

# **Refugee Action Campaign**

## **Annual Planning Meeting - 18 January 2020**

### **Discussion Document**

This is a document designed to stimulate thought and discussion in the lead-up to our Annual Planning Day on 18 January. In it we look at the continuing centrality of the refugee issue to world politics. Indeed it has remained a central dividing line between different visions of the kind of society people want to see. We also look at what has happened politically in Australia with different groups of people and where they are moving on the issue. This is particularly important because of the impact of the election win for the LNP and the repeal of the Medevac legislation. We conclude that while some sections of the population have moved in our direction on some of the issues, some of our strongest supporters and activists have become despondent. The document suggests that the campaign needs to take a broader approach than we have over the last few years – in which offshore detention and the plight of people on Manus and Nauru was the cutting edge. While this remains an issue for us, we propose that the emphasis be that we are the resistance to inhumanity and cruelty to refugees against a government likely to remain in power for nearly two and a half years. We list many of the activities we carried out this year. Finally, we propose some broad and some specific suggestions to take the campaign forward.

#### **Refugees: the International Dimension**

Immigration and refugees remain one of the three great issues – along with inequality and climate change - dominating politics around the world. Since refugees are usually the most visible element of immigration and usually thought to be in far greater numbers than is actually the case, attitudes to refugees and to immigration in general are closely intertwined.

In the US, Trump has made opposition to refugees a hugely polarised issue – with the border wall, and the attempt to stop immigration from some Muslim-majority countries. He has set a cap of 18,000 refugees in 2020 – down from 30,000 in the previous year. This is the lowest number since 1980, when the refugee resettlement program began.

In Europe, immigration and refugees is still a critical issue and has been so since 2015. Thirty-four percent of respondents to the Eurobarometer survey of August 2019 viewed immigration as the most pressing problem. Although this is down six percentage points from last year, that still puts it ahead of climate change (22%) and the economy (18%). The Eurobarometer found immigration topped the list of concerns for the first time in 2015 (at 58%) – the year of the 1.3 million arrivals of, mostly, asylum seekers from Syria. (Although it has to be borne in mind that this still represented just 0.2% of the EU population.)

Moreover, there is evidence that, since 2015, the basis of the concern has shifted from economic reasons for opposing new arrivals to cultural ones in some places. This is reflected in the statements by government leaders in Eastern and Southern Europe and by right-wing figures elsewhere.

Throughout Europe, there is an 11% decline in people's willingness to accept refugees when they are Muslim compared to similar but Christian refugees.

Similarly, Trump has not based his opposition to immigration primarily on economic grounds but that the people coming through Mexico were "bad people" and even (absurdly) "could be" from the Middle East.

Many studies of anti-immigrant sentiment around the world show that anti-migrant attitudes tend to be held more often by men, by people with low educational backgrounds and – relatedly – by people with low income or with experiences of poverty. However, work on the anti-immigrant groups and people at their mobilisations in Europe since 2015 indicate that low-income and poverty were not particularly important. They had employment, income and education about the levels of the general population. Their primary motivation was cultural/xenophobic/racist.

In all of this conflict over the future of our world, our side has been much stronger in terms of activism. One study of Germany, for example, showed that almost 10% (7 million) of the German population, were actively engaged in supporting refugees in 2015 and 2016 – mostly by providing material support. If, in addition to the more active forms of support, donations are included, some studies estimate that at least half and as many as two-thirds of Germans have helped.

As people see the danger that anti-immigrant and anti-refugee politics has posed, mass mobilisations in support of refugees and recent migrants have also been on the rise since 2018. For example, the "We'll come united" parade in Hamburg in September 2018, under the slogans of "societal participation, equal rights, and solidarity", attracted 30,000 participants. Two weeks later in Berlin, over 200,000 people took part in a demonstration for an "open and liberal society – solidarity instead of exclusion".

Even in Hungary, where Prime Minister Victor Orban has been one of the most vicious in Europe in attacking refugees, Muslims and migrants generally, one survey conducted in October 2015 found that perhaps 190,000 people volunteered, donated goods or did similar things during the first arrivals of the asylum seekers.

Meanwhile in the US, two-thirds of Americans oppose Trump's wall and only 30% support his proposal to make it harder for people to request asylum protection in the United States. Nearly the same number (27%) want to make it easier and 34% want it left as it is.

So, just as in Australia, people around the world have taken up the campaign for refugee rights and opposition to Islamophobia and racism. It is an important fight and, in it, we are certainly not alone.

## **Australia – what are people thinking?**

In Australia, also, we have significant and, on some questions, rising support. On the most general level sentiment is almost evenly divided. In 2019, when asked the question 'are you personally concerned that Australia is too harsh in its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees', 48% said they were 'a great deal' or 'somewhat' concerned, 47% 'only slightly' or 'not at all concerned'. However, the evidence is that more people support boat turn-backs than support resettlement of people who attempt to come by boat. However, it, and immigration (unlike in Europe) is far from the most important issue for the great majority of people. The economy is the major concern (29%) followed by the environment (with a major rise to 17%). Immigration is viewed as the major problem by 6% but poor treatment of asylum seekers/ refugees by only 1%. This doesn't indicate the asylum seekers are unimportant in the minds of many – just that it is not the most important issue to them. In

purely electoral terms, it also probably means that there are not too many votes to be won or lost on the question. This could be either a positive or a negative outcome.

As with Europe cultural/racist elements are clearly critical. 2019 data shows that 21%-25% indicate a negative attitude to Muslim immigration when questioned by an interviewer. A much larger group of the same sample (39%-41%) indicate a negative attitude when doing so anonymously. So many are anti-Muslim but realise that it is not right to admit it.

The most recent poll on off-shore detention however, done in October 2018, showed that 37% of people were in support of closing down Nauru and bringing the people there to Australia, while 42% were opposed. However, more people thought there was no long-term future for offshore detention. Forty-three percent were opposed to keeping Nauru going indefinitely against 35% in support.

Reinforcing these shifts is a late November 2019 poll which showed that 60% of people either supported Medevac as it was or thought it should be more compassionate. In February 2019, 16% thought Medevac should be more compassionate. In the latest poll that figure rose to 25%. Only 22% bought the government line that it weakened national security. However, there is no evidence that people have shifted much on questions like boat-turnbacks – the most difficult of the issues for us to win.

Our conclusion is that some people have moved our way on two key issues – that of the long-term future of offshore detention and on Medevac.

## **Who is opposed to Australia's policies?**

In the 2019 data, three groups registered above 60% in believing that Australia is too harsh in its treatment of asylum seekers: Greens voters (87%), those aged 18-24 (70%), and Labor voters (61% - c.f. 30% of LNP voters). Concern by women (52%) was significantly higher than by men (43%). Young people under 24 are the most critical of the policies, as are 56% of those aged 25-34. Then every other age group is below 50%.

Education – as we have seen from previous Australian Electoral Survey data - is an important factor in attitudes. Those with a Bachelor degree or higher were more concerned (58%) about Australia's policies than those holding a Diploma or technical certificate (47%). Interestingly, those with only a Year 12 education were much more concerned (56%) than those with a Trade or apprenticeship (36%). This might reflect age. One other possible explanation for this is that it is not education per se which shapes attitudes but economic security. Those with trade qualifications include a large number of small business/contractors who may have higher incomes than those with a Year 12 education, but are also more reliant on the vagaries of the market at any particular time. Those with university degrees tend to have better long-term prospects.

Another interesting factor is that coming from a migrant background does not necessarily make you more sympathetic to asylum seekers. Those from an English speaking background are more likely to be concerned (54%) than those from a non-English speaking background (NESB – 50%). This is actually not surprising. The NESB people are often more recent migrants who find themselves in less secure employment and often in competition with the newest group of migrants in similar sections of the labour and housing markets.

The church-going population is also split. Only 39% of Anglicans say they are concerned, as do 46% of Catholics, 45% of other Christian groups and 50% of those of other religions. The group most concerned about government policy are those who registered as “No Religion” (58%) However, these figures are most likely to reflect the older demographic especially of the Christian churches in Australia - with age rather than religion the determining factor.

## **The current mood amongst the activists**

It's now fairly clear that we are finding it harder to mobilise. This has been apparent for some time. At the beginning of 2019, we had a clear perspective – i.e. that people had shifted our way to some extent – especially on the question of Manus and Nauru. We also had a clear, short-term objective of making the build up to Palm Sunday the major form of our intervention in the election campaign. The favourable shift in opinion was verified by the almost total absence of a mention of the issue of refugees from the government during the campaign.

Although we had no illusions that Labor in government would implement the policies that we wanted, they did have better policy than the Coalition. Moreover, many of our supporters were probably even more hopeful than us that things would change a lot with an ALP government.

The shock result in May seemed to draw an initial response of defiance and anger – our General Meeting two weeks after it drew about 80 people. But in the following months this has probably changed to depression. The knowledge that the Coalition will be there for another two and a half years and that they are certainly not going to change their refugee policies – in the right direction – has meant that many people have lost hope that we can win anything at all.

The climate actions seem to belie this mood. They have often been large. However, the largest of them have been very young people – especially school students – who have not been involved in anything before and therefore haven't had time to be disillusioned. That has not been our core constituency. Also, the climate campaign has had powerful reinforcement from international actions which can be copied – the school climate strikes, Extinction Rebellion etc.

The second factor we would suggest is contributing to why we're finding it harder going is that, for some years now, Manus Island and Nauru have been at the sharp end of the campaign. Now a combination of people being brought to Australia for medical treatment, some going to the US and some to Canada, might be making people think that being kept in PNG and Nauru is a declining issue.

Palm Sunday in 2019 was a big success. We estimated 4,000 people – our biggest yet. Part of that success is that we have become better at what we do – c.f. maybe 1,500 in Sydney. But part of it was also because of the expectations of the election and coming to the demo was a way of influencing it. That element is now gone. The last demo to save Medevac had between 150 and 200 people – and it was harder to get people to do things to build it. We never expected it to be huge, but it was on the low side of expectations.

The repeal of the Medevac legislation will deepen this sense of despondency. However, a few points need to be made about this terrible setback. Firstly, the government's argument that national security was compromised by Medevac is ludicrous and was seen as such by most who paid attention. Medevac was actually very conservative legislation that gave the Minister the absolute authority to ban people if he believed there were national security or criminal implications. But their

modus operandi of being “tough” on refugees is now so ingrained that even obvious facts really don’t matter and post-election they could afford to play to their most right-wing base.

On the positive side, just about every professional association of doctors in the country came out opposing the repeal. Also positive is that the ALP, for the first time, took a decent stand and stuck to it. This is at least partly because they must have determined that, in voting against repeal, they would not lose support. It is also indicated by the fact that the government made a huge fuss about the passage of the Medevac bill early in 2019. Morrison went to Christmas Island and pledged \$1.4 billion to reopen it in order to prevent people being Medevaced to the mainland. But, during the election campaign it was hardly raised at all. The inescapable conclusion is that they found they were not getting traction on the issue – or certainly much less than in the past.

All this – and the poll figures noted above - shows that we are winning the battle for the heart of Australians on some aspects of the issue. But the movements that are happening are more complicated than a simple shift in one direction. Let’s divide the population into five unequally-sized groups (following Sally Rugg’s writing on the equal marriage campaign).

- The 1s are our closest supporters who have been active at some level and have been to a demo or public meeting.
- The 2s are those who agree with us on policy but are hard to get to do anything.
- The 3s are the middle ground who are possibly persuadable.
- The 4s are clearly opposed to us.
- The 5s are died-in-the-wool anti-refugee advocates and Peter Dutton fans.

We think that there have been significant shifts in two of these groups. Firstly, there has been a positive development in a longer-term shift of the 3s in our direction – especially on questions of off-shore detention and Medevac- and this has been reflected in the polls and the unwillingness of the LNP to campaign on refugees much during the election. Secondly, there has been an increased weariness and despondency amongst the 1s, especially since the election. That reflects the length of the campaign and a feeling of helplessness.

## **Activities Reports for 2019**

This list captures the major events and activities. There have also been a number of smaller events that are not listed including the various and numerous activities that are undertaken to build for major events.

For example, in the lead up to a number of events, we have distributed leaflets over the preceding weekends at the two Farmers’ Markets, major bus interchanges and public events around Canberra, have displayed posters at suburban shopping centres across the city, and held up prominent signs at busy traffic intersections each morning in the week before the Palm Sunday rally. Moreover, there has been significant work done to engage social media and media platforms.

This list does not include the activities of the various RAC Working Groups; they will be included in a subsequent version of the discussion document.

### **Rallies & snap vigils and protests**

- Urge Parliament to Support the Urgent Medical Treatment Bill, Snap Rally, 12 February
- Solidarity Rally with Muslim Community, Snap Rally, 19 March (following the Christchurch massacre)
- Enough Is Enough: 2019 All Off Manus & Nauru, Palm Sunday Rally, 14 April
- 6 Years on Manus & Nauru, 6 Years Too Long, Rally, 20 July
- Support the Biloela Family, Snap Action, 6 September
- Vigil for Mirwais, 21 October
- Detention Harms Health: Save Medevac Rally, 9 November

### **Public meetings, forums and similar**

#### “No Friend But the Mountains” Public Reading

21 May on World Poetry Day 8.15 am - 7pm.

Save Medevac For Refugees, Speakers - Dr Kerry Phelps & Dr John Warhurst,

1 July

Stories from the Saharawi Refugee Camps, Speaker - Tecber Ahmed Saleh

18 Sept (in conjunction with APHEDA Union Aid Abroad)

Sri Lanka to Australia: From Persecution to Detention, Speakers – Dr Shiamala Suntharalingam & Vanessa Burn, 29 October

Against Our Oath film screening, 23 November

### **General meetings:**

Sat 19 January - annual planning meeting

Thurs 7 March

Sat 1 June

Sat 3 August

Sat 19 Oct

### **RAC supported non-RAC events**

These are events initiated by other organisations that RAC have supported. Support ranges from publicising the event via email and social media platforms to covering all aspects from arranging speakers to sound amplification.

Rally for Kinley, 5 April

Dignity in a Teacup Book Launch, 18 April

Invitation from Gungahlin Mosque to join community Iftar, 2 June

Opening of Parliament Convergence, 2 July

Rally for Permanent Protection, 29 July

Support the Biloela Family Emergency Vigil, 1 September

Jam for Refugees, 20 September

Save Medevac Rural Australians for Refugees Vigil, 10-11 November

Breakthrough Conversations, 28 November

### **RAC Canberra-wide organisational activities**

Open Letter, published Canberra Times, 6 April

Refugee Week RAC Community Information Stalls, Sat 22 June

Save Medevac campaign:

- RAC Submission to Senate Committee Inquiry, 16 August
- Jane Keogh gave evidence to the Senate Committee on behalf of RAC, 26 August
- Save Medevac petition

RAC Stall, UnionsACT Labour Day Picnic, 7 October

Refugee Awareness Speaking Tour road test presentation, 7 December

End of year BBQ, 7 December

### **Activities by month**

<p>January:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual Planning Meeting</li> </ul>
<p>February:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urge Parliament to Support the Urgent Medical Treatment Bill, Snap Rally</li> </ul>
<p>March:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solidarity Rally with Muslim Community, Snap Rally</li> <li>• General Meeting</li> </ul>
<p>April:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enough Is Enough: 2019 All Off Manus &amp; Nauru, Palm Sunday Rally</li> <li>• Rally for Kinley</li> <li>• Dignity in a Teacup Book Launch</li> <li>• Open Letter</li> </ul>
<p>May:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No Friend But the Mountains” Public Reading</li> </ul>
<p>June:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invitation from Gungahlin Mosque to join community Iftar</li> <li>• Refugee Week RAC Community Information Stalls</li> <li>• General Meeting</li> </ul>
<p>July:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 Years on Manus &amp; Nauru, 6 Years Too Long, Rally</li> <li>• Save Medevac For Refugees, Public Forum</li> <li>• Opening of Parliament Convergence</li> <li>• Rally for Permanent Protection</li> </ul>
<p>August:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Meeting</li> <li>• RAC Submission to Medevac Senate Inquiry</li> </ul>
<p>September:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the Biloele Family, Snap Action</li> <li>• Stories from the Saharawi Refugee Camps, Public Forum</li> <li>• Support the Biloele Family Emergency Vigil</li> </ul>
<p>October:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vigil for Mirwais</li> <li>• Sri Lanka to Australia: From Persecution to Detention, Public Forum</li> <li>• General Meeting</li> <li>• RAC Stall, UnionsACT Labour Day Picnic</li> </ul>
<p>November:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detention Harms Health: Save Medevac Rally</li> <li>• Against Our Oath, film screening</li> <li>• Save Medevac Rural Australians for Refugees Vigil</li> <li>• Breakthrough Conversations</li> </ul>
<p>December:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refugee Awareness Speaking Tour road test presentation</li> <li>• End of year BBQ</li> </ul>



## **What to do – broad suggestions?**

So, what do we do? We have three main suggestions of a broad nature and a series of other practical ideas about organising.

### **1. Broaden**

Firstly, we should broaden the focus from PNG and Nauru. That doesn't mean that we don't mention them – but they should be mentioned as part of a broader attack on government injustice and cruelty to asylum seekers and refugees. We have always mentioned the broader questions but Manus and Nauru were the first point of approach for us and the sharp end of the campaign. That is less likely to resonate now.

Similarly, we need to find ways of connecting to opposition to racism and Islamophobia – which are, after all, the basis of a great deal of support for government policies. We took the lead in holding a very successful snap rally in conjunction with Muslim and other organisations following the Christchurch massacre. As a result, our connections with the Muslim community have improved significantly.

### **2. We are the resistance**

Secondly, we can't credibly claim that we are likely to get significantly better policies through this parliament (although we might be able to resist worse ones depending on what happens in the Senate). But we can try to create the mindset in our supporters that we are the resistance to inhumanity and cruelty. We are the resistance to some of the worst refugee policies in the world. We are the resistance to playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people, etc. etc. So we're not saying to people – come to this demo so that we can see a change take place in the immediate future. We are saying – show people that we're still fighting. We can adopt this theme through all our campaigning, even saying "Join the Resistance to.....". We create the mindset that it is always better to resist inhumanity than to accept that there is nothing we can do.

### **3. Build up the 1s.**

The third is that we need to revitalise our core supporters – the 1s – and create more of them by turning 2s into 1s and find practical methods to do this. There is no point talking about the strategy of how to approach people, the slogans to use, the actions we take etc if we don't have the activists to carry out any of these plans.

## **What to do – other suggestions?**

### **1. Climate and refugees**

Because of time constraints, we have begun to organise a major public meeting on Refugees and Climate Change – probably in February. This would help to create momentum in the lead-up to Palm Sunday on 5 April. We need to build momentum, bring new people in and revitalise people who

have been around for a while. The connection between the issues is important. But it also allows us to build on the climate movement's momentum to some extent.

As mentioned at the beginning of this document, refugees and climate change are two of the great, issues of our time which shape our society. Increasingly, they are linked. We can see now that extreme drought was a factor in the war in South Sudan and also in Syria. The Pacific Island Forum in late 2019 was a disgraceful example of Australia ignoring the pleas of Pacific Island countries threatened by global warming. Given how we treat people recognised as refugees by the 1951 Convention, how will we treat people displaced but who do not even fit that definition? Moreover, as on Medevac, greater action on climate change is clearly supported by a large majority of Australians but ignored by the majority of the parliament.

## **2. A plan for each working group**

The working groups are a unique organisational feature of RAC in Canberra. They have been very effective in building the campaign because they enable people in a particular area to build support in their own constituency, using the language common to and the connections available in that constituency. To increase the number of 1s, we need to build them. So we are suggesting that each group meet soon to plan (a) what it can do to build the big events planned by RAC centrally – such as Palm Sunday and (b) what event or events it can have in the period between January and Palm Sunday to build itself.

## **3. Creative resistance**

RAC in Canberra has always tried new things as part of the campaign. Things such as contingents marching into demos, demos on median strips, flashmobs at demos and many others have become part of our trademark. One of the problems with a long campaign is repeating a routine of actions which, while not physically tiring activists, can create a sense of futility – i.e. "I did this same thing last year and nothing's changed – what's the point." So we have a series of suggestions for different actions – especially in the lead-up to Palm Sunday – which we will put out soon and before the Planning Meeting. In the meantime, please let us know if you have any ideas and bring them along to the meeting. A few ideas which might be useful are put forward below. They are obviously contingent on whether people like them and whether there is enough interest and energy to carry them out.

### *3 (i) The Guerrilla Publicity Unit*

The idea is to get a group of people carrying signs – perhaps Palm Sunday corflutes, with others handing out flyers, others chalking the pavement, someone with a megaphone announcing what's happening and maybe some music, people putting up posters, stickers etc. Then they move through a crowded area – Garema Place at lunchtime, around the campuses etc.

### *3 (ii) The BS Detective Series*

This is a quick response video to call the government or others out on BS they talk about refugees. We did one on Medevac. An animator is now working on some creative animation to give it a consistent style.

### *3 (iii) "The Demo"*

Since one of the problems we've identified is a somewhat lower degree of activism, we thought we would try to do a short series of videos about activists trying to build our next big demo – on Palm Sunday – 5 April. Each short video would concentrate on a particular person – e.g. faith-based, someone doing distribution, unionist, student etc. We tried to do this using an iPhone app last year and that model didn't work. This time we will have people with extensive video/film-making experience and good equipment doing the filming and editing.

### *3 (iv) Refugee Awareness Speaking Tour*

A group of people have already put together a slideshow/video/spoken presentation which we can offer to various community groups. This was road-tested at our last meeting and end-of-year BBQ.