

# Our guest speaker, Freddie Steen



Freddie is well known to many of us, due to her long time refugee advocacy, expertise, and continued support of Buddies. Formerly a public servant in the Australian Immigration Department, Freddie now volunteers with the Indooroopilly Uniting Church Refugee Support Group, which has been providing among other things, pro-bono lawyers, migration agents and councillors to the refugees.

The title of Freddie's talk to us today was, "The current situation for asylum seekers and refugees in the 'care' of the current Australian Government and Queensland's advocacy response."

Some main points from Freddie's talk:-

- Began by saying she has had 20 years involvement helping asylum seekers and refugees in Brisbane, and the situation now is the worst she has seen it.
- Reiterated the need to hold our Government's representatives to account The word 'persecution'. Gov reps (and most Australians) have no experience of it.
- Spoke of her time at Romero Centre (an organisation much like the IUC Refugee Support Group). The inspiration for Centre's name is from Oscar Romero, an Archbishop of El Salvador, who spoke up about social injustice, and was assassinated (shot) in 1980.
- What mattered most, then, was the welcome given to refugees.
- Today, the Gov has deliberately set out to push away those asylum seekers who come by boat.

Freddie told the story of a man, now a friend, from Afghanistan, who was on the Tampa (2001). At the time, the basic attitude of the Australian Government was – we don't believe in the UN Convention, that people need protection and dignity.

That man (around 24 at the time) was left sitting in the sun on the hot steel ship's deck, then taken to Nauru. He was there for a year, when the UNHCR assessed the claims of the Tampa people. (Very unusual for the UNHCR to do that.) This man was assessed as a refugee, but the Australian Gov kept him on Nauru for another year. When he eventually arrived in Brisbane, he was housed for 1 night only, then he was on his own. Romero helped this man and people like him to find their way, to get accommodation, a licence, a job and so on. Now 20 years on this man is doing well in life; he now runs his own car wrecking business.

20 years on, things are worse for asylum seekers and refugees. In 1999 Temporary Protection Visas came in. (No real pathway to permanent residency.) Also, refugees cannot sponsor family to join them in Australia. 20 years ago, the SIEV X, carrying mainly women and children, sank. There was no other way they could join their husbands and fathers in Australia.

**Afghanistan:** Aust has used the same brutal tactics. Australia pulled out May-Aug 2021, and 200 interpreters were left behind. Former Australian soldiers are now active lobbying the Gov for their rescue. Afghani Australian community is lodging applications for people still in danger there. 26,000 applications lodged – could be up to 100,000 still in danger there, needing a safe country.

Only a couple of short years ago, the Australian Immigration intake was around 200,000 people a year (not counting those on student or working visas). Now all the Australian Gov has offered is 3,000 humanitarian visas to those wanting to escape persecution. Canada has offered to take 40,000. The Refugee Council of Australia and many faith leaders are lobbying for Australia to take at least 20,000.

Over the past 2 years Australia's humanitarian program has slowed to a mere trickle. Yet at the moment there are 8,000 Afghani refugees living in limbo in Indonesia. 16,000 refugees altogether. No hope. Resettlement not an option; Australia, NZ and Canada not taking them.

Good news for some who escaped Afghanistan – all up Australia rescued 4,000 people from Kabul. Most have connections in the Australian community and many have gone to live with family. They have been given 3 month temporary protection visas, and have been told they have a pathway to permanent residency.

Yet there are up to 32,000 refugees in the so called 'legacy caseload'. These people are living on different kinds of temporary visas with no path to permanent residency. They cannot be sent back to places like Afghanistan or Myanmar or Iran (Iran will not take any sent back against their will), yet they are left in limbo, not granted permanent residency, not allowed to get on with their lives in Australia.

Again, Freddie emphasised that off-shore detention must end. Australia must stop corrupting our neighbours like Nauru and PNG, making them take asylum seekers who are our responsibility. (However, Australian has just signed a new contract with Nauru for this purpose.) There are still medevac refugees in BITA (Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation), and refugees in detention in PNG who are Australia's responsibility. 22 out of 46 in detention in Melbourne have Covid.

Community detention is still detention – no freedom to live. Some have been in detention for 10 years; it is time to let them live. Need to get this message across to all who vote – federal election next year.

In the 1950s the immigration policy was to build a nation – needed immigrants for this. Today the government has a business mentality – not training our own people, we will get people from overseas, a commitment to temporary residents. Industry relies on temporary people – cheaper.

### **Communify and ASRA in Qld.**

Communify is an organisation helping refugees and asylum seekers in Qld. Funds come through ASRA (Asylum Seeker and Refugee Assistance program) funded by the Qld Government. (2019-21, the Qld Gov gave \$3.98 million to Communify through ASRA - <https://communify.org.au>) However, people need to be released into the community to work and live permanently. An underclass is created if people are forced to continually live on charity. It is a basic human need to belong, and be welcomed.