

A New Plan for Australia's Humanitarian Intake

Currently, the Australian government accepts individuals as part of its humanitarian intake from two sources: those who are transported here under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) program and those who make their own way to Australia. On top of this intake, the government should allow a third category to make up Australia's humanitarian intake – the civil society category.

The civil society category would consist of persons identified by Australian charities and NGOs as refugees in their country of origin, mitigating the necessity for the difficult government process of determining if they are genuine refugees once they arrive in Australia. They would be transported to Australia safely, by the charity or NGO who identified them as refugees. This would mitigate the necessity for them to undertake unsafe travel arrangements such as unseaworthy vessels that have formed such an emotive component of the Australian asylum seeker debate for over a decade. Finally, they would be offered support services once they reached Australia to assist them in re-settling process. This would include language, education, health and cultural services. These support services would be arranged and paid for by the charity or NGO in question and, as such, would be of no cost to taxpayers. The NGOs and charities carrying out this work would be funded voluntarily by individuals, community groups and businesses in the Australian community.

The civil society component would be in addition to the current UNCHR intake and private individual applications meaning Australia's overall humanitarian intake would increase.

This proposal for a new category of the humanitarian intake addresses a number of criteria of the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry:

- cost
- social cohesion
- the opportunity for Australians to altruistic to persons seeking asylum
- national security

Immigration as poverty alleviation

Development experts are fond of saying there is no magic bullet for solving poverty. But there is – immigration.

There is huge debate regarding the efficacy of government-funded foreign aid. Critics argue it irreparably damages the institutional fabric of recipient nations or at the very least is completely ineffective. But even proponents believe that foreign aid can achieve only a modest increase in economic growth.

The reason for this is that the prosperity or otherwise of a nation is dependent upon its institutional arrangements. In particular, the rule of law, private property rights, free markets and democracy. These institutions are very difficult to change. And even if they are changed, they need to be underpinned by the cultural and social mores of the population to be effective.

A far more realistic approach, especially for those people living in the very worst environments imaginable (think North Korea and Syria), is to give people the choice to opt out. Enabling people to effectively swap their institutional arrangements through immigration can achieve a greater improvement across any indicator of quality of life than foreign aid.

The organisation Open Borders estimates that an individual crossing the border from a poor nation to a rich nation could expect to instantaneously at least double their income. Economist Michael Clemens from the Center for Global Development says that 80% of Haitians earning more than \$US10 a day live in the United States. What's more, the total money migrants send back to friends and family members in their country of origin – funds known as remittances – is three times greater than all the foreign aid transferred globally.

The framers of Australia's foreign aid program can only dream about doubling the income of aid recipients in the comparatively short amount of time it takes to re-settle individuals and families in a new country. Accommodating refugees in Australia is our most effective way of alleviating poverty.

Civil society and immigration

But the mistake many nations make with regards to immigration is entrusting the task of re-settling immigrants to the government through the UNCHR or leaving immigrants to navigate the journey out of danger themselves. Civil society – in the form of charities and NGOs - can facilitate the journey from the world's most ghastly places and provide support services to new immigrants far more effectively, and at a fraction of the cost, than the government.

An example of this is an organisation called Liberty in North Korean (LINK) based in California. LINK transports refugees out of North Korea into either South Korea or across Asia through a “modern underground railroad” to the US. Once in the US or South Korea, LINK offers financial assistance, education services, language training and cultural activities.

It only costs LINK \$US3000 per refugee to fund their safe passage from North Korea to the US or South Korea and sustain the relevant support services once the refugee has arrived. Compare this with the \$AUD200,000 - \$450,000 per year it costs the Australian government to detain boat arrivals.

It is mystifying why there is not more of this. Big NGOs such as World Vision and Oxfam would find it far easier to transform a person's life if they ran ‘sponsor a refugee’ programs that provided safe passage from war zones to countries in the west and targeted support programs once they arrived.

Furthermore, civil society taking a leading role in immigration mitigates many of grievances of those opposed to increasing immigration in its current form. The cost difference has already been mentioned above. And over time, if civil society were to eventually completely replace government services for immigrants, the cost would be borne only by those who had voluntarily contributed rather than taxpayers generally.

Civil society can even mitigate concerns that immigration increases crime and creates so-called ‘ghettoisation’. Social cohesion is built on social capital accumulated between different individuals and groups in society. Civil society is one of the vehicles through which social capital is accrued. By building connections with immigrants before they even enter a recipient country, greater civil society involvement in immigration would at least partially ameliorate these social cohesion concerns. Certainly, civil society would be more effective in this regard than uncaring, unnavigable government departments.

And charities and NGOs would also undoubtedly provide better services for immigrants. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre believes there are “significant gaps” in the health services on offer for immigrants from the government due to their unique health challenges. Just as private businesses are almost always more effective than the government at producing the goods and services that they specialise in, experienced charities and NGOs, like LINK, are in a much better position to offer localized, tailored solutions to these needs than the costly, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches of governments.

By demonstrating the benefits and easing concerns about immigration, civil society can pave the way for freedom of movement through immigration to be expanded over time.

Summary of how this approach meets policy objectives listed above

The addition of a new civil society category to Australia's humanitarian intake would meet the policy objectives listed earlier, contained in the Term of Reference of this Inquiry, in the following ways:

Minimising Costs to Taxpayers

Reducing costs to taxpayers is a major theme of this Inquiry and mentioned at various points in the Terms of Reference. These mentions include:

- 1. a. ii: *(The benefits and costs that the intake of permanent entrants can generate with respect to)...government services used (including public health, education, housing, social and employment services) now and in the future;*
- 1. a. iii: *(The benefits and costs that the intake of permanent entrants can generate with respect to)... Taxes paid now and in the future;*
- 2. g: *(An examination of the scope to use alternative methods for determining intakes – including through payment – and the effects these would have)... the administration and compliance costs associated with immigration;*

The introduction of the civil society category meets this objective in the following ways:

- It is likely civil society will be able to provide services to refugees at a lower price than the Australian government. As mentioned above, LINK successfully transports refugees from North Korea into South Korea and the United States as well as offering support services for years after they arrive, for only \$US3000. The Australian government detains asylum seekers at a cost of \$200,000 to \$450,000 to taxpayers.
- Payments from the general population to organisations that transport and re-settle refugees in Australia would be voluntary. They would be undertaken by individuals, community groups and businesses that have a genuine interest in eradicating poverty and assisting refugees. If, over time, the civil society category grew to the point where Australia was able to reduce or eradicate all together our humanitarian intake from other sources, it would almost completely remove refugee services from the government's costs and be a significant boon for taxpayers.
- As immigration is such an effective form of poverty alleviation, it may be possible to encourage civil society to take part in the civil society category by offering tax breaks paid for by the foreign aid budget. Not only would this give Australian taxpayers better 'bang for their buck' with regards to foreign aid, but also be a tax saving.

Social Cohesion

Ensuring Australia's social cohesion is maintained is a theme of this Inquiry and is mentioned in the Terms of Reference:

- 1. b. ii: *(The benefits and costs that the intake of permanent entrants can generate with respect to)... cultural, social and demographic impacts;*

The introduction of the civil society category meets this objective in the following ways:

- As mentioned above, interaction between individuals and civil society builds social capital in a far more powerful and authentic way than interaction between individuals and government departments does. Therefore, it likely that greater civil society involvement in Australia's

humanitarian intake will reduce any consequences it has for Australia's social cohesion. This includes increased crime and so-called 'ghettoisation'.

The opportunity for Australians to be altruistic to those persons seeking asylum

Ensuring Australians have an opportunity to be altruistic to those seeking asylum is a theme of this Inquiry and is mentioned in the Terms of Reference:

- 2. d: *(An examination of the scope to use alternative methods for determining intakes – including through payment – and the effects these would have)... entrants would have limited access to social security or subsidised education, housing or healthcare;*
- 2. f: *(An examination of the scope to use alternative methods for determining intakes – including through payment – and the effects these would have)... opportunities for Australian citizens to be altruistic towards foreigners including refugees;*

The introduction of the civil society category meets this objective in the following ways:

- The civil society category allows Australians to take greater control in Australia's humanitarian intake. Individuals, community groups and businesses can decide to support refugees coming to Australia creating a more meaningful and authentic multicultural partnership in Australia and a more vibrant and dynamic civil society generally.
- As the private sector generally produces goods and services cheaper and of a higher quality than the government, so charities and NGOs would also undoubtedly provide better services for immigrants. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre believes there are "significant gaps" in the health services on offer for immigrants from the government due to their unique health challenges. Experienced charities and NGOs, like LINK, are in a much better position to offer localized, tailored solutions to these needs than the costly, 'one-size-fits-all' approaches of governments.
- Given the overall benefits of civil society taking on the responsibility of transporting and supporting refugees in terms of cost to taxpayers, social cohesion and the opportunity for Australians to be altruistic, there is greater scope for expanding the size of Australia's humanitarian intake over time.
- A key aspect of the debate around asylum seekers arriving by boat has been safety. Indeed, many people have drowned travelling to Australia with the intention of seeking asylum. It is possible that fewer individuals would be tempted to travel via boat to Australia if there were greater opportunities for safe passage to Australia such as that offered by civil society under this plan. Fewer boat arrivals would also mitigate the need for mandatory detention of asylum seekers, a practice which many Australians think is inhumane.

National Security

Maintaining Australia's national security is a theme of this Inquiry and is mentioned in the Terms of Reference:

- 2. b: *(An examination of the scope to use alternative methods for determining intakes – including through payment – and the effects these would have)... qualitative requirements relating to health, character and security would remain;*

The introduction of the civil society category meets this objective in the following ways:

- The one area where the government will still have to play a role in the humanitarian intake under this plan is the provision of the necessary security checks on applicants through Australia's security agencies. However, it is likely that allowing civil society to manage Australia's humanitarian intake will make the job of Australia's security agencies in this

regard easier. Civil society will assess individuals in their country of origin. This can be done in conjunction with security agencies. This would be easier for security agencies than attempting to verify the claims of individuals who apply for refugee status after they arrive in Australia having made their way here independently. Furthermore, security services can direct civil society to source applicants to this category from countries and regions of countries with a lower security threat.

Possible policy features of the civil society category

Clearly, the ideas outlined above constitute a major change in how Australia manages its humanitarian intake. Nonetheless, incremental positive change can be achieved through intelligent policy design. The following constitute some possible first steps:

Enact a pilot scheme

To introduce the category, allow only an additional 100 spots of Australia's humanitarian intake to make up the first civil society category. This would enable civil society and government to address any initial 'teething problems'. The size of people in the civil society component could be increased gradually over time. Depending on the success of the category and the level of support of the Australian public, the civil society category may grow to become the entirety of Australia's humanitarian intake.

Relax the definition of a 'refugee' for the civil society category

To reduce the government workload in assessing whether or not an applicant of the civil society category is a 'genuine' refugee, the requirements for this category can be relaxed to include those living in extreme poverty (as opposed to the current definition which requires individuals to be facing various abuses of their political and human rights). This makes it easier for individuals to qualify for this category and easier for the government to check.

Offer tax breaks to civil society to engage in this activity paid for through the foreign aid budget

As outline above, immigration is the most effective form of poverty alleviation. Civil society facilitating the safe passage of refugees to Australia would be achieving far more than the foreign aid budget in its current form. To encourage civil society to take part, the government could offer tax breaks paid for out of the foreign aid budget to ensure Australian taxpayers get better 'bang for their buck' with regards to foreign aid.

Conclusion

The human story is one of migration. Throughout history, humans have left their homes for greater opportunity. Countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are almost exclusively comprised of people who have migrated or whose ancestors have migrated in search of a better life for themselves and their families. There is a huge opportunity for civil society to play a key role in enlarging the transformative impact of immigration in Australia today.

The dynamism and authenticity of Australia's civil society can be strengthened and Australia's multicultural partnership can be emboldened by giving Australians greater freedom and responsibility for this country's humanitarian intake.