



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

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Catholic bishops question Coalition's proposed policy changes on refugees and asylum seekers

The Australian Catholic Bishops are questioning the coalition's proposed policy changes on immigration and say that a return to the Pacific solution would show a lack of appreciation of the ethical issues related to migration.

Yesterday, the coalition announced changes which could require asylum seekers to be processed overseas if the coalition was to win government.

A touted return to the temporary protection visa (TPV) policy would be included in these changes.

As it was under the Howard government, the TPV holders would be able to work and have access to Medicare. They would be required to attend English language classes after a year and would have access to limited income support.

However, they would not have family reunion rights and the period of temporary protection could be extended indiscriminately 'if required'. The negative mental health effects of TPVs have been widely recorded and have led in the past to an actual increase in boat arrivals, especially women and children, because of the lack of access to family reunion. In addition to this policy, under a Coalition government, TPV holders would have to work for welfare, although this would not necessarily increase their employability if they gain permanency.

Bishop Joe Grech, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference spokesperson for refugee and asylum seeker issues is concerned about these changes.

"The requirement of asylum seekers to work for their benefits would need to be carefully considered and its motives made very transparent. Vulnerable and traumatised human beings cannot simply be used as deterrents to others seeking asylum in this country", said Bishop Grech.

"It has always been the view of the Catholic Church that human beings such as asylum seekers should be treated as human beings, not as political footballs. This policy sounds as though it could be quite punitive toward asylum seekers who have left their countries of origin because of dire and dangerous situations", said Bishop Grech.

"It is important to focus on the problem of people smuggling while not holding asylum seekers responsible for this phenomenon", he said.

Director of the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office Fr Maurizio Pettena said that many also do not realise the wealth that we enjoy in Australia as a result of migration.

"It has been demonstrated time and time again that refugees and asylum seekers work extremely hard in the Australian community, contributing much to the fabric of this country", said Fr Pettena.

For media enquiries, please contact Beth Doherty on 0407 081 256