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Unions call for humane approach to asylum seekers; refugees should not be a political football

Australian unions have restated their support of a humanitarian immigration and refugee policy and called for strong leadership from all sides of politics to show compassion to asylum seekers fleeing strife-torn parts of the world.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow said Australian unions strongly support a humane approach to asylum seekers and that their rights are respected.

She said permanent migration – including the humanitarian and refugee program – had played an enormous role in Australia’s growth and prosperity and would so for decades to come.

Australia was a safe and wealthy nation which in the past had shown generosity and compassion to vulnerable people seeking protection from persecution in their home country.

“There should always be an open and informed public debate about immigration and asylum seekers, but we would be concerned if refugees genuinely fleeing for their safety became the victims of political football in an election year,” Ms Burrow said.

“We again call for strong leadership from all sides of politics to counter views that seek to demonise asylum seekers or encourage Australia to abrogate its international obligations.

“The Government should release the assessments of the political and security situations in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, and it should ensure no-one is sent back to a situation of personal danger or oppression.

“Australia is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention which makes it clear that any genuine claims of persecution must be considered and processed.

“The most fundamental obligation for Australia under the Refugee Convention is to ensure that asylum seekers are not returned to a situation of serious risk, and this cannot be done without a proper assessment of their claim.

“Indefinite, prolonged mandatory detention has in the past worsened the anguish and suffering of asylum seekers who have already endured traumatic experiences.

“The issue of boat arrivals attracts inordinate political and media attention, considering our current refugee intake of about 13,000 a year is small by international standards and forms less than 10% of our total permanent migration intake.

“There needs to be international action to deal with the push factors that cause people to seek asylum. Australia can play an international leadership role by working towards peace, equitable development and decent work for all.

“Australian unions are longstanding supporters of multiculturalism and the role of immigration in Australia’s development,” said Ms Burrow.

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