



## OPINION PIECE

### **THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION MEMBER FOR CORIO**

#### **GENEROSITY THE SIGN OF A CIVILISED NATION**

The politics of immigration is changing.

And this is wonderful.

The order of the day during this week in Parliament has been generosity, and that is how it should be.

Last week Prime Minister Tony Abbott was issuing his three-word slogans hoping this would sustain a position through the immediate Syrian refugee crisis. Only on Sunday, he was still stubbornly maintaining a stance of not providing any additional places above our existing humanitarian program. But a few days can be a lifetime in politics.

On Monday Labor made a call to have Australia provide at least an additional 10,000 humanitarian places in the next financial year for the Syrian crisis, plus a contribution of \$100 million.

To be sure, it was met by the predictably narrow-minded reactions by some on the government benches. But it was also met by a chorus of support around Australia for our Government to act.

The offer of assistance from the state governments was nothing short of amazing: Labor and Liberal premiers alike pledged assistance on the part of their governments to help resettle Syrian refugees. Churches and NGOs were demanding generosity.

Regional Australia proudly played its part. Cities around the country were offering assistance to a people on the other side of the world, from a different country and a different culture but whose need and suffering was universal.

For me, it was particularly poignant that first among those cities was Geelong. The effort led by the local settlement agency, Diversitat, to bring 16 organisations together in Geelong to commit support to settle Syrian refugees was magnificent. From the

provision of housing to education to mental health services and everything in between, Geelong stood up to be counted in a national movement pleading for generosity. This is the welcoming, compassionate, multicultural city in which I love to live. This is the modern open-hearted country about which we can all feel so proud.

With the pressure building and the call for generosity becoming deafening, on Wednesday the Government acted. A contribution of 12,000 additional humanitarian places for Syrian refugees is a globally significant offer. \$44million will change the lives of tens of thousands in and around Syria. The Government is to be commended and every Australian can hold their head up high.

In April I was in Jordan at the Zaatari refugee camp witnessing first-hand the plight of those suffering as a result of the Syrian civil war. The camp is within sight of Syria, set in rugged and dusty terrain. From time to time the sounds of artillery and war can be heard from across the border, a perverse reminder of the horror many had fled from. In a tight area, about half the size of the Melbourne CBD, 82,000 people have accumulated in what is now one of the largest refugee camps in the world.

In the camp I met a young family living in a dwelling that was basic but safe. The room was meticulously clean revealing people whose circumstances were dire but whose pride and dignity were very much intact.

The family were olive farmers. They had stayed in Syria for some time after the commencement of the war hoping that if they could stick out the bad times they would be able to maintain their home. But ultimately the war came close and the safety of their kids came first.

Having found refuge the father's thoughts turned to whether his house had survived or whether the trees in his olive grove still stood. This was a humble man who'd lived a peaceful life which felt so very normal and familiar. But this family's life had now been ripped apart by one of the most appalling civil wars of recent times.

It is impossible to witness this and not know that Australia must play its part in the world and that generosity must be our guiding light.

At Labor's national conference in July, we announced the single most generous offering that any potential Australian government has ever made to global humanitarian affairs.

This week we have witnessed the major parties competing, not on hardline rhetoric, but on generosity. It is a remarkable transformation and one that must become the hallmark of how we consider this issue in the future.

We have one of the highest proportions of our population born outside our borders. The Australian project has largely been about the resettling of immigrants and the building of a modern diverse society. The immigration debate since 2001 has torn at the fabric of this project.

The events in the Parliament and around our nation this week can be a turning point for Australia. It is a moment we must seize.

Having endured a stormy and destructive immigration debate for 14 years it is nice, at last, to finally see a ray of sunshine push through the clouds.

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