

Labor, listen up: Refugees are not okay

By Jane Salmon

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The Labor Government continues to ignore the plight of refugees awaiting permanent visas as the numbers campaigning for action increase, writes [Jane Salmon](#).

HAVING BEEN VILIFIED and blocked for over a decade, asylum seekers needing permanent visas are not okay.

The death by self-immolation of refugee activist [Mano Yogalingam](#) (on Wednesday 28 August 2024) barely attracted public comment and certainly nothing from Parliament House.

There have been several deaths and many trips to hospital for this small cohort this year. The suicide toll for those in limbo across more than a decade is as high or higher than for the most acutely vulnerable Australian citizens.

There are currently 24/7 vigils in five capitals. The first began nearly 60 days ago in wintry Melbourne. No one camps outside on cold concrete for fun.

The message of these vigils is clear. Hardworking and deserving taxpayers are forced to wait too long for the permanent visas they deserve. They are tired of paying taxes for, yet still missing out on, access to affordable tertiary study, steady Medicare, bank loans, continuity and permanent jobs. They are tired of Facetiming their children or any remaining relatives instead of hugging them. They want to know when the fear of deportation will finally lift. They would love to be able to get mortgages and look forward to voting.

Refugees can and do offer Australia a great deal. These people feel they have no other safe home. They are dynamic workers, builders, family and community members. They volunteer and donate blood enthusiastically. In return, Australia has demanded front-line work during a pandemic. What's next? Do we start demanding their kidneys?

Their 24/7 protest camps are well maintained. There is music and good food. Hospitality and fellowship extend beyond ethnicity or language to embrace everyone attending. There is a warmth and courtesy that seems exceptional to anyone lucky enough to be Aussie-born.

But these people are desperate for change. Many of them shirk a medical check-up at the GP, in the same way that citizens avoid \$5,000 crowns or root canals.

All it takes to help them is for Labor to recognise that they are governing now and

that it is incumbent upon them to act in the current political term.

On Tuesday 10 September 2024 in Brisbane, tents and even a memorial to the recently deceased refugee Mano were taken down (by shopping centre security) after 23 days outside Treasurer [Jim Chalmers](#)' office in Logan City. The removal of refugees' carefully maintained protest and property caused deep distress.

People have invested a great deal in the protests. They have taken long breaks from home comforts to sleep on the ground. They have given up precious time with any children who are here. They have shared resources to secure enough tents, barbeques, bedding, printing, microphones, speakers, transport and food.

For those at vigils, the most elusive resource is hope. The national discourse has been rejecting or downright hostile. (Neo-Nazi and Right-wing bloggers have taunted people at the camp. On 6 September, racists were incited to attack the Melbourne encampment, pulling hair and punching heads). Many have run the gauntlet of courts seeking a pathway to permanence.

Live video scenes from the Brisbane camp teardown are hard to watch. I have not seen grown men in such emotional pain for a long time. A woman collapsed. Another person went to hospital for heart palpitations attributed to anxiety.

It is risky to be there. Arrest could lead to deportation.

The real cure for this pain is not moving camp, another anti-depressant or group hug. Nor is it yet another political promise. Any suggestion that Labor will be doing better by this group next term is Labor conceding that it has had and still has no commitment or courage now. If it continues to wave the white flag on this

issue, it is an admission that it is too weak or too uncaring to govern.

Opposition Leader [Peter Dutton](#) is still the nation's leader even from opposition. Labor spent nine years in opposition and failed to change racist narratives.

The time for action is now — not the political never-never.

All it takes is a sweep of Home Affairs Minister [Tony Burke](#)'s pen and 10,000 desperate people can reconnect with their futures.

It is not okay for Labor to postpone another day.

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