

## Community Sponsorship of Refugees (CRISP)

If you have a concern for refugees and would like to be more directly involved, you might be interested in this new program that the Australian Government is currently trialling.

For many years the Government has capped the number of humanitarian visas offered to refugees but has now agreed to increase the quota if members of the public will take on the welfare of the additional families.

This opens up a prime opportunity for church groups to show some love and once again take a lead in this important area.<sup>1</sup>

This policy shift will mean Australia is more closely aligned to other countries like Canada.

Canada has an official Government refugee settlement program (like Australia), but for years have allowed members of the public to group together and directly sponsor refugees as well. Religious and humanitarian groups have responded to such an extent that Canada can now help nearly twice as many people to resettle. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has shown leadership to welcome the new arrivals. Rather than building 'walls', Canada has extended a welcome mat. (For example - they have settled 40,000 Syrians since the crisis there)

The experience from Canada is when the public are directly involved all sorts of positive stories are generated.

The Australian refugee experience has been overshadowed for some time by a fear of boat arrivals. Politicians have exploited this for electoral advantage, competing to introduce tough border protection policies that have tended to 'punish the innocent'. This focus has steadily undermined compassion for refugees in general.

Fortunately, in recent months bi-partisan support has grown in Australia to shift back to more humane policies and the Government is backing the 'Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot' with a view to increasing Australia's refugee intake as well.

### Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP)

Essentially CRISP is designed around the idea that a small group of 'normal people' can band together and care for a family for the first year. This group is called the 'Community Supporter Group'.

The Government will cover the costs to bring the family to Australia with the supporter group meeting them at the airport and guiding them through each issue and challenge over the first year.

The arrivals are granted permanent visas with access to Centrelink / Medicare etc. The Supporter Group put in the time and some funds to help the family get established.

#### How will it work in practice?

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<sup>1</sup> I once heard a story of two women walking on a beach after a storm and the beach was covered with starfish that had washed up. Every now and again one of the women bent over to toss a starfish back into the water. Eventually her friend said – *Why bother, that's not making much difference when there are so many.* To which she replied.

*Well, it's making a big difference for that one!*

We have an opportunity to change the future for families fleeing from danger.

An important consideration when rolling out this program, is that the vulnerable refugee family is properly supported when they arrive and that everyone involved is safe. The supporter group also need support and some training.

To ensure this, the program is being administered around Australia by a not-for-profit group called Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia – CRSA

The following link is a short video from the CRSA webpage:

Click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2LB9gE6vto>

### **Essential things the supporter group commit to do!**

Lower down is a link to the CRSA application guidelines (which are quite detailed) but to save you time, the following is a summary of the basic requirements for you to be accepted as a supporter group:

1. The group needs to include at least 5 adults who live near each other.
2. You nominate a group leader who will liaise with CRSA to fill the application form (including details about each member and Police clearances etc).
3. Members participate in two half day training sessions.
4. The group agree to support a family that CRSA select. The program doesn't allow you to choose your candidate family (apart from an option to nominate a preferred religious background if you wish)
5. A **time commitment** of about 10 hours a week support for a year (this is a combined total from the whole group)
  - o Various group members take on each challenge like
    - Arranging the interim accommodation
    - Transport from the airport
    - Registering with Centrelink / Medicare / Bank accounts etc
    - School enrolments / English lessons
    - Orientation to the neighbourhood
    - Understanding the medical system
    - Assistance to find permanent accommodation and employment.
    - Providing social connections
6. A **funding commitment**: The group opens a dedicated bank account and raises funds to cover some basic needs like:
  - o Temporary accommodation for about 6 weeks
  - o Second-hand furniture and white goods
  - o Initial food requirements

The family will be eligible for Centrelink and to work, so the financial support is supplementary. The CRSA guidelines include estimates, but the cost will vary depending on the size of the family and the availability of things like housing and donated goods. A minimum fundraising goal of \$5,000 is probably realistic.

A significant factor with CRISP is that the Supporter Group can host the arrivals anywhere in Australia (where they themselves live) if they can demonstrate the ability to support them.

The CRISP pilot will run for several years, and the objective is to link 65 families in 2023 (increasing to 95 families in 2024)

The following link to the CRSA webpage contains more detail and the application form:

[CRISP Application Guidebook - Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia](#)

## **A Missional Perspective**

As Christians we are to show love to the poor and the stranger which is our call to be involved in social justice. This might be sufficient motivation to get involved, but acting well in this space also opens up a great opportunity to share our faith.

I personally find that when I have time to win the trust of an unbeliever by showing real care for their welfare it becomes much easier to share about the Lord (who is the reason we 'care')

Refugees have usually been badly treated along their journey and your kindness over the year together can be quite impacting.

### **Sponsoring a family from another faith background**

You will find that nearly all refugees come from cultures that respect God and they are quite comfortable to talk about religion.

If you sponsor a non – Christian family (for instance a Muslim family), these early months and years are frequently a time when they re-evaluate what they believe and ask questions. This may be first time that they can question things openly (a practice not encouraged in some societies).

Our loving actions can go a long way to dismantle a misleading view of Christianity that is perpetuated in their countries of origin.

On the positive side of things – we can help people see Jesus with new eyes as we speak of our love for him, and this can be a step towards people coming to faith.

Inevitably you will become part of their social circle as they connect with their wider ethnic community group. When you win the heart of your sponsor family – they will introduce you to others who will also want to engage. This is a multiplier effect that can go way beyond your immediate connection.

### **Sponsoring a Christian family**

If your sponsored family are already Christian, you may be helping them navigate through a vulnerable transition while they find a suitable place to connect with the Church in Australia. Children and youth are particularly vulnerable and exposed to temptations. They often learn English quicker than their parents, who struggle to guide them. Your loving support of the whole family can make a big difference.

### **Our witness to our own unbelieving friends and family members**

If you and a group of your friends sign up to support a family, it won't be long before others get to know what you're doing and want to contribute. Unbelievers are more likely to take notice and follow our lead when they see us living out our faith.

Perhaps our own youth (who are losing interest in church life) will take us more seriously when they see the older generation getting involved in robust social causes. This is the territory that the next generations care about. Involving your children or grandchildren in an adventure like this could be a way back into fellowship for them and strengthen the intergenerational bonds.

### **Transformation that flows both ways**

Naturally we start by thinking about how we can help people like refugees, but it is worth noting that we will most likely be changed ourselves.

If we are responding to the Lord's prompting – he will open up a rich world to us as we undertake this journey.

## **Support from LCA Cross-Cultural Ministry**

If you decide to form a CRISP supporter group, the Cross-Cultural Ministry Facilitator (Craig Heidenreich) is available as a consultant. We may even be able to link you with an LCA member who has experience befriending refugees. We are ready to back you in this important endeavour and once you know the nationality of your family, we can provide language tips and cultural background to help you prepare.

Another important thing we can offer is how to develop a missional mindset and a respectful attitude as you interact with the family.

### **Other ways to assist refugees**

If you are reading this and thinking, *I would like to help, but committing to this level of support sounds like too much* – there are alternatives.

#### **Formal volunteering options:**

There are many organisations with programs to support refugees who would welcome you as a volunteer. Just do a google search 'supporting refugees in.....' and add your town or city and options will come up.

#### **Informal responses:**

You don't actually have to sign up officially with anyone to make a difference.

Why not just befriend a refugee newcomer that you meet informally!

There are thousands of these people living among us in Australia who would welcome a kind word or offer of help. They are often concentrated in certain suburbs of our capital cities. Others are settling in regional cities and towns like Alice Springs, Toowoomba, Logan, Cairns, Townsville, Armadale, Albury, Shepparton, Nhill, Bendigo, Geelong, Mt Gambier, Naracoorte, SA Riverland, Murray Bridge and Launceston.

If you find yourself talking to someone of refugee background, ask how they are going and offer some support. Things that are easy for us can be very helpful to a newcomer and build the relationship. (Even simple things like helping someone understand an official letter)

Some refugees already living in our communities do not receive much (or any) official support and are in desperate need, so you might well be a Godsend.

### **Further reading**

Refugee policy has been a fraught issue in Australia for some time and the new Labor Govt has plans to change a number of things, so I have added two appendixes to this paper to provide more context for those who are interested. The first is an overview of the last 10 years or so, and the second a summary of several new Immigration policy settings which are being implemented in 2022.

## Appendix 1: Summary of Refugee Settlement over the past decade (2012-2022)

The Australian Govt Immigration Policies have been quite complex over recent years, which may be a deliberate strategy so that Australian citizens find it difficult to know what has been happening. (Obscuring the true issues)

### General facts about refugees

Sadly, about 60 -70 million people around the world are displaced due to conflicts and need help. They can languish in camps for many years. A select group of western countries offer permanent settlement each year to about 200,000 of those most at risk. There is no orderly 'queue' for people to be processed and the outcome for the lucky ones is more akin to 'winning the lottery'.

Australia has an annual settlement quota of about 13,750. We also have occasional bursts of compassion to increase our official intake. Recent examples being Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians. This settlement quota is referred to as the 'regular' channel. As people arrive through this channel, they are given permanent residency, and can apply for citizenship after 4+ years. They are also eligible for Centrelink, Medicare, and some English lessons – but not too many other handouts.

Many refugees stranded overseas do not have access to an official channel to apply for help. So (in desperation) they move towards safer places where people might show them some compassion. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) recognise this as reasonable behaviour and call these people 'Asylum-seekers'.

Historically, Australia had a reputation as a compassionate nation amongst refugees and some have risked a boat trip to ask for asylum. It is these 'boat arrivals' that have been controversial and the average Australian finds the news reports with pictures of desperate people hard to deal with.

The numbers of people seeking asylum in Australia are a fraction of those seeking help in other countries.

The UNHCR is the international body that work in camps to assess the asylum claims of people to determine if they are really in danger or just hoping for a better life (economically). The criteria to be deemed a 'Refugee' is quite strict. Australian officials follow these same criteria when assessing a person who arrives by boat. Significant effort goes into verifying the persons story, and it is important to note that consistently over 70% of boat arrivals are deemed to have valid claims as refugees.

If people arrive by boat (the irregular pathway) and are assessed to be a refugee, the Australian gov't might give them a visa, in which case they would be counted within the annual quota (13,750). This opens up a debate about who is the neediest.

### A bit of history

You may remember the 'Tampa' incident in 2001 when a Norwegian ship rescued 433 people from a stricken refugee boat and asked permission to off-load them in Australia (causing a diplomatic standoff).

This occurred 2 weeks before 9/11 and right before the November 2001 Australian election. John Howard 'skilfully' linked (middle eastern) refugees with a shocking terrorist attack and won the election by suggesting that Australia was under threat by terrorists posing as refugees.

Those working in Refugee settlement were fully aware that refugees are usually fleeing terrorism not causing it.

The Howard Gov't put in place tough settlement policies after winning this mandate, using statements like *'We will decide who comes to this country!'*

In 2007 Kevin Rudd came to power and Labor declared a more compassionate approach - using terms like being *'Firm, but fair!'* and ending 'off-shore detention'.

You can guess what happened when these desperate people heard that someone might care about them.

They started to make their way to Australia and boat arrivals grew from 4565 in 2011 to 17,204 in 2012 and 20,587 in 2013. The Labor Government looked like they had lost control and to salvage their position in the lead up to the 2013 election, they reintroduced tough policies.

Tony Abbott came to power in September 2013 and immediately introduced 'Operation Sovereign Borders' announcing incredibly harsh policies. Their catch cry was '*No-one arriving by boat to Australia will ever settle here!*' This statement 'boxed' them in for 10 years as they did not want to appear to renege and look soft. In 2013 NZ offered to settle 430 of those in long term detention - an offer that is now finally being accepted (after being rejected for 9 years.)

Some things that happened were:

- Anyone who arrived by boat after 13/8/2013 were sent to Manus Island (PNG) or Nauru. This happened to 3,127 people. They were effectively locked up as a deterrent to dissuade any others from contemplating the risky trip. This patently unfair policy was cloaked as an action to stop drownings at sea (and even presented as a compassionate policy)
- The Navy was mobilised to turn boats back if they were detected.
- The 31,000 who managed to get here before the August 2013 cut-off date (but hadn't been processed) were told a similar message but given temporary visas until they were safe enough to return home. This effectively left them in limbo unable to return home or to apply for family reunion.
- An immediate ruling by the new Abbott Govt in 2013, was that boat arrivals were to be officially called '**Illegal Maritime Arrivals**' when previous arrivals had always been called '**Irregular Maritime Arrivals**'. This point might seem semantic, but it started to have a profound effect on the attitude of the average Australian by introducing an idea that asylum-seekers were criminals (who can be locked up for breaking Australian immigration law).
  - In 1954 Australia signed the UNHCR convention on Refugees which explicitly recognised the right for a person to cross a national border (without a visa) and ask for asylum. At this point their asylum claim is to be assessed and they cannot be 'sent back' to a dangerous situation. Australian Governments have been trying to back away from this international responsibility (if there is political gain).

## **The outcomes of the ten years of tough policies**

### **• The Offshore detention system**

This has been incredibly hard for those 3127 people detained and 'eye watering' expensive (at about \$10 billion) – coming in at more than \$3 million per person. (Money that could have been used for aid)

Many are still languishing after 9 years even though the offshore detention centres are being scaled back due to public outcry. So where are the 3127 people now (as of August 2022)?

- 14 died
- 761 were eventually offered settlement in 3<sup>rd</sup> countries.
- 750 gave up and returned home voluntarily or by deportation (deemed not to be refugees)
- 228 decided to remain in PNG or Nauru
- 631 are being held in various detention centres in Australia (hoping for 3<sup>rd</sup> country settlement)
- On (mental) health grounds 600 have been granted bridging visas and released into the Australian community (with little support and no settlement guarantee)

### **• The Legacy caseload of Temporary Visa's**

Apart from 'Offshore Detention' another hidden outcome has been large numbers who are in Australia caught up on temporary visas. This is called the immigration 'Legacy Caseload' and amounts to 31,000 people. These are mainly Afghans, Iranians and Sri Lankan Tamils

### **• Loss of Reputation**

Probably the saddest outcome of all is that Australia has damaged our international reputation for compassion, and our policies are even used (as an example) by other Governments who want to deal with their 'refugee problem'

## **Appendix 2: New Immigration Policy settings for Refugees**

The Labor Party election platform contained several new policies that differed from those of the Coalition. Immigration Minister Giles is now committed to implement these in full, with the objective that compassion is restored into the Refugee Settlement Pathway. The following policies are in addition to the new CRISP pilot addressed earlier:

### **A. Abolish Temporary Protection visa's and open up pathways to Permanency.**

- Resolve the visa status of the 31,000 people who have been on Temporary Protection visas (or are appealing against their visa rejection) and move most of them onto permanent visas.
  - This reverses the Coalition policy commitment '*No-one who comes by boat will ever settle in Australia!*'
  - Resolving these temporary visas will significantly ease the stress of these people as they will now be able to plan a life in Australia and apply for family reunions and eventually Australian citizenship.
  - Who are they?
    - These TPV holders were the group who came by boat immediately before the August 2013 deadline after which offshore detention was mandatory.
    - There have been two types of Temporary visas available over the past 10 years:
      - A standard TPV which was renewed each 3 years.
      - A 5yr SHEV for those willing to work in regional areas (Safe Haven Enterprise Visa). SHEV's were an effort to keep people out of Sydney and Melbourne. (Adelaide was considered 'regional')

### **B. Increase the Australian annual refugee quota from 13,750 to 27,000 by incremental steps.**

- a. This represents a belief that Australia has more capacity to respond to international crisis situations and sends a strong signal to encourage other wealthy countries to do more.

### **C. Offer 16,500 additional places to Afghans**

- a. displaced when the Taliban took over again in August 2022. These will be filled over the next 4 years (this was a bi-partisan commitment before the election)

### **D. A commitment of more resources for 'Home Affairs'**

- a. To help the department visa processing teams to deal with a significant backlog of visa claims (and Citizenship applications) – and to restore Departmental morale.

### **E. A commitment to collaborate with NGO's (including Church groups)**

- a. to restore humanity to the Refugee Settlement programs.