



Grandmothers for Refugees is a grass roots movement that advocates for compassionate welcome and safe settlement of all people seeking asylum.

Visit us at: www.grandmothersforrefugees.org

Political prisoners

As the last refugees leave Park Hotel this week (7 April 2022), one of the great lies of Australian politics comes to an end.

There is no proof left for the appalling idea that people had to be imprisoned to stop others drowning at sea.

This false binary is now undone. Nothing changed in the so-called push factors. No new circumstances presented themselves. The torturers simply grew tired and took off their hoods.

What remains though is a terrible truth: these refugees were kept locked up for purely political ends.

They were released only because they had outlasted their purpose. There were finally more votes in letting them free than in continuing their abuse. That is the only change, the craven maths that has shaped their lives for the past decade.

There is no fanfare about this. Billions of dollars have been spent and innumerable lives destroyed and at the end there is simply the opening of a door into a hotel lobby.

The same happened on Manus Island when it became clear that the prison there was illegal: the government simply opened the front gate and turned off the power.

The people freed from Park Hotel and from other detention sites this week are not truly free. They have entered the purgatory of bridging visas (see overleaf).

Of all the Howard-era torture instruments, these are among the cruellest. They force a person into a perpetual unknowing, waiting for their case to be resolved, uncertain of where they might be sent or what might happen next.

Still, it is the end of one lie. The government has done something it spent a decade saying it couldn't possibly do and in that moment proved there was never any justification for the system of imprisonment it had built and maintained.

This is an abridged version of the Editorial, ***The Saturday Paper***, 9 April 2022

At the time of writing, there are understood to be 10 refugees still in locked detention.

“They have entered the purgatory of bridging visas”

The people recently released from immigration detention are not free to settle in Australia.

To be freed from the prison hotels and other detention centres, they have had to sign for a type of visa that, after six months, requires them to leave the country – either to go back to Nauru, go back to their home country, or find a third country like NZ, US or Canada to accept them.

1. Bridging Visa E (final departure)

Their visas are generally for six months duration with permission to work. They cannot access Centrelink benefits if they can't work. With just three weeks of assistance, they must find work and a place to live. They have access to Medicare while their visa is current. At the end of six months, their Medicare card is cancelled. If they apply for renewal of their visa because they have nowhere else to go, there is often a gap before their medical coverage is reactivated.

2. Bridging Visa E (BVE)

People seeking asylum who arrived by boat but with no visa from 13 August 2012 to 19 July 2013 may access the misnamed “Fast Track” process. They are issued a Bridging Visa E and live in the community while waiting for a decision. It takes years. They may be permitted to work. They can study Vocational Education & Training courses in Victoria. They must pay international student fees to study at university. They are generally eligible for Medicare but cannot access Centrelink benefits.

3. Temporary Visas

If a BVE holder is found to be a refugee, they may be issued either a 3-year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a 5-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). These visas allow refugees to work and access Special Benefit through Centrelink. They cannot bring family to Australia and must re-apply for a further temporary visa prior to expiry.

4. Temporary Humanitarian Concern Visa

In response to the war in Ukraine, the government has announced an additional allocation of places for Ukrainian refugees. They have offered three-year Temporary Humanitarian Concern visas which allow people to work, access Medicare and other support services. Permanent options will be considered at a later date. Around 5,000 such visas have been granted so far.

5. Bridging Visa A

Some asylum seekers arrive (usually by plane) with a visa for business, tourism, or study – but then apply for asylum. This is referred to

as the ‘regular process’. They are issued a Bridging Visa A and live in the community while waiting for a decision. Bridging Visa A may include permission to work for those experiencing financial hardship. They may be eligible for Medicare but cannot access Centrelink benefits and must pay international student fees to study at TAFE or university. If found to be a refugee, however, they will be eligible for a Permanent Protection Visa.

6. Permanent Protection Visa

This allows people to settle and rebuild their lives through work and study, with access to Medicare and Centrelink benefits if required. They can propose family members to come to Australia.

7. Permanent Residency

Some refugees arrive in Australia under offshore humanitarian programs. They apply while overseas, perhaps from a refugee camp. These refugees can work, study, access Medicare and Centrelink benefits if required and propose family members to come to Australia. The government currently allocates 13,750 such visas per year with 15,000 of these reserved over the next four years for refugees from Afghanistan. The government has announced an additional 16,500 places over the next four years for refugees from Afghanistan.

... and then there is Community Detention

Some refugees, mostly families who will never be settled in Australia (even if their children are born here, like the Biloela family), have been allowed to live outside the locked detention centres, but they are not free. They generally live in low rental places assigned to them. Children can go to designated schools but if they want to go on school camp, for instance, they need government approval to be away from their designated address for even one night. Parents cannot work or study, so they are kept helpless and hopeless. They are given a subsistence amount for food and clothing. Most rely on charity for ‘extras’ like internet or transport. If freed from community detention, they are usually placed on a BVE (final departure).