

Opinion Piece ‘The Southern Cross’ – May 2016

Party policies on refugees and asylum seekers: will it matter how we vote?

Last month’s Southern Cross editorial drew attention to the upcoming federal election and the fact that the policy platforms of Australia’s main political parties offer slim hope of any real change for asylum seekers.

Justice for Refugees South Australia (J4RSA) is committed to educating and influencing the policy agenda of all political parties in order to improve the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. During this election period, we are ramping up efforts to clarify the political parties’ positions on asylum seekers for the voting community, and to advocate to our political leaders for change in their parties’ positions on asylum seekers.

As conscientious voters, we want to be informed. We want to cast our vote in line with our convictions. In the matter of the treatment of asylum seekers, we want to know the facts. What is the Liberal Party’s position? How do Labor Party policies differ? What about the Greens?

The facts

Some 30,000 asylum seekers are currently living in Australia. These are people and families who have fled terrible circumstances and are actively building new lives in communities across the country. But they live in a state of limbo. Their status is undetermined. Many have been in this uncertain situation for years.

Another 1,500 asylum seekers are being held in offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru, also awaiting determination of their fate, also living in limbo.

Party positions

As stated in last month’s Southern Cross editorial, there is little difference among party policies where positions on offshore detention are concerned. Neither major party is advocating immediate change to offshore detention. Regardless how we vote, for the 1,500 people being held on Manus Island and Nauru nothing is likely to change.

However, where policies regarding the 30,000 asylum seekers already living in Australia are concerned, there are differences.

Both the Labor Party and the Greens have published policy commitments to abolish the Coalition Government’s Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). Psychologist Damian McInerney’s article in last month’s Southern Cross highlights how the so-called “protection” for refugees under the TPV system has proven to be damaging to and creating uncertainty for people.

Both the Labor Party and the Greens have promised to replace TPVs with a pathway to permanent protection and citizenship for the 30,000 refugees living in Australia, as well as the right to apply for eventual family reunion.

This small but powerful policy change would release these 30,000 people from the anxiety of an uncertain fate. It would also save considerable “Onshore Compliance and Detention”

costs to the Australian taxpayer, for which \$1.691 billion has been allocated in the 2016-17 budget. These costs for bureaucratic tracking, unnecessary surveillance, repeated renewal of visas, etc could be diverted to more productive purposes.

In summary

The Labor Party's and the Greens' commitment to abolishing TPVs opens the way for a clearer future for refugees and asylum seekers living in Australia. However, under the Liberal Party's current policies, the TPV system, with its cost to the Australian taxpayer and the human cost of uncertainty it imposes on refugees, remains in place.

Neither the Labor Party nor the Liberal Party policies offer any hope of immediate relief for those suffering the cruelty of indefinite offshore detention on Manus Island and Nauru. Only the Greens policy statement calls for the abolition of offshore detention. The Labor Party policy statement contains the seeds of an eventual solution to offshore detention. At this point, the Liberal Party policy statement does not.

Other proposed measures in the Labor and Greens policy statements, which the Liberal Party does not support include doubling Australia's annual humanitarian intake to 27,000 (Labor) or 50,000 (Greens) and a boost in funding for UNHCR to \$450,000 (Labor) or \$500,000 (Greens). These are measures that would strengthen Australia's position among the 45 signatory nations in our region sharing responsibilities under the Bali Process Declaration on People Smuggling and help secure the safety of our sea-lanes.

Call to action

If you would like to take an active part in advocating for more humane and effective ways of addressing the issue of asylum seekers and refugees than the approaches presented in our main political parties' policies, please visit www.justiceforrefugeessa.org and consider joining us at J4RSA.

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