



**SPEECH BY KELVIN THOMSON MP  
TO OPENING OF BAPTCARE ASYLUM SEEKER  
HOUSING FACILITY “SANCTUARY”, 19<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2008**

I want to thank Baptist Community Care for the invitation to attend and speak at the official opening of your new asylum seeker housing facility, called ‘Sanctuary’.

The treatment of asylum seekers has been an area of great political controversy since the arrival of the Norwegian ship the Tampa in 2001. I prefer to avoid making politically partisan comments on occasions such as this, but I think that the politicisation of the treatment of asylum seekers was both bad news for the asylum seekers themselves, and bad news for Australia as a nation. It was bad news for Australia as a nation because the debate diminished us; it made us a meaner, less generous, shabbier country.

It left the incoming Labor Government with three pieces of reasonably pressing business, the Pacific Solution, the Temporary Protection Visa regime, and the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia.

The Labor Government has acted to put an end to the “Pacific solution.” The last of the refugees detained at the Offshore Processing Centre in Nauru arrived in Australia in February.

The 21 Sri Lankans were the final members of a group of 82 refugees detained on Nauru that have been resettled in Australia as part of the humanitarian resettlement program.

The Australian Government has initiated discussions with the Nauruan Government over the closure of the centre.

The Pacific solution was a cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful exercise.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship expended \$289 million between September 2001 and June 2007 to run the Nauru and Manus offshore Processing Centres.

A total of 1637 people were detained in the Nauru and Manus facilities, of whom 1153 (or 70 per cent) were ultimately resettled from the OPCs to Australia or other countries. Of those who were resettled, around 60 per cent (705 people) were resettled in Australia.

The bulk of the refugees housed on Nauru and Manus had fled Iraq and Afghanistan – two countries where Australia still has troops committed.

The facility on Manus Province has not been used to house asylum seekers since May 2004. Australia will continue to honour its commitment to a generous aid and capacity development program for Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

The asylum claims of future unauthorised boat arrivals will be processed on Christmas Island, at the immigration detention centre built by the former Government.

The second piece of unfinished business concerned the Temporary Protection Visa regime. The Labor Government's abolition of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) regime announced last week in the Budget will help about 1000 refugees rebuild their lives in Australia.

This honoured a Labor election promise. Under the regime set up by the previous government, unauthorised arrivals who were owed protection under Australia's international obligations were only eligible for TPVs in the first instance. It meant that refugees had no travel rights, reduced access to refugee settlement services such as English language programs, employment and income assistance, and could not be reunited with other family members.

From early 2008-09, refugees on TPVs who are currently in Australia will receive a permanent visa, regardless of their mode of arrival. Provided they meet security and character requirements, they will be granted permanent residency in Australia and will not need to have their protection claims reassessed. It means these refugees will not be afforded the same benefits and entitlements as holders of a permanent visa.

Many refugees suffered enormously before fleeing Australia only to face punitive treatment under the previous government's Temporary Protection Visa regime.

There is also clear evidence that the TPV arrangements did nothing to prevent unauthorised boat arrivals, with numbers increasing not long after the regime was introduced.

Human rights and refugee advocacy groups have welcomed the scrapping of TPVs announced in the 2008-09 Budget.

*"The Temporary Protection Visa policy has created an unjust two-tiered system for refugees and has caused undue suffering and distress for many people trying to escape persecution."* – Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission.

*"No one will lament the end of the TPV regime, a clearly failed policy which damaged the mental health of refugees needing protection and left vulnerable families separated for years."* – Refugee Council of Australia.

*"With this change to abolish TPVs, refugees can start to put their past behind them and build positive futures as permanent members of the Australian community. We applaud this move by the Government to live up to their promises."* – A Just Australia.

The Government also announced in the Budget that it will provide, in 2008-09, a one-off additional 500 places for Iraqi refugees. This will take the total Humanitarian Program to 13,500 places.

In addition to these Program places the Government will also provide permanent resettlement in Australia to up to 600 Iraqis, including their families, who are at risk because of their work with Australian troops in Iraq.

From 2009-10 the Government will increase the Humanitarian Program to 13,750 places.

This brings me to the third area of unfinished business from the previous government, the operation of the bridging visa system. Under the current system, people who may be seeking asylum end up on bridging visas – that is, out in the community – but without work rights and without access to Medicare.

It is a matter of real concern that these people are in many cases reliant on charitable organisations in order to live. They receive allowances to buy staples to allow them to live, but they are not allowed to work, so they have no means of supporting themselves. I do not regard this as a satisfactory state of affairs.

Protection visa applicants who hold a bridging visa may be eligible to work and access Medicare if they applied for a protection visa within 45 days of arriving in Australia – the 45 day rule. I am told that about a third of protection visa applicants out in the community hold a bridging visa without work rights. These people are often reliant on charitable organisations such as yours.

The Minister for Immigration, Senator Chris Evans has acknowledged this problem and stated in Parliament that we “need to have a situation that is much more coherent and caring – rather than one which does plan for people to be destitute out in the community without the capacity to work and earn a living or be in receipt of benefits.”

The Minister went on to say “The solution to this issue is very much, I think, focused around peoples’ work rights and access to benefits.”

So clearly this is a work in progress. In the meantime, this is precisely where organisations such as Baptist Community Care come in. Brunswick has a strong tradition of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, and this new facility in Brunswick continues that proud tradition.

I congratulate BapCare, the Uniting Church, the Brunswick Baptist Church, and the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project for their hard work in making this happen. I know these things don’t happen by accident; they come about as the result of a lot of hard work done by a relatively small group of people.

So I congratulate you on your efforts; the community of Wills appreciates them, and knows that what you are doing is making a real and material difference to the lives of people who would otherwise be doing it very tough indeed. So from the rest of us, thank you and our best wishes in your future endeavours.