape and she herself became involved by sending parcels to Baxter.

She has created a database for Baxter, recording the names of everyone who has been in there, when they came out and where they have been. People can contact her for details.

One of the most pressing needs is to change the law and the Law Council is showing an interest in this. She urged RAR to become more involved and keep in touch with the Law Council.

She believed Amanda Vanstone wants to get rid of the problem but doesn't yet have enough support in government.

She touched on the Rural Migration Scheme but said people needed to read the small print as there were anomalies.

RAC has been to see twelve labour politicians trying to get them to think more deeply about the situation and get a dialogue going. She urged everyone to go to see their local politicians to keep them up to date about what is going on.

She said 200 boat people are still in detention, with half having had their cases reopened. Others are stuck behind wires indefinitely. Most of the fifty-four people on Nauru have cases in progress and hopefully most will be successful. Best thing to support individuals but keep a low profile.

Immigration agents have been found to help those in Baxter and the people working on these cases are and hopeful. Cases that are successful can be used as precedents for those coming behind.

She said the overall situation in Afghanistan very bad. The main thing is to keep up the pressure particularly, with Liberal backbenchers.

Jim Carty from the House of Welcome

Jim talked about the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS), saying the critical date was 27 August 2004. People who had been given a TPV before then could be eligible for the scheme, as could people on Return Pending visas. After 12 months working in a regional area, a refugee could apply for permanent residency. (More details were provided by the DIMIA workshop later in the afternoon.)

Jim pointed out that RAR could do a lot to help refugees to get functional English before they applied for a RSMS visa. When these people applied they were a telephone test and if they failed they had to pay an increased fee to apply. The normal fee was \$1870 but if they failed the test they had to pay a new application fee of \$5200 for the primary application and \$2700 for each supplementary person on the application.

Father Carty outlined the work that the House of Welcome, sponsored by combined churches in Sydney. He said they worked closely with RAR and in the last six months had organised for 40 people go on short holidays with RAR people in Braidwood, Orange and the Southern Highways. He said when they came back they were often transformed and renewed, realising there were a lot of good interested in their welfare. Day outings were also organised.

Father Carty said that recently the House of Welcome had received an anonymous donation of \$20,000 to help them in their work.

Like some of the previous speakers Father Carty said the HOW was increasingly worried about the number of people manifesting mental breakdowns, and didn't know whether they will ever recover.

Keynote Speaker - Phil Glendinning, Director of the Edmund Rice Centre

Chair: Susan Varga

Phil said his centre is increasingly working with the first and the last peoples' - indigenous and asylum seekers. He shared his reflections on the work carried out by the Edmund Rice Centre, tracing the fate of refugees sent back to their own country. He paid tribute to the principal writer and researcher, Sister. She became part of a five-person team which worked on the project.

Since the report was published, they've received many requests to try to contact family members deported.

He said anecdotes are not enough in advocacy, there needs to be hard evidence. The team set out simply to ask a question - if we move people from Australia, are they safe? Australia does not release any info about people sent back. So the group did random checks across eleven countries of people from thirteen nationalities who had all been in Australia at different times. Their stories were remarkably similar. These people were asked a series of questions, and the answers verifies.

Of the forty we interviewed, thirty-five were found not to be safe on arrival in their country. Eleven were in that position for two years, another twenty-four were unsafe long term.

The team looked at the process Australia takes to deport people. Deportees were given out of date landing papers, and others went to countries where they had no landing rights. Others were told they would be safe when they were landed but we witnessed people being arrested on arrival, some were taken straight to gaol and had to bribe their way out.

Phil cited many more cases which are available in the report. He said this system is creating terrorism.

He said the challenges for social justice advocacy are to work in collaboration with each other and to build a movement that provides evidence and facts that we can put before people. The legacy of the Howard government will record these years and history will judge.

In conclusion he quoted an Afghan saying. 'When the finger points to the moon the idiot looks at the finger'.

Future Directions

Chair: Susan Varga

Susan gave an overview of RAR and its current situation. There are now ninety groups throughout rural Australia, with some springing up without our knowledge.

She said RAR had decided to concentrate on a 'let them stay' campaign which could seed into an amnesty/clemency campaign.

RAR has recommitted to the ten point plan - as valid as three years ago. This includes doubling the offshore refugee quota. To assess where groups wanted to go a survey was sent out about future directions and the results are on the RAR website. Many of the speakers in the first session outlined the creative ways people are helping and how they are working and interacting within their own communities as well as at state and national levels. She also said it appeared the mental health issue was a growing concern. RAR could become more involved, as well, in working to change the draconian laws that govern the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. This is not an area that RAR has been involved in and could be a real possibility for action.

Speakers from the floor told about their own experiences and the work they are doing to help bring about change. These were Virginia Walker from the Bridge for Asylum Seekers, Margaret Piper from the Refugee Council of Australia, Riz Wakil, an Afghani refugee now living in Sydney and who is assisting other refugees and asylum seekers, Pamela Kerr from ASRC Melbourne, Trish Highfield from Sydney. RAR members who spoke included Ian Skiller from Kerang, Mira Wroblewski, Helen McCue, Lucy Bainger, Anne Simpson and others.

Workshops

For the last session on the Saturday afternoon delegates broke into four workshops. Reports were compiled of each workshop and were presented Sunday morning.

Conference Dinner - Saturday March 19

On Saturday night the conference dinner was held at the Bundanoon Hotel. Petrea King from the Quest for Life Centre was the guest speaker.

The Tampa Human Rights Award for 2004 was awarded to Anne and Rob Simpson for their dedication and hard work in helping refugees and their tremendous contribution to the growth of the RAR network.

Sunday March 20

Workshop Reports:

1. [Responding to the International Refugee Situation & Working the System Workshop](#)
2. [Campaigns and Actions Workshop](#)
3. [Rural Migration Workshop](#)
4. [Future Needs for TPV's and PPV's Workshop](#)

Chair Bernadette Wauchope

1. Responding to the International Refugee Situation & Working the System Workshop

Facilitator: Anne Simpson

Workshop Leaders: Margaret Piper, Refugee Council of Australia, Kate Gauthier, A Just Australia

After an initial discussion as to how the workshop would proceed given the two topics, it was decided they could be discussed in tandem as one (the International Refugee Situation), informed the other - (Working the System) in a strategic sense.

The following issues were discussed (not necessarily in this order): The context in which we work; Positioning Statements; The World context.

There are 38 protracted refugee situations around the world involving 7.8m people through Africa and Asia - the Thai/Burma border, Nepal etc People in these camps have no legal status, no capacity to earn money. The point was made that most of these people want to return to their country

Who has the influence on the world stage and what are they enacting: The leadership role on the world stage in terms of refugee law and protection is taken by Europe and Canada - not the US. It is important we see Australia as part of a global process. RAR needs to look at the international protection framework - particularly the European community and Canadian models to see what is working eg approaches to detention and what is not working (secondary movement ie treatment of boat people, warehousing) internationally.

The positive tactics/policies have cross fertilisation potential. We can utilise these in our work with Australian politicians. Italy may have taken up Ruddock's 'Pacific solution' model but this is not generally approved of within the community.

Reading the political players - Margaret said it was important to recognise who we are dealing with in Amanda Vandstone. Unlike Ruddock who believed 100% that his approach was the one and only correct response, Vandstone is more responsive and open to outside influence. Not only does she want to be liked and want Australia to be seen well in the international arena but she is also more responsive to criticism.

In the post-Ruddock era there have been substantial improvements in the secondary humanitarian migration stream i.e. the planned off-shore program with an additional \$276million being spent to pay for the cost of medicals, enhancing of the settlement scheme, refugee youth program and household formation program.

On one hand the government restricts asylum seekers using whatever means at its disposal to achieve this end in the case of the boat people and on the other hand (i.e. with the planned off-shore program) the government, with bi-partisan support is bringing refugees to Australia and spending an additional \$276 million to facilitate their integration into the community.

When thinking about our refugee policy need to recognise that it is not all bad and that DIMIA has more than one face - often contradictory. The entire program is not failing - 13,000 people come in every year under the planned migration scheme. Off shore and onshore refugees have very different set of experiences and hence have different attitudes. Currently DIMIA funded services exclude TPV's although some support services not DIMA funded may have more flexibility.

We can use this dichotomy to further our own work for the demonised refugee sector. Pushing for a flow over of benefits - making the programs more consistent.

In terms of the world stage, whilst our resettlement program is very good, we are tarred internationally with the Pacific solution image which was sold by Ruddock to the international stage.

Attitudinal shifts by the Australian Public - Margaret said she believed there had been a flattening off in the bell curve of the Australian public's attitude towards refugees. The uncertain middle ground has become less and those with a negative attitude (those who have bought the Howard fear package) and those with a positive attitude fattening.

She made the point that you don't need a majority to implement change - you need a vocal minority ie enough people to convince Australian politicians that it is OK to lead. Kate added that the Cornelia Rau case had led to more questioning of the Government's position - not just on moral grounds but on the grounds of efficiency or due process, this can support a vocal minority in changing the opinions of politicians.

Long Term Detention; a Fraught Issue to be Considered Carefully - Margaret said not all long-term detainees should have the right to remain - we need to ensure protection for those who need it based on real needs not just longevity of stay because they have been obstructive. Not everyone in detention is an asylum seeker.

Advice offered/Conclusions Drawn:

- Systemic or Individual action - it isn't a choice
- Diversity in approaches is critical.
- Both are necessary, complementary and equally valid.
- Personal Response - Best fit responses for activist - a diversity of focus and responses.
- Individuals need to make their choice based on what they feel most comfortable do and equipped to do.
- As RAR chapters we need to ensure we are sensitive to the dilemma faced by new members trying to find an action that suits them - they can be lost to the movement unless we address this when they are fresh to the organisation
- Actions should reflect and take advantage of the particular character of the organisation you belong to
- Reward or Demonise - how and when to choose
- Kate reiterated that we needed to complement as well as criticise - give everyone some respect and room to move forward.
- The growing band of 'uncomfortables' within the Liberal Party need support to increase their legitimacy and influence.
- We need to also recognise the many faces within DIMIA and respond to them accordingly.
- Finding Windows of Opportunity - understanding how policy change can be affected without taking on the legislation in a no-win political climate
- We can't get rid of the concept of TPVs as it has bi-partisan support however we can work on modifying the conditions. Now that the numbers are smaller, we can lobby for condition-based changes - family reunification, language classes, welfare assistance.
- Advocacy needs to target specific entitlements which require discretionary procedural not policy changes ratified by parliament
- Understanding the world stage and using it to influence Australian Policies and Practices

- Need to look at European law - in particular reception conditions - the common minimum standard offered and use it as a tool to modify
- Australian procedure using the argument to supportive politicians that 25 countries have agreed to these conditions therefore there is an international precedent.
- We need to set achievable goals rather than tackle what we cannot change.
- The bridging visa E-Plus with work rights is being presented as an option - it requires regulation changes not debate - just compliance from the opposition to get through.
- The concept of a panel of advisers to review cases (outside of DIMIA/ESC) also wouldn't require a change of law or regulations - just a change of policy. We could push for this as an option. Again side stepping to get gains.
- Should be careful to not overemphasise the moral right issue but work on the incompetence issue as it has more mileage with conservative thinkers ie taking too long to process.
- Seeing and empathising with a refugee's plight is not necessarily believing - looking beyond how individual situations present - confirming facts to maintain credibility and effectiveness
- Emotive response to the plight of individual refugee issues should be tempered by accurate data and background investigation to verify circumstances and importance of getting approval before naming names. Must always think about unforeseen negative consequences which may arise from taking a public action concerning an individual.
- Gaining the facts - sourcing research undertaken by others
- A plea was made for precise information from research bodies - Margaret said the Refugee Council web site has Q&A's European model on the as well as links to other research organisations.
- It was suggested the RAR website/newsletter could point members to appropriate links with plain English explanations of key issues
- Organisation Wide Responses - Know the political advantages of your group's persona
- RAR's strength was felt to be its national and rural character. We need to play on these unique characteristics.
- As rural politicians have more pull than their constituency dictates so can RAR by targeting local rural members and supporting those members who are prepared to push for change from within the coalition.
- We can encourage rural politicians prepared to speak out and give them (in particular Liberal/National party members) ideas for procedural changes using the European model that they are more likely to be receptive to.

2. Campaigns and Actions Workshop

Facilitator: Rob Simpson

Overall purpose of this workshop was to get a handle on priorities at the macro level. Recurrent themes to date include:

1. Act of Clemency - Rob used the term loosely, with a small 'c', because there is division around the term which some see as implying 'guilt', and there is some resistance to that.
2. The other area is specifically preventing forced deportations - the issue about the Baxter convergence is a separate issue. Involvement in that issue is a local RAR group decision.

John Ball (Uniting Council of Churches) spoke on the Act of Clemency

Fist the nomenclature - an Act of Grace - Act of Humanity - other similar calls have been made over a long period of time. However, Act of Clemency was the term initiated by religious leaders who wrote to the Prime Minister about long-standing detainees. That concept related specifically to asylum or stateless people, (not other style of detainees), detained for upwards of 12 months

which at the time totalled around 300-350. Mainland and Christmas Island were included, NOT Nauru - as that is being overseen by the UN.

The religious representatives called for a humanitarian action giving permanency status as a once off - just to clear the decks - as this long-term detention was an unintended result of border security policy. They sought full benefits to all on release.

A few weeks ago, the Liberal member for Kooyong advised John Ball that there is a lobby within the Liberal Party keen to express support, and principal areas of concern are:

- Long term detainees - dialogue with the Govt is possible as it is unintended consequence of policy.
- All temporary visas should become permanent and be considered separately to an Act of Clemency.
- Institute long term policy reform so that long term detention doesn't happen again. No long term centres at all - more community based restrictions, were essential.

Recommendations:

- Lobby Liberal party whilst Parliament is not sitting and before the budget session on May 10.
- Activists should write or visit local members - particularly back benchers.
- At ground level, two people are better than one when lobbying in person.

Other groups with whom John Ball has recently discussed these issues, advised:

- Amnesty International is launching an 'End Indefinite Detention' campaign - focused on the victims of the High Court decision. May also expand the campaign to include those kept over 12 months.
- Welfare groups – e.g. Red Cross, Hotham, etc, are not wanting to link to an Act of Clemency directly but are working with individuals who are most vulnerable. Their approach is a bit different to an Act of Clemency and would be considered as more general welfare.
- Can advocacy groups define what is a long-term detainee? Do we settle on 12 months which appears to be the de facto standard?
- Are we advocating for asylum seekers and refugees only - or other detainee categories e.g. where documents have been lost, or criminal or overstayers? John felt that for these other categories there are alternative groups available to address their difficulties - so our aims should perhaps focus on asylum seekers.
- A current campaign in Victoria is looking at increased entitlements for people suffering on bridging 'e' visas.
- Visa status: other groups have said permanency is not necessarily the immediate goal - but rather to get them out of detention itself. Then there is time to look at the options for specific appeals e.g. medical conditions, mental health, torture victims, etc. and then specific interest groups can help identify and work with the different categories.
- Need for a database: as reflected in Jane's work on the Baxter database.
- How do we gauge the capacity of the community to assist?
- Advocacy - do we lobby loud or work quietly?
- If we focus on the strategy of 'clearing the decks' first, then we can talk about what a long-term policy model may be?

Legal issues:

- Do we need first to change existing regulations/entitlements?
- The Law Council is working on the need to reform round the High Court decision of indefinite detention.
- Is it fair to lobby for full permanency status for all detainees when 'legit' refugees are only on TPVs?
- Re Act of Clemency. One concept might be a review mechanism outside the ministerial system. which came into play once a person had spent a specified time in detention.
- Is individual case work more effective than an overall Act of Clemency?
- It would gather information and quickly assess why any person had been detained - what were their visa options - starting, of course, with the longest detained.
- John referenced a soon to be released advocacy 'kit' or list of points - but the general thrust was that any lobbying should carry a simple main theme and then direct MPs to the experts we have in relevant fields, with our lobbying focused on the overall view.
- Virginia: For activists in NSW who don't have a Liberal member - it might be worthwhile trying someone who is not on-side, because as an organisation RAR does carry credibility.
- RAR to consider different models for the proposed Review Panel, eg processing the way NZ, Canada etc. do now - which is far faster.
- The composition of any such Panel - not a judicial Panel, but social workers, mental health practitioners, etc. community based to look at what support would be needed on release. That model does keep detention as one aspect of the policy. How should it take to establish if a person is a security risk?
- Any Act of Clemency would be irrelevant for the people who arrive in two months' time - which is why legal reform as an objective is so important.
- Rob: The concept of clemency for all must be accompanied by legal reform, because such an Act sets a precedent and the Government will not accept it.
- Isn't the Govt waiting for a message from the community?
- There has to be in place a broad consensus on key things we are seeking to make community lobbying effective.
- Ian Rintoul (Refugee Action Council) said more discussion needed on the implications for advocate groups. Clemency implies an act of generosity as opposed to something deserved.
- What we are asking for and the way we ask for it - there is connection between any aspect of the campaign and we need to make sure they are consistent. Long term detention and its ramifications is an insidious policy overall, and that is the message we should aim to get across.
- We should take advantage of this shift in public opinion; it should be used to wash over the whole political process, not just Liberal members and a call for clemency.

Deportation Policy:

- How do we stop it? There's an urgent need to stop forced deportation. Deportation is used as a rung in the public face of border protection. There is an internal political aspect also, as after a deportation there is rise in returns or encouragement to 'go back' through the Centres and the refugee community,
- If members had any information on individuals - if they are concerned about a deportation risk - share it with RAC so that it can be used to support legal activity against deportation.
- Media attention is fast and can help stop deportations. It also influences detainees themselves when they know there is public support. It helps them resist as best they can.
- Union members are a useful tool - those who do have the power to stop planes leaving - boats sailing etc. Example given of refuellers in WA who prevented deportation of a Somali man.

- Unions can provide their members with educated guidance on govt agendas, etc, generate sympathy from workers, to workers detained.
- RAR could connect with the public over a different aspect of the refugee issue - the Deportation issue and build another constituency around this aspect.
- Letters to airlines which perform these commercial activities - their part in the process is not good publicity.
- Leaflets which promote individuals and families give a face to the deportation story.
- Rob queried a hotline number which is to be called in an emergency deportation situation. Last 4-5 weeks two cases arose over conditions for a possible deportation. Ian says the National Anti-Deportation Campaign has an emergency number operating 24 hours, and the number is 0417275713. It is set up for that specific purpose and is not to be used for non-emergency or unrelated queries.
- Groups such as RAR could consider an Information night about Deportation as an aspect of detainee life. The public needs to know how to defend with facts.
- RAR can also alert its members to - being aware on flights in case they notice a detainee situation. - passing on any information about someone they believe to be at risk.

How does the charter air service as opposed to commercial flights affect this monitoring?

- Ian said improve liaison with pilots and airport union members so charter flights can also be monitored.
- Some of the 23 Iranians with cases currently under review, went on a hunger strike; as a result, deportations were put off and that allows further breathing space for the general campaign.
- Virginia Walker: Could the Clemency Act also waive the government imposed financial bills asylum seekers are hit with for detention centre residency?
- Group discussion around the word 'Clemency': Some disquiet was expressed. However, the intention is the act of clemency, even if we use an alternative word.

3. Rural Migration Workshop

Facilitator: Helen McCue

The main thrust of the workshop was to extract as much up-to-date information as possible about the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) from the DIMIA representative, Jeremy Stokes and to hear how RAR was currently involved and how it could become more involved.

A series of questions were elicited from the group as a basis for the workshop:

1. What is the RSMS and how does it work.
2. How to get started.
3. Are there any successful cases?
4. How to make it work?
5. How to get reliable information. What types of visas can be gained?
6. What is the definition of a rural worker?

As most of the questions were aimed at DIMIA Jeremy Stokes took the floor to answer them.

He said the scheme applied to all regional areas, including some capital cities but did not include Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle and Wollongong.

The scheme was no long skills based but required a worker to be employed regularly, including seasonal work, for a period of twelve months. A person can do jobs for several different employers over this period. The worker could live in the city but must be employed in a rural area outside the city limits. If the worker met these conditions a RSMS could be applied for.

These applications would be mainly from people currently on a TPV whose application for a PPV has been refused. However, the small print in the regulations say someone on a TPV must have been granted the visa before August 27 2004 to be eligible to apply for a RSMS. Anyone granted a TPV after that date is ineligible to apply. If granted the RSMS would be subjected to a two-year period during which the permanent visa could be overturned if the conditions were not satisfactorily met (although he said this would only happen in extreme cases.). People with permanence can apply for citizenship after two years.

The application price for a RSMS is \$1845 which can be paid by the applicant or the sponsoring employer. Health checks are carried out every 12 months during the period of the visa. Character and security checks are carried out by an external agency even though they would have already been carried out to allow granting of a TPV.

Jeremy Stokes and another DIMIA officer (Caroline?), administer the program from Melbourne and according to the House of Welcome and Ian Skiller (RAR Swan Hill) have been very helpful. Mr Stokes pointed out that people can only apply for spouse visa once they get their permanent residency. Spouse visas even for people on PPVs are taking considerable time to process. He did not know why as his unit was not involved in spouse and family reunions.

David Fancis from the House of Welcome and Ian Skiller spoke about their involvement placing refugees in rural work. David said the HOW carefully screening anyone interested in applying for the RSMS as it was important that those going into a rural area were realistic about the situation and there had to be a reasonable expectation that they would succeed.

He also pointed out that refugees should not be encouraged to apply for a RSMS if there was a chance they would be granted a PPV. They should only be discouraged if they have been refused a PPV or are on their second TPV. As the work situation in Sydney is very good it would be hard to get refugees, particularly families, to move to the country as many would feel isolated and cut off from their support networks.

The HOW is working with RAR Southern Highlands to assist Kazimi Zahir, a 25-year-old Afghani who is now working on a dairy farm in the Southern Highlands. He has a rented house and car, assisted by RAR Southern Highlands. David Francis said he was chosen because he was keen to apply for a RSMS, had an outgoing personality, spoke good English and came from a rural background.

Kazimi said he had twice been refused a PPV and was in danger of being returned to his country. Although he was earning good money as a tiler, he initially realised that moving to a rural area was his best chance of staying in Australia. He said he has been so overwhelmed by the warm welcome and help he has received that he is keen to stay in the country. He is also busy trying to interest other refugees from Sydney to move to the Highlands to join him.

Ian Skiller said that his group was also helping ten people who were working at Shepparton under the RSMS.

He said it was a good idea to approach organisations who may be able to help with funding to help people set up in the country. He also pointed out that it was necessary to identify where the skill shortages were and work with potential employers.

He also said that RAR needed to ensure not only federal members knew about the RSMS but that local councillors and state members be targeted.

Recommendations from the Workshop:

- RAR groups link up to exchange information
- Approach councils, especially economic development officers, to brief them about RSMS.
- The August 27 date for the cut-off for RMSMs be questioned and moves made to change it.
- Make sure refugees understand that the PPV is the most beneficial and gets wider benefits.
- Talk to employers or companies who may be able to become sponsors.
- Be creative about small groups becoming companies which can sponsor.

- RAR groups become away about the provisions of the RSM and be realistic about helping people to apply. Jeremy Stokes said people are welcome to contact him with any queries.
- A website that has good information is www.iarc.asn.au also www.refugeecouncil.org.au

4. Future Needs for TPV's and PPV's Workshop

Facilitator: Rob Bryant

Rob said there were now about 1000 refugees living and working in the Shepparton region in Victoria.

Juma Abdullah (now Juma Jason) spoke about his experiences as a refugee and now as an employer. He came to the area in 2003 after getting permanency and now has his own company employing refugees. His main task is identifying where there is a shortage of workers and finding workers to fill the vacancies. He rents seventeen houses in the Shepparton area which he makes available for arriving families.

Although he is now permanent, he still has family problems with his mother being a refugee waiting in Islamabad to join him. She has been rejected for a visa and is now being cared for by UNHCR.

Riz Wakil came to Australia as a teenager and spent nine months in Curtin detention centre. He was given a TPV while in Perth then worked in a shoe factory in Sydney. He works part time as a graphic designer and researcher and now has a PPV.

He said there are lots of people willing to help by solving individual problems refugees experience. He said with the experience people can quite often identify a potential problem and take action in the early stages.

One focus of the workshop was trying to get rid of the TPV and giving people PPVs to start with. Discussion revolved around the different kinds of visas and the need to make sure applicants knew the full implications when they were making applications.

Needs of visa holders were highlighted. They included:

- First jobs, then housing
- Mechanism for upgrading skills and obtaining funding
- Education needs and restrictions. It was pointed out the TPVs can complete their HSC although they could not access HECS. Cases such as the person who achieved a 95.5 UAI score and was awarded a scholarship to university need to be made public, so people can see that many refugees can be high achievers if given the chance.
- Girls' education, working with cultural issues.
- Mental health support.
- Need to get documentation correct to apply for PPVs, education, finance and employment.
- Assistance needed to help refugees learn to drive, know the road rules, insurance and obtain a car as many of the jobs were on industrial estates poorly served by public transport.

Jim Carty from the House of Welcome spoke about the problems of families being split. He also went into the details of what medical and rent assistance could be provided.

Rob Bryant said there was a necessity for a central communication point so information could be disseminated effectively. There was also need for an alert system for volunteers and for DIMEA to work more closely with support groups. He also outlined how the regional migration scheme was working in the Shepparton area.

Juma Abdullah gave details of how he had set up his company and what tax benefits he could gain.

Riz Wakil spoke about the support group for young people that was working so well in Brisbane, placing young refugees with families from the same background and some of the initial problems and about his concerns about mental health, highlighting cases of suicides. He said receiving a letter from the Government was often confusing and distressing time for recipients and causes great psychological distress. In some cases, relocation was necessary to stop the distress escalating. Another point of concern was kids in foster homes who contacted each other and influenced each other's behaviour. There was a danger of gangs forming and these need to be broken up.

Summary:

- There was need for more assistance to help people with the visa process
- Lobby universities for educational support
- Database needs to set up for jobs, accommodation, visa information, companies willing to sponsor and take on workers
- Mental health and relocation support needed.

RAR's Strategic Objectives For 2005

Chair: Anne Coombs

Before the session began, Alan Nield of Whyalla RAR read out several short poems he had written about life in Baxter. On a visit to Baxter they were served a simple meal prepared by a young Iranian man. This thoughtful and sensitive man was traumatised, along with other inmates, by the abduction of three of his friends the week before and the forcible return to Iran of two of them.

Baxter Bread

I ate a piece of Baxter bread,
A plain white baker's roll
But it became a sacred meal,
And Manna to my soul.

He spoke about the prisoners at Baxter who were rationed to one boiled egg a week. Some refused their egg as a protest again the mean-spirited action of the managers of the detention centre.

Baxter Rations

One boiled egg every week,
Is ACM's Baxter ration,
Same for the strong and the meek
And those who like eggs with a passion.

"Where would you like your boiled egg?"
asked the neatly dressed ACM cook,
"I'd like you to firmly insert it,
in the place where it came out of the chook.

Following Alan's entertaining interlude, Anne invited people to speak from the floor about what strategic objective RAR should pursue in the future.

Following are suggestions that came from the floor:

- Continuing education of our community to illustrate the refugees haven't gone away - Sally Waterford
- Database of jobs in rural Australia call job site Refugees for Rural Australia - John Highfield
- Support a vision for Act of Clemency - get concept into public agenda leave it up to DIMIA to deal with the details - Anne Simpson

- Addendum - Can only be effective if broad based movement with support and principle adopted by rest of refugee movement - Susan Varga.
- More action around complementary protection - Virginia Walker
- More support for Petro Georgio, Bruce Baird and others within the coalition who are speaking out - Jan Hale
- RAR Working party for legislative change be established - Susan Varga.
- Education and lobbying of new senators as a priority.
- Lobby for Point 10 of our plan - calling on government to double migration of off-shore refugees coming into Australia to counteract our skills shortage - Helen McCue
- Establish a media fund so that we can from time to time to buy advertising space or use other publicity and promotions events to promote our program - without relying on media report - Alan Nield.
- A plan/kit in relation to settlement services so that when refugees do move into the bush they are supported - Ian Skiller
- Addendum - Set out clearly the advantages which can be gained from working in rural areas for refugees - case studies, examples etc to promote the benefits and support available . Thought of relocating hard for refugees with city based networks in place so we need to promote the concept to the refugee community - Margaret Piper
- A private database of location of refugees and asylum seekers which can be used as a speaker base. Strictly confidential - Anne Simpson
- Cultural integration - extend offers of weekend holidays - working closely with organisations such as House of Welcome
- Need to link database of refugees on TPVs and jobs available so it can be circulated to the refugee community - House of Welcome rep

Summing Up

Chair: Helen McCue

Helen gave an overview of what had been discussed and achieved in the last few days.

She said we need to re-affirm that we are an important vocal minority, a significant movement across Australia akin to the Anti-Vietnam War movement.

She said there was a lack of political involvement in Australia generally and RAR can provide a grass roots model. We also need to try to get more young people involved in RAR.

During the conference the situation with protection and permanency had been aired as had personal accounts of the work many individuals are doing. It was necessary to acknowledge the achievements and significant gains that have been made.

In the previous session many people came up with suggestions for action so we must sift through them and come up with a plan of action.

As well as all the areas RAR has been so far involved in we need to seriously consider helping to create employment for refugees, plugging into rural economic development for rural areas and expanding the welcome towns and welcome weekends concepts.

Another area to explore is the creation of educational opportunities for refugees in rural Australia - through TAFE system and other education sectors ie opportunity for skills development. Move on from fruit picking to more substantial training.

Continuing to educate the community seems to be another priority, with the Shepparton example of outreaching to Rotary clubs etc to tap into existing community groups.

Resolutions of the Conference

Helen McCue called for Resolutions from the floor:

RESOLUTION 1

The members of RAR gathered here endorse the move of RAR Administration to Port Pirie.

RESOLUTION 2

We thank Anne and Rob Simpson for their work in the past year as RAR Administrators.

RESOLUTION 3

We purchase a RAR Admin laptop for RAR administration purposes on which database and contact lists will be maintained. (\$1000 raised at the conference to fund the purchase of a laptop)

RESOLUTION 4

RAR is a network rather than an organisation, however those RAR groups who want to undertake formal fund-raising such as raffles should make sure they fulfill the necessary legal obligations in their State.

Addendum - that we approach a public interest advocacy centre to provide pro-bono advice to RAR for circulation to RAR groups as to what is legally entailed in each state regarding incorporation, seeking public benevolent status permission to fund raise etc.

RESOLUTION 5

That we float the option of establishing a working party for legislative change in the next newsletter

RESOLUTION 6

That the RAR National Gathering of 2005 calls on the Government to provide a general amnesty for all asylum seekers and for all TPVs and related visa holders as a forerunner to general reform. (Helen McCue)

Addendum - That we form a strategic alliance with other organisations to effect this.

RESOLUTION 7

That RAR commit itself to a Refugees for Rural Australia campaign as a means of giving permanence and employment to refugees and to community enrichment and economic growth to our country towns. That this be supported by a jobs database, a settlements services plan (inclusive of mental health support) and promotional material aimed at refugees in the cities. (Anne Coombs)

RESOLUTION 8

That RAR groups approach local councils and local TAFEs to inform them of the RSMS and enlist their cooperation with RAR in providing education and social services for refugees in rural towns - (Susan Varga)

RESOLUTION 9

RAR groups explore the possibility of setting up Young Australians for refugees within our groups. (Ann Beaumont)

RESOLUTION 10

That we reaffirm our commitment to Point 10 of our 10-point-plan - to double our intake of refugees. (Helen McCue)

Closing Ceremony

The conference closed with a moving ceremony organised by Southern Highlands RAR members, Anne Donaldson and Ruth Hartcher.

Many thanks to everyone who attended and to the organisers for a well organised, inspiring and educational 2005 conference. Special thanks to members of Southern Highlands RAR.