

Combined Refugee Action Group

History Summary – October 2020

In the Beginning

The Combined Refugee Action Group was formed in 2013 in response to the Rudd Government's announcement of the PNG solution later to be known as the Pacific solution. Geelong Trades Hall Council moved the following motion;

"That Geelong Trades Hall Council notes the recent Federal Government policy on asylum seekers arriving by boat as announced by the Prime Minister Friday 19 July 2013 and endorsed by cabinet on Monday 22nd.

This Council condemns the policy as short sighted, politically motivated around the election and against our humanitarian interest and international obligations. We consider the policy as tantamount to locking out workers fleeing persecution and then punishing them unlawfully. This is an insult to Australian unionism and our sense of international solidarity with workers in need.

Furthermore, this council calls on VTHC, ACTU and affiliates to publically oppose this policy and to continue to work towards improving conditions for workers overseas and a more humanitarian solution to asylum seekers in transit."

Subsequently Trades Hall wrote a letter to all churches, existing refugee groups, NGOs, Socialists, Greens and Labor Parties inviting them to a meeting to discuss opposing federal government policy. At this meeting it was acknowledged that while there were a lot of refugee support groups in the Geelong area doing good work, there was a lack of political action against government policy. Thus, the first CRAG action plan was developed.

Early meetings had prominent community activist like Catholic Monsignor James Murray, Anglican Bishop Peter Danaher, Trades Hall Secretary Tim Gooden and RAR campaign veterans like Cathie Bond and Sue Longmore.

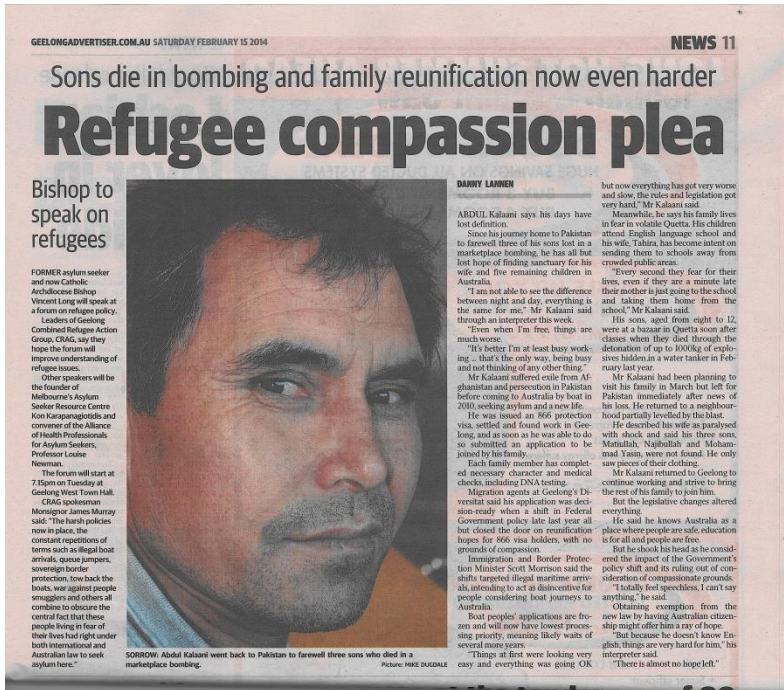
WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR? (in terms of asylum seekers and refugees).

- Ending off-shore processing.
- Speeding up.....
- Protection Visas + / Bridging Visas.
 - Humanitarian Issue – NOT ILLEGALS:
Right to seek asylum (It's not a crime to seek asylum.)
 - Close the detention centres Manus Island & Nauru.
 - "Stop the Boats" by processing either bridging or protection visas in Pakistan, Afghanistan or Indonesia.
 - Detention Centres in Australia require more urgent action to facilitate process of release into Australian communities (especially for women and children)
 - Get accurate information on relative numbers of asylum seekers and refugees by comparison with numbers in refugee camps throughout the world. (Aust.Nos are minimal 1 refugee per 1000 people).
 - Right to Work. .457 Visa.
 - Keeping the promise of re-unification with their families (wives and children).
 - Combine with other Social Justice groups for joint voice and action: i.e.
Geelong Interchurch Social Justice Network. R.A.R, GRAIN, Interfaith Network,

Actions included protest rallies, town hall public meetings, welcome dinners for refugees and meetings with local politicians. We began setting up the basics like bank accounts and email contact lists.

Education was a big part of bringing people along and gaining support for those seeking asylum. Pamphlets were printed and stalls at local events and markets were established.

About the same time, dozens of young Tamil men were sent to Geelong on release from detention. It was the middle of winter and they had few clothes or possessions. So the Geelong community, along with Diversitat (a local NGO), gathered together and raised enough resources to help the Tamil men get established in the community.



A big public meeting was held at Geelong West town hall in early 2014 with over 700 people attending. This was the beginning of a media and education campaign supported by local journalists, like Danny Lannen. We organised everything from street stalls to speaking tours with draw cards like former teachers from Manus Island.

Marching, protesting and engaging the public.

We called rallies and marches at regular intervals and organised for contingents at the big Palm Sunday rallies in Melbourne. We marched and entered floats with a political message at the local multicultural festival, Pakofesta.

We produced leaflets and information highlighting the plight of people seeking asylum, exposing the lies about Australia's policy and laws and the failure to abide by international human rights obligations.



We challenged politicians, whenever they came to Geelong. This became a CRAG specialty. No prime minister or politician could get in or out of Geelong without meeting protesters from CRAG and supportive local unionists.



When Julie Bishop attended a Liberal party fundraiser here, we only had about four hours notice yet we still got over a dozen people to peacefully picket and hold placards. The Melbourne police force sent fifty odd riot squad specialists to watch us - a bit of a back handed complement we thought. Today the government keeps it a secret when politicians come to Geelong.

Tragedy

Tragedy struck the Geelong refugee community and their supporters in mid-2014 when one of the Tamil men seeking asylum died. Leo Seemanpillai passed away after setting himself on fire. It was a huge shock to everyone around him and to the broader community. CRAG rallied around and did all it could to support the refugee community and tried everything to get government approval for Leo's family to attend his funeral, but the Abbott government would not move and his family could not attend.

Later that year Tim Gooden, Trades Hall secretary and CRAG convenor, along with Aran Mylvaganam from the Australian Tamil Council, travelled to Tamil Nadu in India to return Leo's possessions to his mother. This would not have been possible for people living in a refugee camp in India without the intervention of CRAG.

Welcome place

Two members of CRAG, Cathie Bond and Linda Cusworth, had shared a vision for some time about the need for a place where refugees and asylum seekers could feel welcome and



receive practical assistance and emotional support. Cathie and Linda approached Wesley Church in Geelong with a proposal to establish a drop-in centre, where people seeking asylum, and refugees on temporary visas, from a diverse range of countries and backgrounds could meet together, socialise, participate in activities and share a weekly meal. The Church agreed, and 'The Welcome Place' opened its doors in July 2015.

Along with social support, the Welcome Place provides assistance with job applications, rental applications and form completion (non-legal), and referrals to legal assistance and other supports are made. A food bank continues to meet the basic needs of many families and individuals, particularly during this time of Covid-19. As well as providing financial support and food donations, a number of CRAG members are involved as volunteers at the Welcome Place, which is now a highly regarded Uniting Church-aided service, meeting urgent and otherwise unmet needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.



CRAG Today

CRAG now is an umbrella group for over 27 local groups and networks. We have an email list of 967 supporters. We lobby politicians through face-to-face meetings, letters and submissions to Senate Select Committees, supported by protests at their offices.

CRAG advocates for policies that are informed by the UN Refugee Convention, developed in partnership with our regional neighbours ensuring the safety of vulnerable people seeking asylum. We consider it imperative that the government abides by Article 31 of the Convention; that all contracting states (including Australia), must not impose penalties on people who arrive without authorisation seeking refuge.

Three years ago, CRAG decided to open a designated legal account to raise funds to assist Asylum Seekers in the Geelong region with legal fees required for their visa applications and judicial reviews. To date money raised for this account, through donations and fundraising, has enabled us to pay around \$90,000 to assist nearly 50 cases.

CRAG today brings together people from a variety of backgrounds – from the community generally plus the churches, unions, refugee support groups, social justice and political groups, students and many others. We are united by the shared aim of advocating for just, humane and welcoming policies towards people seeking asylum and refugees.

We want to see:

- The release of people in mandatory detention both onshore and offshore
- TPVs replaced by permanency
- Family reunion for refugees
- Fair and decent policies for people seeking safety

2019 Federal election Campaign

During the federal elections of 2019 CRAG set up the Corangamite election *Campaign Choose Fairness and Decency*. We organised and trained 91 volunteers while 20,000 leaflets comparing the refugee policies of all major parties were distributed at pre-election events, three pre-polls over three weeks and 15 polling booths on election day.

CRAG was instrumental in unseating an incumbent Liberal member from the seat of Corangamite, Sarah Henderson, in the pursuit of a change of refugee policy.

