

## **Australia & asylum seekers: *The myths and the facts***

### **Who are asylum seekers?**

The terms 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' are often confused: an asylum seeker is someone who has fled their home and is seeking protection from another country stating that he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been evaluated<sup>1</sup>.

In Australia, asylum seekers must prove they are refugees before they are granted a visa. They must prove to government agencies that if they return home they face persecution, imprisonment or harm for reasons of race, religion, nationality, their social group or political opinion.

### **Myth 1 – Australia takes in more than its fair share of asylum seekers**

Contrary to what the media and many politicians are saying, Australia is not being 'swamped' by asylum seekers. From January to August this year, Australia took in below average numbers of asylum seekers compared to previous years and global intakes<sup>2</sup>.

The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has calculated that the average number of asylum seekers accepted by a country in the global context is 197 per million of population. On that basis Australia's fair share for the first 6 months of 2009 should be 4,197 rather than the 3,666 we have taken so far.<sup>3</sup> In comparison Canada, which has a population of just over 33 million compared to Australia's 22 million, received 6 times the number of lodged applications (18,722).<sup>4</sup>

In a global context, the average rate of asylum seeker intake according to population ranks Australia 20<sup>th</sup> out of 44 countries worldwide, behind countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and Malta (which tops the list).<sup>5</sup>

According to another key factor – gross domestic product (GDP) – Australia falls to 24<sup>th</sup> place when ranked by asylum seeker intake per size of GDP.<sup>6</sup>

### **Myth 2 – 'Boat people' are swamping our shores**

The vast majority of asylum seekers arrive in Australia by air. Last year, of the 13,500 people granted asylum in Australia only 206 of those arriving without visas came by boat; 2,291 came by plane – well over 90%.<sup>7</sup>

There is also data to suggest that people who arrive by boat are more likely to be legitimate refugees. Of asylum claims made by people who arrive by aircraft, 55% are rejected. Only 2-15% of claims made by people arriving by boat are denied.<sup>8</sup>

This number is also small when compared to the number of people who over-stay their visa in Australia each year, particularly those on travelling visas, the majority of whom are English-speaking tourists. Conservative estimates suggest that, on average, 50,000 people stay in Australia without the proper documentation each year.<sup>9</sup>

Some media<sup>10</sup> have been misquoting data that last year 13,500 asylum seekers were granted refugee status. The Department for Immigration & Citizenship has responded that the vast majority of these in fact 'came to Australia on valid visas as part of Australia's dedicated offshore refugee resettlement program or were proposed as special humanitarian program entrants - largely, they were not asylum seekers', with over 11,000 visas granted before entry to Australia through proper processes.<sup>11</sup>

### **Myth 3 – the Government's changes in policy have made Australia a 'soft target'**

2,504 people lodged asylum applications in Australia from January to June this year, an increase on the same time last year. This increase is in line with global trends.<sup>12</sup>

However these numbers are far below those in 2000 and 2001. In 2000, there were over 13,000 claims in the first half of the year, with over 12,000 in 2001.<sup>13</sup> This highlights the continuing fluctuations globally in the number of people seeking asylum caused by changing world events that force people from their homes.

From January 2008 to June 2009, only 750 people arrived by boat compared to 43 boats carrying over 5,516 asylum seekers in 2001,<sup>14</sup> after the outbreak of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Global events dictate how many people are displaced every year.

While some are claiming that the abolition of detention debt (in August 2009) and temporary protection visas (August 2008) have made Australia look like a 'soft target,' this isn't the case. Since temporary protection visas (TPVs) were introduced in 1999, they have had very little impact on the number of people seeking asylum in Australia. In the two years following its introduction over 8,455 asylum seekers arrived in Australia by boat<sup>15</sup> compared to the 2,504 people this year.

They have also had very little impact on the number of people being granted refugee status. According to the Department for Immigration and Citizenship, nearly 90% of the people allocated temporary protection visas were granted a visa that gave them Australian residency. Only 3% (or 379 people) granted temporary protection visas departed Australia.<sup>16</sup>

### **Myth 4 – Refugees are a burden on our economy**

Refugees offer potential for our economy – they are not a burden. Claims that refugees cost the taxpayer \$628 million were made by some media sources in the last week, but they are baseless, with Centrelink, the government department in charge of providing welfare, stating that there is simply no data to support this figure.<sup>17</sup>

Centrelink also highlights that 'only about 3% of Centrelink customers who were in receipt of a Newstart Allowance income support payment at 30 June 2009 held a refugee and humanitarian or permanent protection visa'.<sup>18</sup>

The Department for Immigration and Citizenship states that immigration currently provides 60% of our population growth, but within the next few years it will be the only source of net labour force growth in Australia.<sup>19</sup>

## Myth 5 – Boats are bringing terrorists to our shores

Some opposition backbenchers have recently stated that arrivals of boats are likely to be a perfect cover for terrorists entering Australia.<sup>20</sup> In reality, the threat of terrorists entering the country in this way has been described by counter-terrorism experts as ‘infinitesimally small’.<sup>21</sup> Asylum seekers arriving by boat may face years of delay before gaining entry into Australia – as opposed to those arriving by air.

All asylum seekers arriving in Australia undergo thorough security checks from ASIO in conjunction with Indonesia. Comparisons with the US found that those involved in the terrorist activities of September 11 arrived on valid US visas.<sup>21</sup>

## Myth 6 – Asylum seekers are ‘illegal immigrants’

Under the Refugee Convention, which Australia has signed, all people have the right to seek asylum in Australia.<sup>22</sup> They may be found to be genuine refugees, and they may not – but seeking asylum is not illegal under Australian law or international law. The term ‘illegal immigrant’, just like the term ‘queue jumper’, is designed to make asylum seekers seem alien and unworthy of sympathy.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR - *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries First Half 2009*:

<http://www.unhcr.org/4adebca49.html>

<sup>3</sup> Crikey, ‘When it comes to asylum seekers, Australia is no Malta’ October 19<sup>th</sup> 2009:

<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/10/19/when-it-comes-to-asylum-seekers-australia-is-no-malta/>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: <http://www.unhcr.org/4adebca49.html>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – *The refugee story in statistics*:

<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4d6.html>

<sup>6</sup> Crikey, ‘When it comes to asylum seekers, Australia is no Malta’ October 19<sup>th</sup> 2009: Graph 2

<sup>7</sup> ABC Media Watch – *Welfare & Refugees, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s2724620.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Crikey: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/10/15/latest-wave-of-boat-people-push-or-pull/>

<sup>9</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, Peter Hartcher ‘At last, we have a real leader - pity that it's not Rudd’:

<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/at-last-we-have-a-real-leader--pity-that-its-not-rudd-20091028-hl00.html>

<sup>10</sup> ABC Media Watch – *Welfare & Refugees, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Channel 9 News*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s2724620.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Response from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to Media Watch, 22nd October, 2009:

[http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938\\_immigration.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938_immigration.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *The Australian*, ‘Liberals wrong on refugees’ <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25339551-5013457,00.html>

<sup>13</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries First Half 2009*: <http://www.unhcr.org/4adebca49.html>

<sup>14</sup> Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library: <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bn/sp/BoatArrivals.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library: <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bn/sp/BoatArrivals.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Response from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to Media Watch, 22nd October, 2009:

[http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938\\_immigration.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938_immigration.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Response from Centrelink to Media Watch, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009:

[http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938\\_centrelink2.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938_centrelink2.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Response from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to Media Watch, 22nd October, 2009 – 5.

Centrelink: [http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938\\_immigration.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0938_immigration.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Department of Immigration & Citizenship - *Fact Sheet 15 - Population Projections*:

<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/15population.htm>

<sup>20</sup> ‘Terrorists ‘hiding’ with boat people’, Daily Telegraph, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009:

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/terrorists-hiding-with-boat-people/story-e6freuy9-1225790211002>

<sup>21</sup> Dr Michael McKinley quoted in SMH article ‘Rudd slams Tuckey’s ‘terrorist’ asylum seeker comments’, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/rudd-slams-tuckeys-terrorist-asylum-seeker-comments-20091022-hamt.html>

<sup>22</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>