

RURAL AUSTRALIANS FOR REFUGEES



Rural Australians for Refugees was born out of frustration. It began after the Tampa stand-off, when we were told that 85 per cent of Australians were behind the Government. Those of us who were not seemed to be covered by this overwhelming majority, silenced.

In early October 2001, my partner, Susan Varga, our friend Helen McCue and I were sitting around at home wondering what we, as individuals, could do. This is the problem for people stirred up by our political leaders' actions or failure to act. Confronted with abuse of power, individual action seems futile. But it is exactly at such moments that it is imperative. (Anne Coombs)



When **Anne Coombs, Helen McCue and Susan Varga** (pictured left with Jim Carty from the House of Welcome) organised a public meeting in their local town of Bowral, five days before a federal election, in October 2001, they cannot have imagined that this action would inspire the size of the Australia-wide network of public dissent which is now **Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR)**. Their actions however show what happens when seeds of peace are planted, even in the most harsh of seeming times and climates 'from little things, big things grow' indeed.

From its beginnings in the Southern Highlands of NSW, in October 2001, Rural Australians for Refugees has certainly tapped into a deep reservoir of anger and compassion in, sometimes surprising places. For the *Decade to Overcome Violence* themes of *truth-telling, mercy, justice* and *communities which value difference*, are acutely focussed in the struggle for just refugee policies in Australia. Such essential human values cross traditional political, religious and local divides in the constituency of *Rural Australians for Refugees*. For there are now over eighty RAR groups throughout Australia, with members ranging in allegiances from National Party to the Greens (not these things matter to RAR or its work). This amounts to approximately 15,000 (and growing) members and friends who are *'an informal group of concerned citizens, prepared to work hard to turn this country away from an inhumane and bizarre policy.'*



Aided by the modern communications network, especially by email and an excellent website, *Rural Australians for Refugees* continues to build, link and extend grassroots opposition to the Australian Government's treatment of asylum seekers. As a 'clearing house' for fellow campaigners, RAR has thereby mobilised many thousands of people who have never been involved in such political activity before. In doing so, it has also exposed the particular lie that 'ordinary', especially rural, Australians accept the indefinite detention of asylum seekers and the violence done to many desperate people.

*There is no point in being disillusioned, no point, personally, in pulling back.
Withdrawing doesn't help the spirit.*

SEEDS OF PEACE

Empowering people to create change

RAR has never sought to organise others but to enable frustration to be channelled into effective and energetic activity for change. As a network, some common strategies have been adopted, such as nationwide campaigning against temporary protection visas, 'welcome books', which encourage ordinary citizens to write messages of welcome to refugees in detention and the 'welcome towns' campaign, where local councils declare themselves refugee-friendly. More generally however, RAR works closely with others in the pro-refugee network, and there is great diversity in RAR groups and their activities.

Some RAR groups, such as Port Augusta, Port Pirie and Whyalla are located close to detention centres, while others are in parts of the country where they rarely see a refugee. So each group, and each individual RAR supporter, undertakes whatever work seems most appropriate. Such activities include: writing to detainees; working on submissions to have detainees released; visiting and taking things they need (medication, to shoes to second-hand computers); finding legal help; writing to politicians and newspapers; lobbying for better treatment in detention; collecting household goods so newly released refugees can set up house; holding regular information nights and street stalls; organising community awareness-raising events; media work; organising holidays in the country for city-based refugees; and giving English and driving lessons. The groups near the detention centres are in daily contact with detainees, and in rural areas of NSW and Victoria, many people are involved in helping people on temporary protection visas. Some RAR members are battling to free particular families from detention - a fight that has taken over their lives. Others concentrate on public education and raising money for those 'at the coalface'



Some of the Facts about Asylum Seekers

- Australia receives very few asylum seekers compared to other countries (never more than 4000 in any one year). Sweden, with about half our population, receives a similar number, whilst Iran and Pakistan, two of the world's poorest countries, each host over a million Afghan refugees.
- No other country has non-reviewable mandatory detention of asylum seekers. In most Western countries they live in the community while their applications are processed (eg. in Sweden as soon as identification and criminal screening is complete).
- 60% of refugees are victims of torture or severe trauma. But in Australia they are treated like criminals rather than ordinary people fleeing persecution.
- Boat people are not illegal. Under the UN Refugee Convention, Australia has an obligation to take in asylum seekers and assess their claims.
- There is no queue to jump. In many places there is frequently no visa or resettlement process available. Where one exists it is often ad hoc, agonisingly slow and corrupt.

Sources and more information

www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org

Anne Coombs *Mobilising Rural Australia* (Griffith Review, Autumn 2004)