

Refugees, family reunification and the 2005 election

Immigration has risen to the fore as an issue in the 2005 election in a way it has never has previously in New Zealand. Given the negative attention focussed on refugees in recent British and Australian elections, however, and the way exploiting lack of community understanding on these issues has benefited some politicians in those countries perhaps we should not be surprised.

Ironically refugee communities, groups working with refugees and politicians are united on one thing - that family reunification is one of the key issues for the refugee sector. Therein the views diverge completely. On the one hand some political parties are claiming too many people are being brought in through refugee family reunification. The *Herald* reported Winston Peters, for example, telling an audience that the Tampa refugees have brought in 237 family members since arriving, some of them up to 11 each. What Mr Peters failed to point out, however, was that the family members of the Tampa refugees were accepted into New Zealand as part of the annual quota of 750 refugees accepted by the NZ government.

The National Party has subsequently announced that it would axe the 300 place Refugee Family Quota ballot and use the 'savings' from its removal to support settlement of the 750 refugees accepted annually through the main quota. Given that refugees have to pay to enter the ballot and, should they be successful, pay for the airfares of the family members they bring here it is difficult to see how these so-called savings could be achieved.

On the other side of the argument refugee communities and agencies working with refugees say the current system is cumbersome, expensive and fails to achieve the level of family reunification it should.

It is widely recognised that that the key building block for social functioning is the family and that reuniting family is a key part of any successful refugee resettlement programme. Recent research by the New Zealand Immigration Service (*Refugee Voices*, 2004) shows that facilitating refugee family reunion potentially improves resettlement outcomes and decreases adjustment costs for refugees by reducing the emotional and financial strain resulting from anxiety about family members remaining in situations of danger.

New Zealand is one of only 16 countries worldwide which accept a quota of refugees, with cases presented by the United Nations (UNHCR) each year. When refugees leave their homeland they are frequently separated from family members with some left behind and others forced to flee at different times through separate means. Thus, when they arrive in their new country, their energies are often concentrated on concern for family left behind rather than on the challenges of adjusting to their new home.

For those separated from family, the time and effort committed to seeking reunification can significantly impede resettlement. Anxiety about family overseas may impact negatively on physical and mental health and compromise a person's ability to focus on language development, education and employment. Often it also means that of the little income received by a person in New Zealand a significant amount may be set aside to send to family overseas or directed at costly immigration processes.

Despite the importance of family reunion to successful refugee resettlement, and despite assertions by some politicians that the family reunification process is being exploited, the current options in New Zealand for family members to be reunited are limited and often expensive.

On the positive side, the total annual quota of 750 has provision for up to 300 places to be made available for Family Reunion of immediate family i.e. dependent children, declared spouses or UNHCR refugee family reunification places. This policy recognises that it is impossible to achieve good settlement outcomes if such cornerstones of the family are absent. Another 300 places are made available annually under the already mentioned Refugee Family Quota ballot (the successful applicants must still meet the normal criteria for police, identity and health checks).

A major difficulty for family reunification is the complexity surrounding the concept of family. New Zealand immigration policy emphasises nuclear or immediate family relationships. However, many cultures have quite different understandings of family which may include a wider and more diverse group. In addition the impact of persecution and the stress factors associated with flight to safety, mean refugee families are sometimes reconstructed out of the remnants of various households, depending on each other for mutual support and survival. Such families may not fit neatly into preconceived notions of a nuclear family.

While the Refugee Family Quota allows for a wider range of family relationships, the policy itself provides a very limited option for a small number of individuals. This category, like other family residence categories in immigration policy, requires that only the immediate family of the principal applicant be included in the application (i.e. partner and dependents). This means that where there is an interdependent family grouping (such as a parent with an adult child and grandchildren, or two widowed sisters living together raising their children), sponsors are put in the invidious position of having to select some family members with the potential of further separating the family and leaving some members in an even more vulnerable position.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines family as *“All members of a family group who are living as a family and who demonstrate a long term emotional, physical or financial dependence upon the family unit.”* Applying this definition in government policy supporting refugee family reunification would remove many of the current difficulties.

There is no question that family reunification for refugees is intrinsic to successful resettlement. The current opportunities for refugees to achieve family reunification are very restrictive. Playing political football with the issue during election time is not the way to achieve a constructive solution. While the family reunion desires of resettled refugees are likely to always exceed New Zealand's capacity to respond, more strategic policy decisions could be made to ensure that priority is given to those with greatest need. If this were done it would make a significant contribution to the successful social and economic resettlement of some refugees for whom separation from family is causing great hardship.