

**Opening Remarks to Special General Meeting of Refugee Services Aotearoa  
Brian Lynch – Interim Chairperson**

**Wellington, Monday 29 June 2009**

**I have had the pleasure of chairing the Interim Board of Refugee Services for the past five months. It may be useful to recall the context in which the Board found itself at its first meeting on 21 January 2009.**

**The “positives” were five-fold and easily identified:**

- **the organization had existed in one form or another for 35 years and in that time delivered credible and credit-worthy performance**
- **it was driven by compelling and well-intentioned objectives**
- **it had gained international recognition and praise for work that in some aspects was global ground-breaking**
- **it was served by dedicated staff and volunteers, and**
- **there was an increasing professionalism underpinning its operations**

**Offsetting those pluses was a set of “negatives”:**

- **there were reports the organization seemed to have lost its way ,and had become dysfunctional**
- **in part that state of affairs it was said, was attributable to a serious rift within the previous board which reflected fundamental shortcomings in the Constitution**
- **this led to unhealthy tensions between senior management and the board**
- **key funding agencies were anxious for signs of action to rectify that situation**
- **their anxiety was aimed in part at a failure to implement recommendations of a 2008 review of the management structure, the “Hatton Report”**
- **the membership was not adequately representative of the expanding network of stakeholders with a legitimate interest in refugee matters**
- **notably, membership offered either insufficient opportunity or insufficient appeal to attract participation by more recently established refugee groups**
- **there was too heavy a level of dependence on the taxpayer for core funding**
- **resource issues were beginning to assume significant proportions with a sizeable gap emerging between the projected cost of service demands and the level of assured funding**

**In brief, the Interim Board inherited a cluster of issues around:**

- **the organization’s Constitution**
- **its membership**
- **its management, and**
- **its mainline funding**

**What the Board also inherited was a mandate from the Refugee Services AGM of 11 December 2008. It basically said: “here is a troubling set of problems, please come up with solutions to them by 30 June 2009, and talk to us while you are about it”.**

**So what has happened in the past five months? What point are we now at? And what decisions are being sought from this special general meeting?**

**Since late January the Interim Board has met eight times ; subcommittees of the board addressing specific issues have met more often .This work has involved a substantial investment of time ,travel, energy and creative thinking by board members, all of it given on a voluntary basis. Our work has been focused in four main areas:**

**The first order of business was to tackle and try to remedy the issues surrounding Refugee Services fundamental reason for being, its apparent difficulty recruiting members, the rift that had developed between board and management, and the delay in proceeding with the Hatton Report proposals.**

**To have any hope of accomplishing those objectives the Interim Board was left with no option but to turn the requested review of the Constitution into a major makeover. Given that it had proved to be incomplete, behind the times, and out of step with what other high profile not-for-profit agencies now routinely have as their framework documents.**

**We are confident the revised text in front of this meeting is a robust governance instrument .It has passed the scrutiny of peer review. It has also been subjected to independent legal analysis. In that context the Interim Board is grateful for the advice received from the law firm of Morrison Kent at no cost .The modified text takes into account most of the constructive comments received during the consultation phase. An accompanying paper explains the detailed changes now recommended by the Interim Board and why.**

**Secondly, the Interim Board had to resolve the vexed question of where responsibility lay for being the single point of final accountability, of identified leadership and of being the recognised organization “voice” and “presence”. To do this, Hatton had recommended that the three-member national team arrangement be dismantled. The Interim Board reviewed and then accepted the Hatton argument .There is now a chief executive in place .**

**Thirdly, the Interim Board took heed of observations made at the December AGM that the membership of Refugee Services was shallow and unrepresentative. This is an urgent matter. The grant of full member status for the eight agencies presently in the provisional category, would double the number of affiliated organizations. Of critical importance, six of those agencies are refugee-driven and managed. Their membership of this organization would be seen to greatly enhance the profile, credibility and relevance of what Refugee Services is all about and reinforce its leadership role in this sector.**

**Fourthly, there is the issue of funding. The Interim Board became painfully aware early on in its work that Refugee Services was grappling with an emerging disconnect. There was a gulf in perception between, on one hand, the assessment of the staff regarding the resource implications of their workload .And on the other hand , a rather different view held by the principal funding providers, as to the level of service delivery that the**

**organization had been contracted and paid to perform, and how its outcomes were to be reported.**

**At this point I can only say, so soon after the Government has released its budget, that future funding is an area of work in progress. Like any not-for-profit agency in pursuit of a deserving cause, there is an almost limitless number of good things that Refugee Services could do. The stark reality of course is that the organization must live within its means. And expect its financial and operational performance to be rigorously measured. No mystery about all of that.**

**The Interim Board is confident the question of funding for this year and beyond will be sorted soon to mutual satisfaction , giving reassurance to staff and renewed comfort to the key funders. All the same it is imperative that Refugee Services is more successful than it has been to date, in broadening the base of its support beyond government funding sources. To be over 90 per cent beholden to the public purse is a risky level of exposure to policy shifts. This is a key area of focus for the new chief executive.**

**Now some brief remarks about the business of this special meeting of Refugee Services. The agenda before us contains three important resolutions. The first two, covering provisional membership and the proposed new Constitution, reflect the outcome of the Interim Board's efforts to implement core aspects of the mandate issued by the December 2008 AGM.**

**As regards resolution one,we recognize that the present unamended Constitution allows for provisional members to be accorded full membership status only at an AGM. This special meeting however has authority to alter that process as an exceptional measure should it choose. The Interim Board recommends that you do so. Why? With the sole and simple intent of showing those who have put their hand up ,and especially the various refugee groups whose representatives are here, that their readiness to join the Refugee Services support network is appreciated and accepted.**

**If those two resolutions find favour with this meeting, there will be flow-on consequences. Some of them are of a significant governance character and should be dealt with at board level. For that purpose it is desirable to have short-term continuity rather than a hiatus.**

**Hence in the third resolution before you ,the Interim Board is recommending to members that its term be extended by a bit over three months until the next AGM. That AGM we are proposing should be held earlier than usual .High on its agenda would be the election of the board for the long-term, under the formula envisaged in the new Constitution should it be approved today.**

**Finally, as is the case with any special general meeting this one has been convened in extraordinary circumstances. At this time in Refugee Services' history , as members, you are faced with clear alternatives. You can choose to allow Refugee Services to continue to struggle under a flawed Constitution, a seriously depleted support base, and concerned funders. Or you can provide the organization with a robust new platform.It would be one with a modern Constitution, a strengthened membership, a strong and clear accountability framework, and better prospect of secure funding .Upon such a platform Refugee Services will be well-placed to deliver vitally necessary, more efficient, and more**

**cost-effective services. The Interim Board believes you should prefer that path. We recommend you do.**