

## **TIME FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF PATRIOTISM**

**SPEECH TO THE NSW LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK 2015, WARRAWONG HIGH SCHOOL,  
12 JUNE 2015 – PAUL POWER, CEO, REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA**

I would like to begin by thanking Aunty Bev for her moving and personal welcome to country. It is an honour to be here today in the Illawarra region, country which has been in the custodianship of indigenous people for many thousands of years and which, in much more recent times as Aunty Bev has noted, has become a new home for people from many corners of the earth.

Last weekend, my wife and I went to the movies to see “Woman in Gold” which tells the story of Maria Altmann, who fled the Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938 as her Jewish relatives and friends were being arrested and their property stolen. The most prized possession stolen from Maria’s family was a portrait of her aunt, which eventually ended up in a national museum in Vienna where it was hailed as Austria’s “Mona Lisa”. More than 60 years later, Maria returned to Vienna to try to reclaim what rightfully belonged to her, as the last remaining relative of the family which owned the painting. She was strongly opposed by officials of the Austrian Government who wanted to keep what they saw as a national treasure. Maria was given invaluable assistance by an Austrian investigative journalist, Hubertus Czernin, who uncovered evidence on which her case to reclaim the painting was based. In the movie’s version of events, Hubertus is asked by Maria why he is helping her when other Austrians are not. He replies that he is “a different kind of patriot”.

That phrase lodged in my brain and has been there ever since: “a different kind of patriot”.

In the current debate about whether or not Australia should welcome people seeking asylum, I hear a lot of voices saying or suggesting that our national way of life is under threat. Any discussion quickly descends into talk about shadowy threats, terrorism and sharia law. Even a discussion on ABC radio about the prospect of refugees on temporary visas moving to regional towns was introduced with the question: “Could this mean a mosque coming to a town near you?”

Should Australian patriots be worried? Is our way of life under threat? Are our national values at risk? I would answer “yes” to these questions – but for a different set of reasons to those with the loudest voices in the current debate.

A different kind of patriot thinks deeply about our national values, about what we want our country to stand for. As a teenager and young adult growing up in a very ordinary street in an unfashionable suburb in Western Sydney, I valued my neighbourhood’s cultural diversity and the fact that it became the place where people who had lost everything because of persecution could start again. An essential national value for me is that Australians prefer to take the side of the battler in a clash with the rich and the powerful, will argue for a fair go for those most disadvantaged and will take the side of a person being bullied, not the bully. I recognise that these values are not exclusively Australian ones but are essential human values, based on the finest aspects of different faith traditions and the belief that all human beings are created equal. But as citizens of a nation built largely by migrants and refugees who arrived with nothing but hope, these values are particularly important to us.

These values are under threat and it requires a different kind of patriotism to speak up, to refuse to remain silent. Millions of Australians are deeply offended by a policy which results in children being locked up indefinitely because their parents had the temerity to hope that Australia might offer them enduring protection from persecution. Millions of Australians are offended when Ministers, Parliamentarians and the shock jocks who do their bidding launch attack after attack on the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission because she has the hide to point out the physical and sexual abuse of children in Australian-funded detention centres and draws attention to threats to Australia’s tradition of respecting the rule of law.

A different kind of patriot knows instinctively that Australia must be on the side of the stateless Rohingya people of Burma as they struggle to find anywhere where they can live free from oppression. We don’t want to be on the side of the Government of Myanmar which stripped them of their citizenship, the extremists in Burma who forced them out of their homes or the officials in other countries who have spoken publicly about turning their boats away. A different kind of Australian patriot cheers the efforts of the Acehese fishermen in Indonesia who acted with compassion to

rescue those at risk at sea and feels disgusted when our Prime Minister says “nope, nope, nope” to our neighbours’ request for help in resettling some of the persecuted people who will have nowhere to go.

In responding to complex issues of displacement and movement of people across borders, I am not suggesting that the choices are simple ones between good and evil. But when thinking about these choices, what fundamental values do we bring to our deliberations? Is our starting point that we should do everything we reasonably can to see that persecuted people are protected? Are we guided by a fundamental belief in the equality and dignity of all human beings?

Or are our decisions guided by a belief that Australians are somehow better than others, that people we don’t know are probably a threat to us, that we must preserve our national privilege at all costs and that it is OK for us to turn away when others are in distress? If that is so, what sort of country do we want Australia to be in the future? Do we really want Australia to be known internationally as a nation which is fearful, selfish and spiteful towards those who criticise it? What will it be like to live in a country like that?

Refugee Week provides us with an opportunity to think about our national values as they apply to people seeking protection from persecution and to imagine the sort of country of which a different kind of patriot would be proud.

It’s no coincidence that we have chosen the Illawarra region to host this year’s NSW launch of Refugee Week. While intolerance exists at some level in every community, this is a community overwhelmingly with a long and proud record of welcoming people who have lost everything because of persecution and war. For 70 years, the cities of Wollongong and Shellharbour have been receiving newly arrived refugees in significant numbers, giving them the opportunity to start again in a new land and to give back to their new society. Refugee Week is a celebration of the culture of welcome which the Illawarra has embodied for so long and also a celebration of the many achievements of people who once were refugees.

Around Australia over the coming week or so, we will see more than 250 local events, in big cities and small towns, marking the achievements of those who now call Australia home and honouring the efforts of those who have extended a hand of friendship to unknown new arrivals. You will see from the local calendar of events being circulated today that Refugee Week events in the Illawarra over the next two weeks will include a film screening, concerts and a refugee camp exhibition at Wollongong and Keira High Schools.

In hosting this event today, we at the Refugee Council of Australia are very thankful for the assistance provided by the local organisations which are at the forefront of community efforts to assist newly arrived refugees. I would particularly like to thank Illawarra Multicultural Services, SCARF and STARTTS for their support in organising today’s launch. Our principal sponsor for Refugee Week in NSW, Settlement Services International, has been involved in planning this event from the start and is doing so much to support Refugee Week in this state. We also appreciate the support given by our other principal sponsor Victorian Multicultural Commission, our major sponsors Navitas English and AMES Australia and our other sponsors Multicultural NSW, NSW AMES, NSW Teachers Federation and the Salvation Army. We have a great partnership with SBS and I’m very pleased that the chairman of SBS, Nihal Gupta, has joined us for today’s function. And, of course, we are honoured to be hosted today by Warrawong High School, which has done so much for many years to educate successive generations of newly arrived young refugees.

You will note that the theme of Refugee Week this year and for the next two years is “With Courage Let Us All Combine”. These words are taken from the often forgotten second verse of our national anthem. These words are, of course, preceded by the lines: “For those who’ve come across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share”. In choosing our theme, we want Refugee Week to appeal to a different kind of patriotism, one which encourages open hearts and open minds, one in which citizens are committed to advancing Australia as a fair nation.