

Hon. Malcolm Turnbull
Prime Minister
House of Representatives
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Turnbull,

During this Refugee Week, it is important that we, focus on what it is to be a refugee – someone who “has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.” Australia, as one of the first signatories to the Convention on Refugees, is obliged to accept and protect people who flee to safety on our shores asking for asylum.

Australia seems to be forgetting this basic responsibility focusing rather on finding harsher and harsher ways of punishing those who come by boat or plane seeking our protection – banishing asylum seekers to off-shore islands for unendurable lengths of time; preventing genuine refugees coming to Australia from Manus Island and Nauru; subjecting asylum seekers to long periods of processing, leaving asylum seekers in a state of suspension and insecurity and now ceasing most financial support.

In recent months Minister Dutton announced the cutting of financial support (two thirds of Newstart) to asylum seekers resident in Australia. Despite the best will in the world the asylum seeker NGOs, along with support services, community mental health teams and the police, will not be able to assist all of the estimated 7-12,000 people without funds or shelter. Unemployment is around 5% and these people, often traumatised, without a secure visa, some with little English and others with qualifications unrecognised in Australia are destined to be at the bottom of the employment pile. This makes them vulnerable to exploitative work, in danger of homelessness and generally at risk.

What has happened to “the land of the fair go”, the Australia that welcomed thousands of refugees from post-war Europe, Vietnam, East Timor, El Salvador, Bosnia and many other countries? We are concerned for the future of our country; we ask that you reconsider these harsh penalties and begin regarding asylum seekers as vulnerable human beings who, if welcomed and supported, could make a great contribution to Australia as they have in the past.

Yours sincerely,