



CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES IN NEW SOUTH WALES CLRI(NSW)

Prophetic. Pro-Active. Prayerful.

The Honourable Kevin Rudd
Parliament House
Canberra

20 August, 2009

Dear Mr Rudd,

Re: Refugee Policy

We write on behalf of the CLRI Justice committee, a group representing the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in NSW. CLRI numbers approximately 3,500 Catholic Religious women and men and their associates. The congregations have a long history of involvement with Asylum Seekers, Refugees and their families and communities, particularly in the areas of education, health, migration advice and welfare. We follow in the footsteps of Mary MacKillop, whose life and vision you so much admire.

We affirm the extent of the policy change that has occurred since the Federal election in 2007, particularly changes to the immigration detention system, the abolition of the temporary protection visa, new funding programs aimed at improving housing affordability, and the reviews of education, employment and case support programs. It is clear that these are providing practical benefits that are supporting the settlement programs for refugees and their families.

At this stage, there are four areas, however, which we believe need urgent reform. We urge all members of Parliament to give serious consideration to these changes, so that Australia's reputation as a responsible global citizen and advocate of a fair go for all will be restored.

End to the excision policy

We are concerned about the continuing use of Christmas Island to process unauthorised boat arrivals. We believe that all asylum seekers are entitled to have their applications for protection determined under the procedures that apply on the mainland and that they should have full access to independent legal representation and other support. This would include access to Christmas Island by Independent lawyers and Migration Agents.

We urge the government to bring an end to the Excision Policy (which is based on a legal fiction preventing asylum seekers from landing on "Australian soil") in order to ensure that Australia complies with its obligations to refugees under International law.

SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

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Reform to the current refugee intake policy

The Australian Government has advocated successfully for a stronger Resettlement Service within UNHCR as part of a strategy to give resettlement a higher priority. Australia is now in a strong position to enhance its role as a global leader in refugee resettlement, leading by example and advocating actively for other nations to increase their involvement in resettlement. A larger refugee program and breaking the numerical link between onshore and offshore refugees are, we believe, critical steps in this process.

Resources for international refugee protection

Australia has contributed \$37 million to UNHCR for refugee protection, but has spent a massive \$1.3 billion on border protection, national security and responses to people smuggling. It is our belief that redressing this imbalance would contribute significantly to a more humane national policy and could help educate Australians about our responsibilities as a global citizens.

Housing for refugee families

Housing is an area of critical need for refugee families. We believe that the injection of Commonwealth funds into new housing projects needs to include a deliberate and more comprehensive policy, which addresses the specific needs of refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia.

We are aware that the situation of asylum seekers and refugees remains a sensitive political issue in Australia. Misinformation and unhelpful comments by certain members of the Parliament and the media are clearly designed to play on the fears and lack of knowledge of many Australians.

It is our sincere hope that all members of Parliament will assist in building awareness in the community of the truth regarding asylum seekers and refugees – both in terms of the reason for their situations and in terms of Australia's obligations as an ethical country, and as a member of the global community.

Yours sincerely,

(for CLRI NSW)