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Acknowledgements omitted

It's fitting that we are gathered here today to discuss the challenge of the global refugee crisis. Many of you here today are advocates. You've been working tirelessly to uphold the rights and dignity of refugees and people seeking asylum for years, decades even.

In this speech, I will share with you my ideas about how we should as a nation, as a responsible member of the international community move forward. I suspect that there may be a bit – or a lot – of anticipation around what I am about to say. So I want you to be a part of it, because as a backbencher putting forward ideas and Labor being in Opposition – I actually need you to be part of it. I need all of you here, your passion, your advocacy, to help make these ideas a reality. To take ideas, develop them into policies which can one day be implemented in a future Labor government.

It's a long journey, on a long road, and a long climb up the hill. But I cannot take it alone and I ask that we take this journey together.

In my first speech to Parliament in 2016, I said that as the son of migrants who came to Australia from Egypt, escaping a region engulfed in war I appreciated the yearning for a life of peace, security and opportunity. In both the 2016 and 2019 federal election campaigns and the best of a decade before, I argued strongly for an increase in our refugee intake and an end to the cruelty of indefinite offshore detention. Cruel because of the government's failure to resettle refugees for 6 or more long years, even with New Zealand offering to accept an intake.

After I was elected, my staff and I have helped many many refugees and asylum seekers. They come to my electorate office in Coburg, desperation in their eyes and we listen to their stories. Stories of pain, stories of struggle and stories tinged with the faint hope for a better life – a life without persecution.

This work – making a difference to someone’s life by listening, by writing a letter of support, making representations on their behalf to the Department, the relevant embassy or even directly to the Minister – is critically important and when we get a result it has meant that we have done some good even as a backbencher’s office in Opposition.

But my team and I can only help on a small scale, in the hundreds. So I also recognised the need to contribute to policy that could make a broader impact at the national level. That’s why after the 2016 election, I got myself on Labor’s Immigration Policy Working Group, to contribute to the policies that we eventually took to the 2019 election.

These were good policies that included a commitment to:

- Ending the cruelty of offshore indefinite detention of refugees with a 90 day goal for processing, and pursuing swift re-settlement of refugees
- doubling Australia’s annual refugee intake
- securing an additional 5,000 places per year through a Community Sponsored Refugee Program
- pledging \$500 million in funding to the UNHCR
- establishing an independent Children’s Advocate
- For refugees in our community:
 - ending both 3-year Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and 5-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVS) and ensuring refugees have permanent protection and the right to family reunion, to start building a life here in Australia
- For asylum seekers in our community:
 - abolishing the Fast Track judicial process (which discriminates against people who came by boat)
 - and restore Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) welfare funding

And from Opposition, before the last election, 69 Labor MPs and 6 crossbenchers in the House voted to pass the Medevac Bill. We have seen this law repealed just last week. Devastating too was the election result on 18 May. Because our defeat meant that the refugee policies we would have implemented in a Labor government – which would have made a difference to tens of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers – would not become a reality.

There is still an opportunity to do that, to make a difference on an international scale.

Next week, the first United Nations Global Refugee Forum will take place in Geneva, where member states will try to coordinate a response to the largest global refugee crisis since World War Two.

The forum is the result of the 2016 ‘New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants,’ which saw all 193 UN member states agree that *“protecting those who are forced to flee and supporting the countries that shelter them are shared international responsibilities that must be borne more equitably and predictably.”*

The Declaration tasked the UN with creating the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and developing a “Global Compact on Refugees.” The “Global Compact” although non-binding represents a consensus from the member states that the scale of the crisis demands a coordinated response.

Marise Payne, Australia’s foreign minister, has not committed to attending. Nor has the Morrison Government made any public statement about what role Australia might play in the UN talks. This is unsurprising given Australia’s approach to refugee policy: singularly

focussed on the domestic politics of refugees, while consistently side stepping broader engagement with the global challenge. We are a successful migrant and multicultural nation with a history of welcoming refugees. Yet, our potential to contribute to a global solution is unrealised.

The UN refugee forum represents an opportunity for Australia to change this and lead the development and negotiation of a coordinated global agreement that processes and resettles hundreds of thousands more refugees each year.

We bear witness today to population movements across the world at unprecedented levels and think we can avoid the cost or the impact. But no matter how insulated we believe we are from these forces either – by virtue of our geography or our current fortress mentality – the waves of future mass migration could well breach the gates.

The sheer scale of the global humanitarian crisis can no longer be denied.

According to the [UNHCR Global Trends Report 2018](#):

There are over 70 million displaced people globally including:

- 41.3 million internally displaced
- 3.5 million seeking asylum
- 25.9 million refugees
- 1.4 million of these refugees are most vulnerable and considered in need of urgent resettlement in 2020.

They are orphans in camps. They are stateless. They are the most in danger. They are the most desperate.

When a voter in my electorate asks about refugees usually the focus is domestic policy. I answer them and then I pose a question of my own. I ask them: How many of the world's 25.9 million refugees were resettled last year? They will usually guess 2 or maybe 3 million people. When I tell them it was just 92,400 people, they begin to comprehend the scale of the challenge. The “queue” is not moving anywhere fast, nor getting any smaller.

With UNHCR facilities overwhelmed and miniscule global resettlement of refugees annually, there is very little in the way of a queue in the first place. Desperate asylum seekers, with their lives at risk, seek refugee status by using people smugglers to take them to safety. As such they have been described as “queue jumpers” and perceived to be circumventing due process.

The immensity of the global challenge and the ineffectiveness of responses, both in Australia and abroad, is clear to anyone who cares to examine the numbers. In 2018, Canada accepted 28,076 refugees, the world's highest contribution; followed by the US, 22,900; and Australia, third, with 12,706. Meanwhile, some wealthy, developed nations accepted as few as 34, 26, 22, 18 refugees for resettlement last year.

There are dozens of wealthy or developed nations that resettle only a handful of refugees. However, I'll just note that these figures are slightly larger when you account for successful refugee applications made direct in-country. For example, Canada accepted an additional 16,800, the US an additional 35,000 and Australia an additional 10,000. Even still with these additions factored in some wealthy, developed countries' refugee intakes only increases from 20 people to about 500 last year.

As the “queue” barely moves it is developing nations, such as Pakistan (1.4 million), Uganda (1.2 million), Turkey (3.7 million), Sudan (1.1 million), and Iran, Lebanon and Bangladesh

hosting almost 1 million people each, with resources already stretched, that host 84% of the world's refugees and displaced.

We cannot hide from these facts. There is nowhere to hide.

The UN forum represents a consensus that nations cannot continue to respond reactively or in isolation. The sheer scale demands nations work together. Yet Australia has been unable or unwilling to engage.

It has been almost two decades since Tampa and the Howard government's response which laid down the blueprint for zones of cruel, indefinite offshore detention which persist to this day. Some argue that indefinite offshore detention has made us safer and insulated Australia from the broader global crisis.

But this callous approach does not serve our national interests in addressing the global crisis and it is unsustainable in the long term, because the "deterrent effect" of indefinite offshore detention is not the primary reason people smuggling operations have reduced. The trade has reduced largely because of covert and overt anti-people smuggling operations, turnbacks and targeting financial transactions.

We know this because of evidence from a [former Immigration Department official who went public](#). People seeking asylum see the route to Australia as 'closed' not because of detention centres but because boats, for the most part, are no longer reaching our shores. Those on the far-right who argue we "need" the cruel detention centres to maintain deterrence are peddling a myth.

Indefinite offshore detention only suspends our engagement with a growing global challenge. Instead of collaborating with other countries towards a best practice model, we have shifted responsibility, not really even to other nations but somewhere out there, some nebulous elsewhere. Anywhere but here.

Our approach has failed globally and domestically. The conservative side of politics post-Tampa has created a domestic framework that positions asylum seekers and refugees as external threats to be feared. The refugee is viewed as potential terrorist, welfare cheat, taker of our jobs, criminal and eroder of Australian values.

When we were debating the Medevac Bill in February, Prime Minister Morrison said "[they may be a paedophile, they may be a rapist, they may be a murderer, and this bill will mean that we would just have to take them.](#)"

This was, and is, obscene dog whistling and simply not true.

While those on the right see in every refugee a potential terrorist, while those on the far-left see in every refugee a stricken moral angel. Stretched between the figure of the victim and the victimizer, the dignity of the refugee's individuality and humanity has worn away. What is incontestable is that whether refugees are vilified by the far right or victimised by the far left, demonised or idealised, the polarised debate generates plenty of noise but no viable policies.

Actually, we have seen some of the most important building blocks of our modern nation – immigration, refugee policy and multiculturalism – securitised and politicised. A toxic debate has corroded broadly held views that immigration, including of refugees, has benefitted Australian social, economic and cultural life in countless ways. This diminishes the strength and security of our country in a fundamental way.

We are losing the bipartisan commitment to the foundational story of migration to Australia – one of nation building, with a pathway to citizenship at its heart. Ultimately this corrosive debate around refugees and migrants has normalised these views and it weakens our democracy and social cohesion. Australia has become more polarised, less stable, less secure because we cannot move past the toxicity to enact viable, humane solutions or even successfully capitalise on the advantages that the cultural diversity of our migrant nation affords us.

Labor has operated at times uncomfortably both within and outside of this framework, attempting to ameliorate the worst aspects. Trying, unsuccessfully, to establish alternatives such as the Malaysia solution when in government, and more recently from Opposition chipping away at the periphery, by passing the medevac bill into law.

Nonetheless the framework endures. The nation has not been able to reach beyond. But it is time we start, because the global refugee crisis is likely to worsen.

Repressive and failed states, sectarianism, violent conflict, natural disasters and the impacts of climate change – including increasing aridity, depleted drinking water supplies and rising sea levels – will continue to drive new conflict over scarce resources and population displacement.

Climate change will surely impact our neighbours in the Pacific. Our current blinkered solutions do not address these impacts and the numbers show that the global community is not prepared for future mass movements of people either.

So, what can be done? The alternative must be to work towards a new international agreement.

This is why I propose Australia lead the development and negotiations for an international refugee processing and resettlement agreement, the “Fair Share Agreement” with multiple countries agreeing to lift their ambition to resettle hundreds of thousands more refugees each year.

A “Fair Share Agreement” would draw on the distinctly Australian value of egalitarianism. Each country’s increased commitment to settling refugees would be calculated fairly based on negotiated and agreed upon metrics and set data points. While the metrics would be negotiated as part of an agreement, they could include: population, GDP per capita, geography, net migration numbers, strength of resettlement services and relative historical refugee intake.

The formula would produce each country’s yearly refugee intake and because each country would be doing their fair share, it would de-politicise the domestic decision making around refugee policy that plagues Australia and other nations.

There are dozens of wealthy, developed nations that because of tradition, of monoculture, don’t have a high intake of refugees. If they opt out of increasing their intake, under the agreement they would be required to make commensurate financial contributions to resettlement services.

Why would countries do this? Because they would be contributing to regional and global stability. Because by doing so they would be investing in their own security and prosperity.

In alleviating the burden on developing nations hosting refugees awaiting resettlement, we can reduce instability, and the strain on already scarce resources. If nations work together,

we can make the world more stable and more secure by fairly and safely resettling hundreds of thousands more refugees each year. Well beyond the 92,400 resettled in 2018.

Coupled with the retention of anti-people smuggling operations, a “Fair Share Agreement” with multiple countries taking more refugees each year, would see the “queue” finally move.

The reality is establishing a robust global agreement will take considerable diplomatic work over a lengthy timeframe. The beginning of the journey is the first meeting of the newly created UN Global Refugee Forum next week. It will be an opportunity for member states to pledge financial and technical support. The first steps towards a future agreement.

If only the Australian government would take a leading role, but alas I suspect it may have to wait for a future Labor government to start genuine diplomatic efforts. One that would ask Canada, France or the UK, other regional partners such as Malaysia and Indonesia, to join as first steps towards an agreement. Building momentum as countries sign on and begin to jointly approach other countries.

Negotiations would no doubt entail intense diplomatic effort from a future Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs. A future Labor government could also consider deploying former leaders with expertise in foreign affairs (Gareth Evans, Kim Beazley, Alexander Downer, Julie Bishop) as special envoys that would work with – and support – the proposal for a special Ambassador for Refugees.

If Australia wants other countries to commit to shared responsibilities, we must lead.

You may well be wondering why I am focussed on an international agreement, on something this ambitious.

Why not first focus on resolving our domestic challenges? It's a fair question. I believe the times call for ambition. I believe our time needs ambition. My answer on the domestic front is this – a successful international agreement would actually be a viable alternative to Australia's current domestically-focussed approach.

It would do a number of things:

- remove the toxicity from the domestic debate –
The answer to Australia's domestic challenges on refugee policy lies in engaging and coordinating with the international community.
- pre-empt the worsening global problem of population displacement and its severe impacts, creating a more stable region, which is of course in our national interest.
- and it would create a new and expanded pathway for resettlement. In conjunction with anti-people smuggling operations, it would be a more effective and humane approach in reducing the people smuggling trade.

Over time, and it will take time, this international approach can replace elements of our inwardly focussed policies. If an international agreement is successful in increasing the global refugee intake, then refugees will have a better, safer pathway to resettlement, an alternative to people smuggling channels.

Not only will the questionable so-called deterrent effect of indefinite offshore detention not be required, if more refugees are being resettled safely there will be fewer getting on boats, and less utilisation of turnbacks.

Sceptics will question whether there is any hope of success.

However, we only have to look back a generation to see how multilateral agreements worked. Under these agreements, 69,877 refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were resettled in Australia between 1975 and 1982. Of these approximately 2000 arrived by boat. The vast majority flew to Australia once their claims were processed through regional agreements in Asia. History shows us viable alternatives to our current policies.

While the current Coalition Government won't, the Labor party must draw on its internationalist DNA to provide alternatives and lead. Labor has a long history of remarkable international vision and achievement; Prime Minister John Curtin's wartime leadership; Doc Evatt's leading role in founding the UN; Hawke and Keating protecting Antarctica, creating APEC; and former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans's instrumental role in the Cambodian peace plan.

In November, Anthony Albanese re-affirmed the centrality of this multilateralism and regional engagement as principles underpinning Labor foreign policy and national security. Australia is a better nation, a safer nation when we embrace global leadership roles.

My hope is that with political courage tethered to an internationalist vision, we embrace the task of leading a global effort that enhances our national security, moves us beyond debilitating domestic debates and changes millions of lives for the better. When Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley spoke about the "light on the hill", bringing something better to the people, he wasn't just talking about us, Australia, he was talking about the betterment of all humanity, all people.

To quote "not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand."

My hope is that we can once again place our light on the top of the Hill.