

STOPPING HARM, SHARING RESPONSIBILITY AND CELEBRATING COURAGE

SPEECH TO THE VICTORIAN LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK 2015, VISY CARES HUB, SUNSHINE, 15 JUNE 2015 – PAUL POWER, CEO, REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

I would like to thank Uncle Perry Wandin for his welcome to country and acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and their custodianship of the land we are on, paying my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge the City of Brimbank as a great multicultural city, a city which has welcomed and become home to thousands of refugees, a perfect location for this year's launch of Refugee Week in Victoria.

The theme of Refugee Week this year and for the next two years is taken from the second verse of the national anthem – “with courage let us all combine”. It is the line following those now sadly ironic words: “For those who've come across the seas, we've boundless plains to share”. In choosing this theme, our goal is to encourage thought about our national values as applied to people seeking protection from persecution, considering how we can all combine courageously to advance Australia as a fair nation.

We also see courage as a critical element of the refugee experience. Refugees are people who face persecution because of who they are or what they believe. It takes courage to refuse to deny your identity or beliefs in the face of oppression. It takes courage to step out into the unknown and seek a life free from persecution and to start again from scratch in a completely unfamiliar land. And those of us who have always enjoyed peace and freedom are called to be courageous on a much more modest level – to speak up when see persecuted people treated with injustice, discrimination or indifference.

For Refugee Week this year, we at the Refugee Council of Australia would like to promote three key messages.

The first is a three-word slogan with a different message: Stop the harm. As Australians, we cannot deny that successive Australian governments' focus on deterring people from seeking asylum here is resulting in significant harm to children, women and men who believed that Australia was their best hope for enduring protection from persecution. We've seen children driven to the edge by extended, indefinite detention, even five-year-olds attempting suicide. Inquiry after inquiry and report after report have aired serious allegations of sexual and physical abuse of children and adults in offshore detention centres. And yet the government response has been half-hearted at best and all too ineffectual. This year we have been advocating for two very modest steps towards stopping the harm. We have asked the Government not to send children and adults to detention in Nauru and Manus Island at least until it has implemented all the recommendations of its own reports into this abuse. We have also asked the Parliament to do what the UK Parliament did last year under David Cameron's leadership and legislate to set an absolute limit on how long a child can be detained – in the UK's case, seven days. Both these requests have been ignored so far. But we must have the courage to continue to speak up and say to our elected representatives: Stop the harm.

The second message for Refugee Week is that Australia's international response to refugee crises must focus much more on sharing responsibility with countries in the front line of large-scale flows of refugees. To our national shame, we are doing less than we have previously, at a time when displacement through persecution and conflict is at its highest level in 70 years. How does our Government justify cutting the Refugee and Humanitarian Program by 6250 places per annum (as it did in 2013), slashing more than \$11 billion out of Australia's aid program over several years and turning down a direct request from our neighbours in South East Asia for help with refugee resettlement while they are acting to protect lives at risk at sea? If we really don't want dangerous and unregulated flows of desperate people across our region, we must get involved in every way possible to see refugees well protected as close as possible to their countries of origin. How does Australia positively influence the protection of refugees in various countries in South East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East? By getting involved in practical sharing of responsibility with the countries in the region which most need our backing – through targeted aid, logistical support, offers of refugee resettlement places and brokering more resettlement places in other countries. And also by not modelling the very policies which would be even more disastrous for persecuted people if they were

taken up across Asia – turning back boats, shutting our borders, sending asylum seekers on to other countries, indefinite mandatory detention and denying asylum seekers the opportunity to work to support themselves. It is so short-sighted of us as a nation not to comprehend how much worse the situation for refugees would be across the Asia-Pacific region if Australian-style policies were copied widely by other nations. And yet we probably have more to gain than any other nation in seeing refugees treated fairly and in an orderly manner.

The third message for Refugee Week is that we must not lose sight of how much we have gained as a nation by welcoming 800,000 refugees since 1947. On Friday, we lodged a submission with the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Australia's migration intake, arguing for a larger Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The case is sound on humanitarian, social, cultural and economic grounds, particularly when the contribution of former refugees is considered over a lifetime. The late Professor Graeme Hugo charted the considerable economic, social and civic contributions of refugees in his landmark report in 2011. His research illustrated that refugees are more likely to start their own businesses than any other group of migrants or Australian-born people. The statistics also tell us that the children of refugees are more likely to get better university qualifications, more likely to be professionals or managers and more likely to own their own home than the children of Australian-born parents. In our submission to the Productivity Commission, we also highlight the contribution of former refugees to rural and regional Australia, including the 160 Karen refugees who have settled in Nhill over the past six years and whose combined contribution to the local economy has been estimated by Deloitte Access Economics so far at \$41.5 million.

Many of the benefits of Australia's refugee and humanitarian program are less tangible – but still profoundly important. Like the fantastic efforts of Minty Saberi, who features on our Refugee Week poster and has been promoting water safety among members of refugee and migrant communities. As Australia's first Afghan-born lifesaver, Minty has also been an impressive builder of cultural bridges, linking new communities and long-established ones by fostering a shared love of the beach. We thank you, Minty, for allowing us to share your story through your photo and for joining us today as a speaker.

We would also like to thank David Holland from Life Saving Victoria for supporting Minty and for his organisation's generous donation of a prize voucher to encourage refugee communities to get more engaged in water safety.

As an organisation with no regular funding, we rely on sponsors to support our national coordination of Refugee Week and events such as today's state launch. Since 2005, our most generous sponsor of Refugee Week has been the Victorian Multicultural Commission, represented today by acting chairperson Ross Alatsas. We also thank our other principal sponsor, Settlement Services International, our major sponsors AMES Australia and Navitas English and our other sponsors Multicultural NSW, NSW AMES, NSW Teachers Federation and the Salvation Army. We thank Brimbank City Council for its partnership with this year's launch and thank the council's Administrator Jane Nathan for speaking today and Terri Soumilas, Chris McIntyre and Stephen Torsi for all their fantastic support in preparing for today's event. It is great also to have the support and involvement of the State Member for Niddrie, Ben Carroll.

We also value our partnership with SBS, which does so much to highlight and celebrate the strength of Australia's cultural diversity. We appreciate your efforts today, Sarah, as MC, and the work Jackie Leewai and Christine Militsis have put in behind the scenes. SBS has brought along a photo booth today and I'd like to encourage all of you to go along and get your photo taken at the end of today's formalities.

There are so many others who have assisted us today and countless others who are working very hard this week around Victoria and across Australia to make Refugee Week a success. Nationally, there will be more than 250 local events, involving inspiring music, the arts in all its forms, good food, challenging ideas and celebrations of the survival and achievements of people who have started again after losing everything they previously knew. May all of us be inspired by the courage in our midst.