

## **REFUGEE WEEK - Speech**

*Statement 20 June*

**HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan)** [ 9.54 pm ]: I rise tonight to acknowledge that this week, between Sunday, 18 June to Saturday, 24 June, it is Refugee Week. For those members who do not know, it is an annual celebration of the positive contributions that refugees bring to Australian society. It also encompasses World Refugee Day, which is today, 20 June. According to the United Nations refugee agency, in 2016 there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. That is an inconceivable figure. We are talking about two and a half times the Australian population. Among those people, 22.5 million were deemed to be refugees, yet in 2016, only 189 300 refugees were resettled. Nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution. Currently, we are witnessing the highest levels of displacement of people on record. Most refugees around the world are living in dire circumstances and rich countries like Australia are playing only a very small part in global resettlement programs. Thirty per cent of displaced people are being hosted in Africa; 26 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa; 17 per cent in Europe, 16 per cent in the Americas; and 11 per cent in Asia and the Pacific. The number of refugees that Australia takes is minuscule, particularly when one looks at the number of refugees globally.

On World Refugee Day we take the opportunity to think about the choices that refugees have to make. These people leave behind everything — their family, their culture and everything they know — to escape war, persecution and terror. Each one of these millions of individuals has their own often inconceivably tragic story. I note that their resilience and strength in the face of such adversity is incredible. I have mentioned before that I previously worked as a lawyer with refugees. It was an enormous privilege to share a part of their lives and to hear their stories. I have great admiration for people who have endured so much and yet are so determined to survive and to make the most of their lives. We know that over half of the over 20 million refugees are under the age of 18, so we are talking about children, most of whom are unaccompanied. They have been separated from their families and a number of them are orphans. Refugee Week also provides an opportunity to acknowledge not only what refugees have been through, but also the contribution to the fabric of the WA community of refugees and their families over decades.

We know that refugees who have come to Australia are a very diverse group. I understand that some people in this place are the descendants of refugees from previous generations. To be accepted into Australia as a refugee, a person is judged on their need for protection and not on the contribution that they might make to the country at that point. I think that is the right way to go about it. Nonetheless, we know people who have come to Australia as refugees have made overwhelmingly positive contributions, economically as well as culturally, and that as a community we have benefited in many ways from settling refugees over the decades. We do benefit when we settle refugees successfully, and we need to acknowledge that that means people often need to have appropriate supports and services to do that. Supports are particularly important when people first arrive and in the first few years that they settle here, including language and legal supports.

I particularly acknowledge the challenge that many refugees face in trying to jump through the legal and bureaucrat hoops that are put in their way. These represent significant barriers to settlement. I can tell members firsthand that refugees are not provided with appropriate time and support to complete their protection visa applications. They are really complex applications and are pages thick. For those who arrive by boat, those applications have to be completed by October this year. An entire cohort of people has been affected by this. This is further complicated by the fact that they may not understand, or even end up receiving, correspondence from the government. The requirements outlined in the correspondence are always in English and we know that translation costs can be prohibitive.

Today is a day for celebration. It is also a day to recognise that, as a nation, Australia has a really terrible record of welcoming and supporting refugees, particularly in recent years. People have a right to safety; I truly believe that. As a country, we have an obligation to offer refuge, which we signed up to internationally, and we are just not doing very well in meeting this obligation. The way that we treat refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in Australia should be a source of great national shame. I know that our detention centres are producing a level of despair, misery and hopelessness in men, women and children who are already suffering from having lost so much and having experienced so much trauma. It is why they are often referred to as mental illness factories.

I also need to express my outrage at the proposed federal citizenship changes that will affect many prospective Australians. People who are living, working, studying and raising families in Australia will be adversely affected by the proposed changes. Some people who have arrived here were told that they would have to wait one year before they could get permanent residency, and now this time has been quadrupled. For many people, particularly people with a refugee background, becoming an Australian citizen is a real achievement, an amazing milestone and a confirmation of their place in this country. Becoming a citizen is something that should be very welcoming and should enable people to feel that they are respected members of our society and our community and that Australia is their home. I know I am not the only person in this place to have had the honour to attend citizenship ceremonies. Members can see the sheer joy, particularly in those people who are new arrivals. I always feel like I am at a happy wedding when I go. Many refugees hold citizenship up as a beacon, and they are desperate to take that final step towards belonging and being part of Australia. Changing the rules on them without notice is not okay and making them wait longer than they have been anticipating or working towards is not okay. It is going to be very difficult.

The proposed citizenship changes will also impact on refugees who are seeking to be reunited with their families. We should all value families, no matter where they are born. We are talking about people who have wives and children and often highly dependent siblings and parents in other countries and this situation causes them great anguish. These people are working really hard within Australia to support their families and all they ultimately want is to be reunited with their loved ones in Australia. If we truly value families, this is something that we should support. The costs of family reunification are prohibitive and time delays are extraordinary. Again, the new citizenship changes will make it even harder for people who should be Australian citizens and who so much want to be part of Australia to get back together. We need to support people to settle here and to feel as though they are part of the community and are valued, and assist them to put down roots and to feel that they belong in Australia. I acknowledge World Refugee Day. Let us acknowledge that refugees ultimately want the same thing we all do — that is, to belong, to have a home and a job and to be with the people they love.