



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



**Submission to the Transport and Industrial Relations Select Committee on the
Immigration Amendment Bill 2012
From the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office
8 June 2012**

1. The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) strongly caution against the *Immigration Amendment Bill 2012*. In our experience, indefinite mandatory detention is an unnecessarily harsh and inhumane way to treat human beings which ultimately divides society, is ineffective in stopping boat journeys and has substantial economic and moral costs. There are alternatives to such a policy which New Zealand is strongly encouraged to explore.
2. It is a common misconception that humanitarian entrants represent an attack on the economic wealth of the nation or way of life. In our experience, asylum seekers who arrive by boat generally have a young age profile, have great respect for Australia's culture and values and want to be a part of our society and get on with life. However, we must favour this integration by helping them *“to find a place where they may live in peace and safety, where they may work and take on the rights and duties that exist in the Country that welcomes them.”*¹ New Zealand is well placed to help these people rebuild their lives. Research in Australia (DIAC, A Significant Contribution, 2011) has shown that being a refugee is just an experience and once these people have access to the same opportunities that others have in Australia (education and employment) they will go on to contribute to our economic prosperity. After five years most humanitarian entrants will be well integrated into the community and either working, studying or raising their family. For these reasons we suggest New Zealand look with great favour and compassion towards asylum seekers and pursue policies which integrate them into the community.
3. New Zealand can expect far fewer numbers of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran or Sri Lanka than Australia does. Initially, asylum seekers are compelled to escape from violence, war or persecution in their homeland. However, they remain in a precarious situation until they have found employment and can provide food, shelter, education and health care for their family and children. This largely explains why asylum seekers do not stay in transit countries as the opportunities

¹ Pope Benedict XVI *One Human Family*, Message 97th World Day of Migrants & Refugees 2011.



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available to them to work and have their children in school, are no better than found in their homeland. For this reason the movements of asylum seekers to New Zealand will depend firstly on the war and conflict occurring in the countries of origin and secondly on the economic conditions found in New Zealand relative to other economies. Australia receives small numbers of asylum seekers by boat because of the geographical challenge this entails. To reach New Zealand by boat is even more difficult. For these reasons, we would question why the immigration Amendment Bill 2012 is even necessary.

4. Australia is the only country in the world to have mandatory indefinite detention of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. This is for two reasons; we have a small number of people who arrive by boat and secondly we can afford the substantial economic cost. In financial year of 2010 – 2011, DIAC estimated the cost of detention facilities was around \$772.17 million.² We have recently witnessed great pressure on our Minister of immigration because of this cost. While unlikely, if New Zealand did receive a substantial influx of asylum seekers, the decision to uphold mandatory detention will impact on the overall budget. Our suggestion would be to pursue a policy which is more flexible and does not tie the government to this sort of expenditure.
5. However, the more drastic cost of mandatory indefinite detention is the impact on social cohesion. As detention is only for criminals, the Australian public conclude anyone locked up must be a criminal. The public then blame asylum seekers for the cost of this detention. However public opinion has become greatly divided. The detention of asylum seekers in Australia has arguably led to ethnic and cultural tension and social disharmony. New Zealand must consider the cost of inevitable social disruption and ultimately the weight that this severe and inhumane response will have on the conscience of many of the New Zealand people.
6. New research (Timothy Hatton, seeking asylum, trends and policies in the OECD, 2011) reveals that for deterrent policies to work the policy must be effective, must be enforced, the whole world needs to hear about it. Hatton (2011), in his research describes the Tampa affair and the need for Australia to turn boats back out to sea. He also acknowledges the damage to Australia's international reputation and integrity as a country which upholds human rights. Deterrent measures are possible,

² Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network, Final Report, March 2012, p 25.



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but to be effective will require cruel measures which will create great angst morally and ethically for the people of New Zealand. It is also likely cause great mental and emotional suffering for public officials who have to administer a policy of mandatory indefinite detention. We greatly encourage New Zealand not to underestimate the social and moral costs of mandatory indefinite detention.

7. New Zealand has a great reputation as a nation who defends human rights and protects the people living not just in New Zealand but also the greater Pacific region. A tough deterrent policy towards asylum seekers will undoubtedly send a negative conflicting message among the Pacific Islands. The way New Zealand treats these most vulnerable people will speak volumes, as it does in Australia.
8. The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office wishes to acknowledge and support the recommendations made in the submission from Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand.
9. We would like to thank the Transport and Industrial Relations Select Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. For any further information in relation to this submission please contact;

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