

Candidates Forum for the discussion of policy regarding people seeking asylum in Australia

I acknowledge the Wurunjeri people of the Kulin Nation and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge that I am standing on stolen land and sovereignty has never been ceded.

I also pay respect to all refugees here tonight, and I offer you a heart-felt apology for the way you have been treated by our government – both LNP and ALP.

Last night I attended a yarn with some Indigenous people. One of the discussions involved the need for truth-telling. There is also need for truth telling in debates about refugees and migration.

The reason party form policies based on evidence. There is no evidence to support our refugee policies.

Human rights lawyer, Shen Narayanasamy, has done some wonderful research. Shen shows how yet again those in power control the narrative – even when that narrative is not true.

Shen suggests it has been a deliberate political strategy to focus the public's attention on a few thousand asylum seekers rather than the 800,000 people arriving each year from Asia, Middle East, India and Africa.

Historically, we have been a country that welcomed refugees. How did our narrative on refugees change so radically?

For example, we now suggest that refugees might be 'economic migrants'. Yet we welcome 800,00 economic migrants each year. In fact, our country is built on economic migrants.

The first wave of post 2nd world war migration began with Displaced Persons. These people fled their countries that had been utterly destroyed by war. And we welcomed them.

In 1976, we welcomed the first boatload of refugees fleeing Vietnam. By 1982 Australia had accepted close to 60,000 Vietnamese refugees. And we brought them hereby plane.

The current narrative: "Offshore detention is the only way to save lives at sea". This is complete nonsense. Flying refugees to Australia would certainly save lives at sea.

Shen put the number of immigrants from 1984 – 2013 into Excel. The graph showed a steady increase that suddenly skyrocketed after the election of John Howard. By the time Howard left office in 2007, the LNP government had more than doubled Australia's intake of migrants.

The big difference is the number of migrants that came to Australia on a humanitarian basis. Prior to Howard it was around 1 in 5. By the time Howard left office, that humanitarian intake plummeted to 1 in 50.

I regularly invite refugee families for a short holiday in my beach shack. I've had some fabulous holidays with people from Sri Lanka, Iran and Sierra Leone. The most recent family was from Syria. The father applied for a skilled migrant visa but he was flagged by the Immigration Department. Why? Because he, his wife and children were from a war-torn country and trying to seek safety here.

We've set up an entire system designed to deter people to seek asylum in our country.

This family ended up on a boat and they spent 4 years in a detention centre. They now live mostly on charity. Not working has had a terrible effect on the father. But the most dreadful thing is the trauma on the 12-year-old son. He is old enough to remember the terror of being on a boat and the terror of being in a detention centre. This young boy is deeply traumatised. And we are responsible for that.

On a positive note, this family were lucky not to become part of the Pacific Solution. What a disgrace calling our policy of transporting asylum seekers to detention centres in the Pacific Ocean, a "Solution". A solution for who? Certainly not people from LGBTI community were have been detained in PNG, a country hostile to LGBTI people. This must never ever happen again.

The Reason Party believes the solution to the Pacific solution is to close all offshore detention centres and facilitate the immediate evacuation of Manus and Nauru.

However, if the next government delays the evacuation of offshore detention centres (as Ged suggests an ALP government might), the next government must:

- Ensure the health and safety of people in offshore detention centres
- Provide international NGOs and the media access to offshore detention centres

When people apply for asylum, there should be a strictly enforced time for security screening. After security screening, asylum seekers should be brought to Australia and assisted to settle in regional towns and cities while their claim for refugee status is assessed. A predetermined timeframe should be set for processing these claims.

Thank you.