

ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR VERSE 2

BENEATH OUR RADIANT SOUTHERN CROSS
WE'LL TOIL WITH HEARTS AND HANDS
TO MAKE THIS COMMONWEALTH OF OURS
RENOWNED OF ALL THE LANDS
FOR THOSE WHO'VE COME ACROSS THE SEAS
WE'VE BOUNDLESS PLAINS TO SHARE
WITH COURAGE LET US ALL COMBINE
TO ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR
IN JOYFUL STRAINS THEN LET US SING
ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR

OVERVIEW

While it seems like a 'new problem', the issue of asylum seekers in Australia has been a fiercely debated political topic for generations. Unfortunately our nation's record is blemished.

A humane refugee policy requires that a country honour its commitments under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In recent years, Australia has been repeatedly found to be in breach of this convention, and also in breach of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, for our treatment of asylum seekers when they arrive on our shores – including children.¹ This is shocking, but true.

This fact sheet debunks some of the myths in a debate that has plagued our nation for a very long time.

BACKGROUND

Australia has a long history of settling asylum seekers. Sadly, we also have a long history of indifference and blatant ignorance.

In the late 1930s, as Nazi Germany began rounding up and slaughtering Jews, Australia made only minor changes to its White Australia immigration policy² and largely ignored the happenings in Europe, which led to the deaths of at least six million people.

Researcher Dr. Paul Bartrop noted that Australia's record in defending Jews at the time leaves much to be desired, "not for what the Australians failed to do, but what they said they were doing and how that did not correspond with their actual behavior".

Fast-forward more than half a century, and what Australia says it will do, we are now actually doing. But that's precisely the problem, because what we're doing also happens to be a serious breach of our commitments under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and under the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

1 <http://hrlc.org.au/un-finds-australias-treatment-of-asylum-seekers-violates-the-convention-against-torture/>
2 <http://guides.naa.gov.au/safe-haven/chapter8/australian-responses.aspx>

On this front, there are many myths that cloud the debate on asylum seekers.

Myth 1: They're 'illegals'

Under the UN Refugee Convention, to which Australia is a signatory, any person has a right to arrive on our shores and submit a claim for asylum. How they arrive makes absolutely no difference to their validity as an asylum seeker. Most people claiming asylum in Australia arrive by plane, on a valid travel visa.

A 2015 Parliamentary report notes: "Although the numbers fluctuate, usually only a small proportion of asylum applicants in Australia arrive by boat — most arrive by air with a valid visa and then go on to pursue asylum claims. While the number of boat arrivals has risen substantially in recent years, it is worth noting that even in high arrival years they still comprise just over half of onshore asylum seekers in Australia."³

The same report notes that a greater proportion of those arriving by boat are found to be genuine asylum seekers.

Myth 2: Asylum seekers are queue jumpers

The so-called 'queue' is a reference to an official list of refugees registered with the United Nations, and awaiting resettlement in a new country. In October 2016, there were about 21.3 million refugees on the United Nations 'waiting list'⁴

In 2015, the total number of resettlement places on offer across the entire world was just 107,000. You do the math... or we can do it for you. If you join the 'imaginary queue' today – and ignoring the fact that it grows every day– you can expect to wait up to 199 years for resettlement.

Of the 245 million refugees who had their status recognised or were resettled in 2015, just 0.48 per cent - that's less than half of one percent - were assisted by Australia (11,776 people).⁵

Myth 3. The Detention Centres are like school camp

And the most terrible myth of all falsely romanticises what we're doing with, or to, the asylum seekers who have arrived on our shores. In November 2015, there were 543 asylum seekers (including 70 children) being held in indefinite, mandatory detention on Nauru, and 926 adult asylum seekers on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea.⁶ And by 'mandatory detention' think prison. Because that's what the camps on Manus and Nauru are like. An anonymous guard at the Baxter camp in Nauru explains, "I'd release them all tomorrow if I could. You can see them getting ill and getting berserk because of the length of time they are in there."⁷

In fact, more asylum seekers have died on Manus Island than been resettled – three dead, as opposed to zero resettled. ⁸

Arguments against 'letting them in'

The main arguments against letting in asylum seekers are that:

1. It encourages people to make a dangerous journey across the sea.
2. Australia will be flooded by refugees if we continue to let people in.

3 http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AsylumFacts

4 <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

5 <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/statistics/unchr2015/>

6 <http://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/immigration-detention-statistics-31-aug-2016.pdf>

7 <http://refugeeaction.org/information/inside-the-detention-centres/>

8 <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/more-asylum-seekers-have-died-on-manus-island-than-have-been-resettled-report-shows-20150716-gidi1b.html>

Specific rebuttals to these arguments

Neither of these arguments comes from a humanitarian perspective. And neither of them is true.

1. People make the decision to put their lives – and those of their children – at risk in a dangerous sea crossing, because their circumstances are so bad that they feel safer on the water than on the land they've fled. The logic is simple - no sane person would risk their life, and that of their loved ones, to put themselves in a worse position. Asylum seeker drownings at sea do occur – they're a tragedy, but that doesn't mean people who attempt journey should be punished. Furthermore, as previously established, only a small portion of asylum seekers do arrive by boat – most venture to Australia safely via plane - therefore this weak argument only applies to the minority.
2. Australia has never been flooded by refugees. Countries like Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey have, with 1.1 million, 1.6 million and 2.5 million refugees respectively. The largest number of boat arrivals in Australia on record occurred in 2013 – it was 20,587. That's just 0.8 percent of the number of refugees currently being housed in Turkey. And it's 0.09 percent of the total number of refugees currently registered with the United Nations.⁹ If we treat refugees more humanely, of course more will come. But we shouldn't view that as a negative.

Moreover, Australians have the largest homes on earth. The average freestanding house in Australia is 245.3 square metres and is home to an average of just under three people. A standard tent for a UN refugee family is one tenth of that size – about 25 square metres - and it houses on average five people.¹⁰ The point is we have plenty of room in Australia. What we lack is political will.

Put simply, Australia has an obligation, under international law, to treat asylum seekers fairly, and to do our bit globally in assisting the world's most marginalized people. And we are shirking this responsibility. But put more simply, it's the right thing to do.

Mums 4 Refugees

- Who are Mums 4 Refugees?

Mums 4 Refugees is a network of strong women working towards an Australia to be proud of. An Australia that is fair and inclusive and welcomes those seeking asylum with kindness and open arms. They're providing a social and legal support network for people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds. They're avidly fostering the development of new advocates, activists and campaigners who seek to amplify the voices of those suffering in detention. And they're empowering them to disrupt the status quo and challenge the inhumane and irresponsible way Australia is dodging an international responsibility.

- How are they involved?

Mums 4 Refugees will be directing 10% of the direct sales made from our ethical ginger beer towards the refugee activism organisation most in need at any given time. These organisations are involved in funding projects focusing on offshore Australian run detention camps.

Their project is real. They want to see change. They are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with other advocacy groups in the refugee movement. They are proud to stand with YOU, demanding #EndTheAbuse #CloseTheCamps and #BringThemHere.

<http://www.mums4refugees.org.au/>

9 http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1314/QG/BoatArrivals
10 <http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/95186/208600-Shelter%20instruction%20flyer-EN-HR.pdf>