

Refugee policy and “The Plan for Change”

Warren Talbot

350 gathered at the Pitt Street Uniting Church on 5 November to hear a range of speakers challenge Australia’s current refugee policies and procedures, and outline plans for change. In the course of the meeting, hosted by the Chaser’s Chas Taylor, attendees tweeted the Chair of Transfield (which runs the detention centres) and also mailed a letter to the same person.

The meeting was organised by the Refugee Action Coalition – a grassroots coalition which has been working since 1999 supporting refugees who are seeking asylum in Australia.

Professor David Isaacs, a paediatrician from Westmead Hospital, visited Nauru in December 2014, and broke his legal contract to talk about what he saw. Dr Isaacs described the treatment of children in detention as “child abuse”. His son, Mark, had worked on Nauru for the Salvation Army, and reached the same view.

Dr Isaacs challenged people to change the language about refugees and asylum seekers, by always talking about “**people** seeking asylum”. He also thought that the language of “rights” could be confronting and should be balanced by talking about people suffering and people seeking a better life.

An Iranian refugee, Saba Vasefi, spoke strongly about her own experience as a refugee. Ms Vasefi showed a short film featuring her daughter. This served to highlight the nature of persecution in some countries, including children.

Tara Moss, a well known author and UNICEF Ambassador, recounted her visit to Lebanon and the situation of the 1.1.m Syrian refugees currently living in camps. Ms Moss had visited some camps. The conditions include child labour, child marriage, and immediate dangers such as hanging electricity wires. Tara Moss stressed that this was the largest displacement of people since World War Two.

Senators Lee Rhiannon and Sarah Hanson-Young provided policy perspectives and support for the need for the Australian Government to change direction. Senator Hanson-Young praised whistleblowers, doctors, nurses and guards. She re-told the moving story of meeting a young girl she met on Nauru who simply wanted a doll – the Senator’s office was flooded with donations which are being sent. Senator Hanson-Young surprised many when she suggested that she was full of “immense optimism right now”. That optimism was demonstrated when she interviewed someone, Andrew Jackson, who had previously voted for Mr Tony Abbott, but had changed his mind on the treatment of refugees since then. Change is possible was a theme from the evening.

Warren Talbot is Convenor of Mission and Justice, Pitt Street Uniting Church.