

## The Role of Government

### The idea of a universal safety net

We are familiar with the safety nets for trapeze artists, and are aware that mostly the net remains there but unused. It is only when someone falls that we observe how essential it is for safety, even for life. In a similar way, Australia has long been committed, at least in principle, to providing a safety net for all in our society. Most of the time it may not be needed but in certain circumstances it is critical to safety and life.



It has been understood that, while we all have responsibilities, there are circumstances in which it is the government which must provide the safety net. Hence, we have long had various forms of housing assistance and income support. More recently, support for people living with a disability has been structured in as the NDIS. These supports are based on a conviction that no one should be without the basic essentials for life, and there are times when it is only the government which has the capacity to provide access.

It is also true that the battle to ensure there is an effective safety net for people seeking asylum in Australia is ongoing. Instead, many people who have sought asylum here are left in a state that does not respect their dignity, cater for their basic human needs, nor take account of the fact that they have already suffered great trauma.

Pope John XXIII wrote the following in 1963, another time in our history when there were millions of people moving from one country to another, including many displaced and in need of refuge.

*Among people's personal rights we must include the right to enter a country in which they hope to be able to provide more fittingly for themselves and their dependents. It is therefore the duty of State officials to accept such immigrants and—so far as the good of their own community, rightly understood, permits—to further the aims of those who may wish to become members of a new society.*

*Pacem in terris* n 106

Anyone who supports or works for justice for people seeking asylum in Australia today will very likely hear arguments in favour of the current government policies. It is therefore important to understand something of what is currently provided.

## The experience of a safety net

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*After being in Australia for 2 months actively trying to look for a job, I found it difficult to survive. I was living in a share house offered to me by Lentara Uniting Church. My employment search was unsuccessful although I could speak English and had even been lucky to have an Australian degree.*

*The first time I received the SRSS payment, I felt that I was getting a sense of a security. My caseworker from the Red Cross explained that I would have access to a basic living allowance and trauma counselling. It lifted me up from a state of depression because I didn't know how I could survive in Australia.*

*It brightened my days because I could worry about finding a job, getting an interview, instead of worrying about a roof over my head and food. The payment meant that I was not alone and I could be safe while awaiting the outcome of my visa. During this difficult journey, I felt supported.*

*My life changed at that time. I started contributing a percentage of my SRSS towards my rent. I started thinking about saving for the future in case I never found a job. This isn't enough to survive as a human being who has no other support, no family and rarely friends. As a single person you can barely survive but as a single mother or a young family life gets even harder.*

## Government policy on the safety net for people seeking asylum

Government policy on spending in relation to people seeking asylum changes quite frequently and a reliable source of the latest information is the [Refugee Council of Australia](#). Here are some relevant points.

- In general terms in the 20-21 budget of October 2020, financial support for people seeking asylum was \$19.6 million, 86% less than \$139.8 million in 2017-18. In that same time, however, the numbers needing help have increased substantially. The rules around who can receive assistance, what kind of assistance they can have, whether they are permitted to work or study etc. are incredibly complex. Increasingly more people are left out of the assistance altogether.
- In September 2020, the government began to release into the community, people *who had been brought to Australia for medical care*. They had been receiving some financial assistance including housing, but were not permitted to work, nor to study. They were given three weeks to move out of the housing and find a place to live and an income (in the middle of a pandemic and very high unemployment). They were no longer to receive any help from the government.
- Status Resolution Support Service – SRSS: This involves a payment some\* people receive as their claims for asylum are being processed and that can take years. The actual payments people may receive vary considerably depending on a variety of circumstances, but for a single person it has been 89% of the Newstart (now Jobseeker) living allowance and rent assistance. Roughly this amounts to around \$250 a week.

*\* Access to SRSS has become more and more restricted over the last year or so.*

## Charities supporting the people seeking asylum

When people have no income from the government, nor from work, they have to depend on other people or organisations. (Some visas do not permit work, and even when they do, it is difficult for many to find it.)

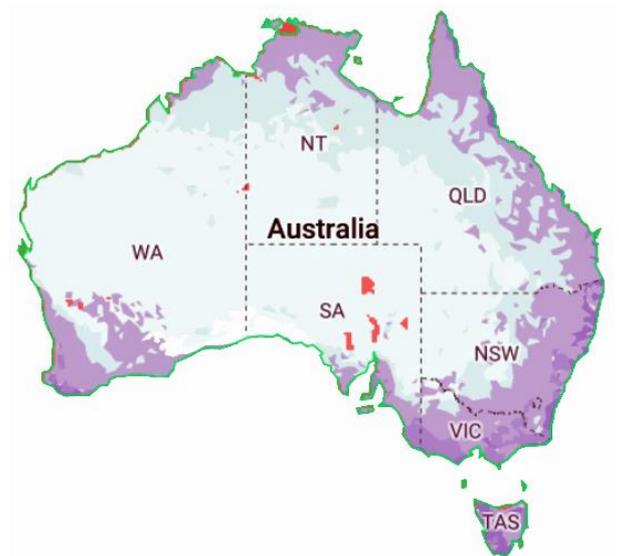
This has meant that those charities who support people seeking asylum are more and more stretched beyond their resources, a situation made even worse by covid 19. Instead of providing support in critical situations from time to time, services are needing to provide much more ongoing support.

As well as affecting the larger charities, this has an effect on parishes and small community organisations which provide support. Many are simply unable to stretch their resources further. Clearly such a situation is unsustainable.

## The situation for state governments

Even with the current federal government support, people seeking asylum very often cannot access adequate housing. While situations vary across the nation, some support is already being provided by state governments, especially NSW and Victoria where most of the people seeking asylum live.

As federal government lessens the support available to people seeking asylum, the effect is to make more and more demands on state governments to support them.



## What happens if we let money do the talking?



Research shows that when people are homeless, there is a significant increase in their contact with health system, (hospital stays, emergency visits, mental health services), the justice system (police, courts, prison) and homeless services.

All of these services involve a lot of government funding.

It has been clearly established that the cost of that funding is far greater than the alternative, namely supporting people into housing.

In the same way, it can be shown that -

**the cost of keeping people in detention and leaving people without support, is significantly greater than it would be to keep people properly supported in the community.**