

Executive Council of Australian Jewry Inc.

**The Representative
Organisation of
Australian Jewry**



306 Hawthorn Road
South Caulfield Vic 3162
Australia
Tel (03) 9272 5579
Fax (03) 9272 5540
E-mail: info@ecaj.org.au

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Executive Council of Australian Jewry speaks out on refugee policy

Grahame Leonard, President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the peak body of Australia's Jewish community, said today:

“There has been considerable discussion recently regarding the composition of Australia's refugee program.

Different factors must be taken into account when determining each of Australia's immigration and refugee programs respectively. In relation to refugees, Australia has international legal obligations under the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and the Protocol to the Convention of 1967. Australia is a party to both instruments. Article 3 of the Convention provides:

Article 3. Non-discrimination

The Contracting States shall apply the provisions of this Convention to refugees without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin.

Since the official end of the White Australia policy, Australia has prided itself on the non-discriminatory nature of both its immigration and refugee policies. The principle of non-discrimination on the basis of race has enjoyed bipartisan support within Australia for more than a generation and is strongly supported by the Australian Jewish community.

Our community would oppose any attempt by either side of politics to abandon or water down this principle. An application by a person to settle in Australia, whether as a refugee or as an immigrant, should be determined on its individual merits and not by reference to that person's race or country of origin. Further, as Australians we are accustomed to caring for those who, through no fault of their own, are destitute and homeless.

This is not only a matter of moral principle and legal obligation. Deciding applications for entry to Australia solely on the merits is in Australia's long term interests. Over the last half century Australia has successfully integrated people from almost every conceivable cultural, linguistic, racial and religious background. Of course with each new wave of entrants there were teething problems. In each group one can point to both 'bad eggs' and outstanding success stories. The vast majority of those coming to our shore have contributed positively to Australia's outstanding development including by joining the workforce, paying their taxes and adopting Australia's way

of life while also sharing their culture and traditions with their fellow citizens. Australia has been enriched in every way by this experience.

The process of integration into Australian society needs to be facilitated by providing adequate support services to refugees, including those from the Sudan. We once again urge the government to devote proper resources to this purpose, which will accelerate and maximise the 'dividend' Australia derives from welcoming productive new members to our community.

As a community which has suffered displacement too often, Australian Jews are committed to assisting the needy. This is justice, not charity. We believe that the vast majority of our fellow Australians are of like mind. Our task is to ensure that every opportunity is given to those gaining refuge in Australia to feel safe and supported; thus enabling them to make their own contributions to their new home, regardless of their race or country of origin."

Further information: Grahame Leonard

Mobile: 0411 462 242

Email: president@ecaj.org.au