

Synod Speech

31 August 2014

Fr Matthew Smedley

Synod urgently calls upon the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to revise the Federal Government's policy in regard to Asylum Seekers.

Australia is a country of political and humanitarian contradictions. We send troops to fight for the freedom of people; we play a humanitarian role, drop food parcels, distribute medical assistance and provide overseas aid. Yet we turn away the most desperate and vulnerable Asylum Seekers.

Millions of people throughout the world are seeking asylum – we all know this – our military have been involved in their wars. Vietnam, Cambodia, the Gulf War, the Iraq war and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, millions of people have been forced to flee. At the height of the exodus around 8 million Afghans were living abroad as refugees.

An Asylum Seeker is a person who has fled his or her own country and applied for protection as a refugee. A person who has fled the ravages and trauma of war, political and religious persecution.

Detention Centres were first opened in Australia by the Keating Labor government in 1992 in response to a wave of Indochinese boat arrivals. There have been a number of migration acts hardening the situation since.

In September 2001 just prior to the Federal Election, and in response to the August Tampa incident, the Howard Coalition Government, again with bipartisan support, introduced Migration Amendment Bills giving effect to a policy of offshore processing which came to be known as the 'Pacific Solution'.

In 2001, in response to 9/11 in which Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists were killed in New York, Australia, in a bipartisan decision, joined forces with NATO countries and sent troops into Afghanistan.

In 2003, Australia joined the United Kingdom, the United States and over 30 other nations as part of the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ to invade Iraq.

The politicizing of the Asylum Seeker issue has led to inconsistent policies; the Howard Coalition Government closed Manus Island, the Rudd Labor Government dismantled offshore processing on Nauru, and the Gillard Labor Government proposed the Malaysian Solution.

Politicising of Asylum seekers reached a peak in the 2013 Election campaign as both major political parties outdid each other in hardening policies in relation to Asylum Seekers. The Coalition Abbott Government reopened Manus Island and Nauru

This motion urgently calls upon the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to revise the Australian Federal Government’s policy in regard to asylum seekers.

We welcome the Minister’s announcement that all children under 10 years of age and their families held in mainland Australia detention centres who arrived after July 19th 2013 will be released into the community before Christmas this year, on Bridging visas. This includes 150 children and their families.

We urge the Minister to extend this to the 712 children who arrived after the 19th July 2013 and who are being held in Australian and offshore facilities including Nauru and Christmas Island.¹

The Australian Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014 reported systematic violation of the human rights of children on Nauru and serious physical and mental health concerns including self-harm and medical neglect of children on Christmas Island.²

The Australian Human Rights Commission National Inquiry quoted that the average length of time for children in detention centres on

¹ <http://www.skynews.com.au/news/national/2014/08/22/morrison-to-face-child-detention-inquiry.html>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/31/immigration-department-detention-child-mental-health-inquiry>

the 31st July this year was 349 days compared with 115 same date last year.^{3 4}

In 1989 the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted and ratified, with entry into force in September 1990, signed by Australia.^{5 6}

The Convention restated and developed the principles of the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by 78 countries including Australia. The 2nd principle states:

“The Child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him [or her] to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.

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This motion calls upon the Australian government to release all the children from detention centres, including offshore detention centres, into the community of Australia.

At the recent Australian Human Rights Commission, Minister Morrison reported that there are 30,000 refugees, men, women and children waiting for legislation to pass through the Senate.^{8 9}

³ http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/_pdf/immigration-detention-statistics-may2014.pdf

⁴ <http://www.asrc.org.au/resources/statistics/>

⁵ <http://www.info.dfat.gov.au/Info/Treaties/treaties.nsf/AllDocIDs/E123F4F71DCAE3E7CA256B4F007F2905>

⁶ <http://www.info.dfat.gov.au/Info/Treaties/treaties.nsf/AllDocIDs/E123F4F71DCAE3E7CA256B4F007F2905>

<http://www.humanium.org/en/childrens-rights-history/references-on-child-rights/declaration-rights-child/>

⁷ <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/child.asp>

⁸ <http://www.immi.gov.au/About/Pages/detention/about-immigration-detention.aspx?tab=3&heading=immigration-detention-and-community-statistics>

⁹ <http://www.asrc.org.au/resources/statistics/>

The 2011-2012 Department of Immigration statistics show that 93% of the boat arrivals assessed were found to be refugees. Legitimate Asylum Seekers.

The latest and most surprising proposal by the Abbott Coalition Government is to send Asylum Seekers to Cambodia – details have been kept secret although it has been speculated that the federal government will pay Cambodia \$40million to take up to 1000 'refugees' from the Nauru detention centre.

The United Nations is concerned for the safety of these refugees considering Cambodia's history of treatment of minorities and government opponents.

This motion calls upon the Federal Government to close detention centres in Australia, to release the Asylum Seekers into the community and to cease offshore processing.

The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees came into force in 1954. Australia has been a signatory since 1954.

Article 31 of the Convention recognises that refugees have a lawful right to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum regardless of how they arrive or whether they hold valid travel or identity documents. It is incorrect to refer to Asylum Seekers who arrive without authorization as "illegal."

30,000 asylum seekers, women, children and men are waiting for legislative changes to determine their visa status.

This motion calls upon the Federal Government to make transparent the information about maritime operations and the processing of asylum seekers as they apply for protection as refugees and to remove the term 'illegal' in relation to asylum seekers

The Minister for Immigration and Border Protection administers Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program. We ask the

Minister to increase the number of refugee places offered. (From 13,750).¹⁰

While we engage in the theatres of war in countries throughout the world, the victims of these wars, the Asylum Seekers, are seeking our hospitality, our acceptance, and our love as they recover from their trauma and loss.

This motion calls upon the Minister, under the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection Humanitarian Program, to increase the numbers of asylum seekers to be accepted into Australia.

The Synod requests the Registrar to write to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to convey the content of this resolution.

This Synod also endorses the efforts of ministry units and Anglicare North Coast in providing practical assistance for refugees and requests Bishop-in-Council to form a working group to resource the ministry units on this issue and to continue to respond to this issue on behalf of the diocese.

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¹⁰ <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/refugee/ref-hum-issues/pdf/humanitarian-program-information-paper-14-15.pdf>