**Seven Years and Counting for the Forgotten People.**

It has been seven years since then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made a major change to Australian immigration policy when he declared that all people who arrive by boat to seek asylum in Australia would be sent to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and held in detention there while their protection claims were heard. Furthermore, they would be barred from ever settling in Australia. A month later he made a similar arrangement with the republic of Nauru. Mandatory detention for people seeking asylum was intended to be a short-term, temporary, and exceptional measure when it was introduced by an earlier Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating but Kevin Rudd lost the 2013 election and, after nearly seven years of Coalition government under three Prime Ministers, it is now at the core of Australia’s refugee policy, and there is no longer a limit on the length of time a person can be held. Over that time the cost to Australian taxpayers has exceeded $5 billion and 13 people have lost their lives in offshore detention, including 7 by known or suspected suicide and 1 by homicide

Today, about 400 people languish in poor health and impoverished conditions in PNG and Nauru. Hundreds of others are held in immigration detention facilities in Australia, about 190 of whom have been transferred to Australia for medical attention that could not be provided offshore, mainly under the former Medevac Law. Sadly, only their most serious medical needs have so far been addressed and their medical condition remains of great concern. Their “Immigration Transit Accommodation” (often motels guarded by private contractors) are high-risk environments during the pandemic and there is particular concern for detainees in the Mantra motel in Melbourne during the current resurgence of covid-19 in that city. You may think that m but, instead, they must now face the possibility that their link to the outside world will be severed by the confiscation of their phones under new legislation proposed by the Department of Home Affairs.

As well as those in detention, there are about 13,000 people on Bridging Visa E in the Australian community with limited or no rights to work or access to government benefits and services. An additional 20,000 people are on 5-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visas working or studying in regional areas of Australia or 3-year Temporary Protection Visas. These, too, are a legacy of the politics of the 2013 election and also face an uncertain future under policies that, too easily, characterise refugees as security risks *to* us, rather than people legitimately seeking safety *with* us.

There have been numerous inquiries, and there are mountains of reports documenting the immense harm that has been caused to the men, women, and children subjected to Australia’s immigration detention system. It is hugely wasteful, in both humanitarian and financial terms, with no end in sight. Other than the arrangements with the USA, under which less than 800 of those in offshore detention have been settled in four years, our current government has no permanent resettlement plans for any of the refugees and asylum seekers in either offshore or onshore detention, or for the thousands of people on temporary visas in the Australian community.

For the past seven years, there has been a standing offer from New Zealand to take up to 150 refugees a year from Australia’s offshore processing system. The Greens, ALP and members of the crossbench have called for this offer to be accepted but the Coalition has persistently refused, despite the NZ Government’s agreement to accommodate their spurious principal objection by banning those settled under this offer from travelling to Australia. This offer, in conjunction with the US programme, could allow for all the refugees now on PNG and Nauru to be resettled, or at least accepted for resettlement, by this time next year. Only politics seems to be in the way.

Australia’s extremely costly indefinite offshore detention regime cannot, and should not, go on forever. There has to be a realistic resettlement plan for the people now trapped in it. While refugee and asylum seeker policy is not commonly the top priority in determining voting behaviour at a national level, research shows that the majority of Australians hold positive views on migration, and that nearly two thirds of Australians believe that people have the right to seek refuge.

Australia was once a world leader in refugee resettlement policy and practice. We are a rich, advanced nation. We have the wherewithal to rebuild a sound, humane refugee program that serves the national interest. We just need the political will.