

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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RCOA'S REFLECTIONS ON THE 2002-2003 FEDERAL BUDGET

May 2002

The Federal Budget handed down on 14th May was arguably the most anti-refugee budget yet delivered by a Government not known for its commitment to refugee protection. It enshrines "Fortress Australia" and confirms the Government's determination to do everything possible to keep out anyone who might need help.

Border protection is seen as being so important to the Government's vision for this country that it was given a prominent place in the Federal Treasurer's budget speech.

He announced that \$2.8 billion would be devoted to this area (an increase, he pointed out, of \$1.2 billion over current spending) and outlined a series of measures to thwart asylum seekers from being able to lodge an application for refugee status within Australia's migration zone, including:

- \$219 million for the construction of a detention facility on Christmas Island;
- \$455 million over 4 years for offshore processing – interestingly including processing on Nauru and Manus Island, despite not having four-year agreements with any Pacific nation to process asylum seekers;
- \$75 million to assist transit countries to detect and intercept asylum seekers on route to Australia;
- \$14.4 million to assist international agencies detain, process and subsequently return asylum seekers.

The Minister for Immigration expanded further on some of these initiatives in a press release entitled "Offshore Processing Developments and Related Savings"¹ which, as the title suggests, presented the changes as cost saving initiatives. Close scrutiny, however, shows that the Minister is trying to justify an expenditure of almost \$300 million in 2002-03 by saying that it will save \$87.5 million. Curious accounting indeed.

And the more one delves into the budget, the more curious things become.

Repeatedly we hear the Government talk about their commitment to helping "real refugees languishing in camps" but in the same Budget that saw a commitment of \$2.8

¹ 14 May, 2002.

billion to exclusion, the core allocation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was almost halved (from \$14.3 million to \$7.3 million). This means that the Australian Government will be giving UNHCR about 30c for each of the 23 million people for whom it has protection and welfare responsibility – some of whom are the most needy and vulnerable people on earth. At the same time, however, the Government is spending in the order of \$700,000 for each person that might come by boat.²

It is true that some aid money has been designated as “the International Refugee Allocation” but if UNHCR wants to get any of this, it will have to compete with other agencies and meet the Government’s criteria.

While on the subject of the foreign aid budget, we see that this includes the feeding and processing of asylum seekers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. One could question how this fits in with the poverty alleviation objectives of AusAID. More likely, it is a way to “disguise” the real costs of border protection.

Another creative accounting strategy was to count searching for boat people to the north of Australia as an "environmental expenditure" in the Budget: \$243 million for the civil maritime surveillance of asylum seekers and illegal fishing vessels to be precise. This has enabled the Government to say that it has delivered record levels of spending on the environment.

Just who is it that we are going to spend so much protecting ourselves from?

The vast majority of boat arrivals in recent years have been determined to be refugees – in other words, people with a legitimate right to seek assistance from Australia and to whom Australia has protection obligations.

And how big is the threat?

The numbers of unauthorised boat arrivals for the last 2 years have been in the order of 4,000 per annum, though since the stepping up of the activities of the Australian defence forces, there have been no boats since December 2001.

Taxpayers have a legitimate right to ask:

- how it is possible to justify spending so much to protect us against so few?
- why, if we are so concerned about unauthorised arrivals, are we not spending the money on addressing the reasons that people turn to smugglers in the first instance?
- why, if we care so much about “real refugees” have we slashed the contribution to the agency charged with their care and protection?
- when will the Government be honest in the way they present their refugee policy to the Australian public?

² Based on 4,000 unauthorised arrivals per annum – the approximate number in each of the last 2 financial years.