

Empowering Communities through Leadership: Rural Australians for Refugees, 2001–2007

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Abstract: From 2001 to 2007, Rural Australians for Refugees, a network established by three women in a New South Wales country town, involved rural communities across Australia in supporting asylum seekers both in detention centres and following their release in rural communities. The highly devolved, collaborative and egalitarian structure of this organisation reflected a distinctively feminist style of leadership. Through exercising their rights as Australian citizens, its members helped asylum seekers transition from the status of unlawful non-citizens, through the uncertainties of life in an unfamiliar culture as temporary residents, to permanent residency and the prospect of full membership of the national community as citizens.

Keywords: refugees, asylum seekers, rural communities, Rural Australians for Refugees, feminist leadership, citizenship

Rural women have been involved in the resettlement of refugees and migrants since the Department of Immigration established the Good Neighbour Movement in 1950, particularly through the Country Women's Association. The state councils of the movement, which were funded and overseen by Immigration, distributed the details of refugees and migrants who settled in regional Australia to contact workers in affiliated community organisations. Their members arranged social functions to welcome these newcomers into their communities, helped them access services, organised English classes for them and often lobbied the department on their behalf. The Country Women's Association was an important participating member of this network.¹

From the late 1990s, the issue of asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat became increasingly politicised and divisive. Under the Howard government, individuals and community organisations that had previously collaborated harmoniously with the Department of Immigration in helping settle refugees expressed outrage at the increasingly harsh measures taken against this new wave of boat arrivals. They became determined to help them. The protests of community organisations reached a new height in August 2001 when a Norwegian container ship, the *Tampa*, picked up 433 Afghani asylum seekers from a sinking boat in international waters. Its captain, Arne Rinnen, was refused permission to land them on Australian soil. He became

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so alarmed by the dysentery and dehydration among his unexpected passengers that he defied this order and sailed towards Christmas Island. Australian troops boarded his ship and Rinnen was threatened with prosecution as a people smuggler. Eventually the asylum seekers were sent to offshore detention centres on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea, where nearly all were found to be genuine refugees. None was allowed to settle in Australia at that time, although some did later.²

The popular outrage aroused by the Howard government's treatment of the *Tampa* refugees was not confined to urban Australians. On the southern highlands of New South Wales three friends, Helen McCue, Anne Coombs and Susan Varga, were inspired by the *Tampa* incident to take action locally by mobilising rural communities to support asylum seekers through a new organisation: Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR). Susan brought to the team the skills she had developed as a lawyer, teacher, novelist, filmmaker, arts administrator and radio journalist. She also had personal experience of the challenges refugees faced. She had come to Australia at the age of five as a Jewish refugee from Hungary, having lost her father and a number of other family members in German concentration camps during World War II, an experience she wrote about in her book *Heddy and Me*.³

Anne Coombs was a journalist and author of four books, the last of which, *Broometime*, she had just co-authored with Susan Varga when her writing took a back seat to political activism.⁴ Her media skills became vital to RAR's campaigning.⁵ Helen McCue was well qualified by her professional background to form a refugee advocacy group. She had worked in Canberra as a nurse and trade union representative before completing a Masters in Health Personnel Education at the University of NSW in 1981. She then joined the World Health Organisation in the Middle East as a nurse consultant, and subsequently worked for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency working with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. On her return to Australia she co-founded Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA, now Union Aid Abroad), a trade union aid body initially focused on training workers in refugee camps. She later worked with refugees in southern Africa and the Middle East. In 1994, she completed a PhD in political science at the University of NSW on gender in Islam and settled in the southern highlands of NSW, where she became involved in Aboriginal reconciliation and other human rights-related community organisations. 'We all had a deep commitment to the country and believed that rural people were not as redneck and reactionary as city people liked to believe,' she observed.⁶

As they had been previously involved in organising local public meetings on the crisis in East Timor and on Aboriginal reconciliation, Helen, Susan and Anne were skilled political lobbyists who already had a team of

people happy to be involved in their new organisation. They researched the asylum seeker issue, developed a 10-point platform, produced a pamphlet to counter prevailing myths about refugees, and collected signatures for a letter to the government that they published in the local paper. They then organised a very timely public meeting five days before the 2001 election. They invited all local candidates to speak at it as well as a local retired brigadier, Adrian D'Hage. The meeting attracted an audience of around seven hundred, gained front page coverage in the local paper, was reported on ABC, SBS and Channel 9 television news, and featured in the ABC's national rural radio program *Bush Telegraph*. 'That totally kicked us off because people listen to it across the nation,' Helen reported.

The day after this broadcast they were contacted by people from a number of towns in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria, all wanting to establish branches of RAR in their regions. To Helen's amazement:

The phone just didn't stop ringing. It was like we'd opened the floodgates. People were just dying to attach themselves to us. We told them that we were just a movement, and they could call themselves RAR as long as they agreed to our 10-point platform. And that's what they did. Other country people had been holding vigils and mobilising on the issue, but none of us had known what the other was doing. Some already had people released from detention centres settle in their communities.⁷

RAR's platform included demands for the closure of detention centres; health and security checks for asylum seekers living in the community under the care of government-funded community organisations; adherence to Australia's international obligations to refugees; the abolition of temporary protection visas and an increase in Australia's annual refugee intake.

RAR's founders were feminists, and they adopted a feminist style of leadership, characterised by a decentralised, collaborative structure that stressed local autonomy and flexible adaptation to local conditions.⁸ This was well suited to RAR's widely dispersed rural membership. Like most other refugee support organisations, however, it was not an exclusively women's organisation, as both its members and those they helped included men. As there was no formal membership requirement, its leaders did not keep membership statistics and did not collect information on members' gender, religion or political preferences. It attracted supporters with a range of political viewpoints, most of whom had already been active in their communities and were largely inspired by concepts of social justice. It also reflected an alternative view of Australian national identity from that promoted at that time by the Howard government and the mainstream press. As Helen explained:

There has always been a social agrarian movement in Australia. Rural people have long had a strong sense of social justice, and we created a national structure to amplify their voices to say, ‘We don’t like this. This is not how we want Australia to be. This is breaking international law. It’s immoral and shameful and we don’t want to be part of it. We want our voice to be heard and registered, and we want to change it and stop it.’ RAR tapped right into these feelings.⁹

The size of its groups varied greatly. In small country towns like Bowral, RAR meetings attracted three or four hundred people at the most; in larger towns like Albury-Wodonga, they attracted up to three thousand. While Helen found it hard to accurately assess the numbers involved in its regional core groups, of which by 2005 there were ninety around Australia, she estimated that they probably had at least twenty thousand active members.

Like other poorly funded community organisations with a widely dispersed membership, RAR was quick to adopt electronic communications. Within a few months of its inception, the organisation had to employ an administrator to deal with its emails and manage its website. From 2001, this online community was able to share news of their activities through an online newsletter, and from 2002 members could meet personally at annual conferences. To relieve the now exhausted original group, the first conference decided to rotate its national administration annually to different regional groups.

RAR members involved themselves in their local communities using traditional types of community education, such as manning tables at their local shopping centres on Saturday mornings. There, their face-to-face contacts with local people helped them both to understand prevailing attitudes towards refugees, and to explain the challenges faced by asylum seekers. They also lobbied local politicians, wrote articles for local newspapers, spoke on local radio stations. One of their principal priorities, however, was to support asylum seekers in detention centres psychologically by writing to them, and sending them phone cards so they could contact people in the community. One member established a network of 1,500 people around Australia who wrote letters to detainees and sent them phone cards and toys for their children. They also provided paint and canvasses to detained Afghani and Iraqi artists, and exhibited the resulting paintings through touring exhibitions in various regions of Australia. RAR members visited those they had contacted in detention centres, taking Welcome Books in which rural people had written messages of good will. ‘We wanted to tell detainees that country people wanted this situation to change, believed that what was happening was morally wrong and indefensible, and wanted to welcome them into Australia and into our towns,’ Helen explained.

From the Welcome Books developed the notion of Welcome Towns. RAR prepared resolutions for local councils around Australia, asking them to

declare themselves Welcome Towns for refugees and show their determination to do what they could to help refugees settle in their region. Armidale and Bellingen were the first to do this in 2001. RAR formally presented the first of its *Tampa* Awards to the captain of that vessel, Arne Rinnen, through the Norwegian Ambassador in Canberra. The second was awarded to the Mount Isa City Council for its commitment to the Welcome Towns project.¹⁰

RAR groups also supported asylum seekers released from detention on temporary protection visas. They raised money and collected blankets, furniture and food that they sent to organisations providing material support for asylum seekers in the community. The successful integration of former detainees into local communities was, however, impeded by their restricted access to the excellent medical, educational and other services routinely provided by the Commonwealth Government to refugees processed off shore.

The ability of many former detainees to adjust to their new and unfamiliar environment was also adversely affected by the physical and psychological legacies of torture and trauma experienced in their countries of origin, as well as by the prison-like conditions they had been subjected to on their arrival in Australian detention centres – in some cases over a number of years. This handicap to successful settlement was ameliorated by state government assistance and by community volunteers, like those in RAR, who used their networks to find accommodation and free, or very low cost, medical care for former detainees in their regions whose visas did not give them access to Medicare. They also arranged for those with psychiatric problems to visit a torture and trauma service in their nearest city. Some heads of local TAFE colleges, Helen observed, broke the rules and allowed refugees to study in their institutions without charging the fees required of former Commonwealth detainees.

One of the hopes of RAR was that refugees released from detention would want to settle in country towns in the communities that had supported them and help counter their declining populations and dwindling support services. That hope was realised in some places, like the Central Coast, Southern Highlands and Blue Mountains of New South Wales, and in rural towns like Shepparton in Victoria, but their efforts were limited by the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas. Despite her hostility to the government's treatment of asylum seekers in detention, Helen praised the rural resettlement scheme that it initiated in 2005 for refugees processed overseas, citing the successful resettlement of Sudanese refugees in Wagga Wagga and Bellingen, towns where RAR had many supporters. 'Wherever the government has worked with the local community to ensure that support services exist, people will be integrated and accepted,' she observed. She believed that the successful settlement of refugees in a rural town depended

on its ability to attract a critical mass of people from the same culture, and employ them. ‘There are not that many jobs in rural Australia. While places like Leeton, Mudgee and Young all had RAR groups, they also had abattoirs, so significant numbers of refugees settled there.’¹¹

The Department of Immigration’s rural resettlement scheme was inspired by the large increase in the numbers of refugees it selected from camps in Africa between 2002 and 2005, most of whom were farmers. Australia’s annual intake of refugees from Africa grew during those years from about one thousand to eight thousand. The selection for the rural settlement scheme of these 16,000 African refugees, was managed by the Immigration Department’s part-African regional director in Africa, Paula Kansky, in conjunction with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration. On Paula’s return to Australia she was given the task of helping these new arrivals settle in rural areas of Australia. Following agreements between the Commonwealth and state governments, she liaised with local governments, police, teachers, doctors, employment agencies and major employers in regional towns, assessed by her department as being able to provide employment to these newcomers and equipped with the medical and educational services necessary to service them and their families. Paula was also tasked with assessing whether the town’s population might be antagonistic to refugees. The department provided local stakeholders with information and organised them into a committee, which was given information about the refugee families arriving in their town. Once an agreement was reached and the department was satisfied the services it was responsible for were in place, the community took over and the department no longer played a major role. Each year the department sent five to ten families from the same ethnic group to a particular town, building up a viable community of refugees, but only to a size the town could comfortably sustain. Paula commented that this provided ‘both a sense of belonging to the new arrivals and a cohesive and welcoming environment for them. Many refugees from rural backgrounds found small towns much less threatening than large capital cities.’ She praised the response of communities in such towns as Shepparton, Mount Gambier, Ballarat and Murray Bridge, and was convinced that they had been enriched through becoming more comfortable with diversity. She even thought the people of some towns, like Shepparton, were too enthusiastic:

In Shepparton the community went overboard and were overly generous and welcoming to the Congolese families we settled there. We heard of farmers dropping baskets of food in front of the refugees’ homes, and people coming to mow their lawns. This level of eagerness needs to be reduced, as we don’t want the newcomers to develop a culture of dependence, they have to learn to do things on their own. However the response of the communities in these towns has been fantastic.¹²

With such a well managed and funded Commonwealth scheme being introduced in many country towns, by 2006 there was a sense within RAR that its rural networks were now sufficiently developed to survive and to contribute to this new Commonwealth initiative without the national administrative structures its leadership had provided.

People know one another at the local level so they can mobilise again if another issue arises. They don't necessarily need leadership or the network. They can do it on their own. They feel empowered. They know what they can do. They've learnt how to be community activists on key issues. It was just fantastic to be able to drive this movement for a period of time, and now it will drive itself.¹³

Both the highly devolved, collaborative and egalitarian structure of this organisation and the manner in which it was wound up, reflected its distinctively feminist style of leadership. Its founders had nurtured its autonomous groups until they felt they were no longer needed, but also harboured what has proved to be unrealistic expectations of Labor Party reforms in this area. Some RAR groups subsequently continued in different guises, and a number of former members involved themselves in other refugee advocacy groups.

Despite all their political lobbying, RAR had not realised many of the goals outlined in its 10-point platform by the time it dissolved in 2007. It had helped a significant number of individual asylum seekers to get out of detention and settle in the community, but had had little influence on the government's policy on temporary protection visas, mandatory detention, or in getting an increase in the annual intake of refugees. However, it succeeded in getting several key politicians in rural-based electorates, both Labor and Coalition, to meet refugees, visit detention centres and understand the complexities of the asylum seeker issue. Subsequently, a group of Coalition members challenged their own party's policies on asylum seeker and refugees, particularly on the detention of children, prolonged detention, the delayed granting of refugee status and the use of temporary protection visas. In addition, RAR, with other refugee advocacy groups, certainly contributed to public awareness of this issue to the point that in the lead up to the 2007 federal elections, asylum seekers and refugee policies were key areas of public debate. Conscious of the importance of their organisation in the history of postwar refugee settlement in Australia in 2008–2009, RAR engaged an archivist to prepare its extensive archive for deposit in the National Library of Australia, where it is now held.¹⁴

Conclusion

RAR was only one of the many organisations formed around Australia in 2001 to support detained asylum seekers, but its focus on rural Australia made it unique. Australia has a long history of volunteers working in community organisations to help settle refugees Australia-wide. The first was the network that comprised the Good Neighbour Movement, whose council was minimally funded by the Department of Immigration between 1950 and 1980, and which included the Country Women's Association. This was followed by the Department's Community Refugee Settlement Scheme, which coopted community organisations to provide on-arrival services to refugees from 1979 to 1999.¹⁵

Looking back at the end of her interview at the National Library of Australia in 2007, Helen McCue confessed that the main achievement of the organisation she and her friends Susan Varga and Anne Coombs had founded in 2001, was something it had not deliberately set out to achieve: it 'provided a very interesting model of participatory democracy'. The freedom with which the members of RAR and similar asylum-seeker support organisations were able to oppose the policies and practices of their own government, and work to change them, provided those who had lived and suffered under oppressive regimes with a practical demonstration of the active citizenship possible for Australian citizens – a status they desperately hoped to attain.¹⁶

¹ For further information on the settlement activities of the Country Women's Association see Ann-Mari Jordens, *Redefining Australians: Immigration, Citizenship and National Identity* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1995), 21–2, 84 and *Alien to Citizen: Settling Migrants in Australia 1945–75* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin in association with Australian Archives, 1997), 87, 102.

² For further information on the responses of community organisations to these events see Ann-Mari Jordens, *Hope: Refugees and their Supporters in Australia since 1947* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2012), 194–212; Frank Brennan, *Tampering With Asylum* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, revised edition, 2007), 41–3.

³ Susan Varga, *Heddy and Me* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁴ Susan Varga and Anne Coombs, *Broometime* (Hodder, 2001)

⁵ Anne Coombs subsequently published an account of RAR titled 'Mobilising Rural Australia', *Griffith Review* 3 (2005).

⁶ Jordens, *Hope*, 201–5 and interview with Helen McCue by Ann-Mari Jordens, TRC5770, Oral History Collection, National Library of Australia.

⁷ Helen McCue interview.

⁸ For more information on feminist leadership see Wendy Weeks, 'Democratic Leadership Practices in Australian Feminist Women's Services: The Pursuit of Collectivity and Social Citizenship?', *International Review of Women and Leadership*

2, no. 1 (July 1996): 19–33, and Helen Brown, *Women Organising* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1992).

⁹ Jordens, *Hope*, 204.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹² *Ibid.*, 222–4 and interview with Paula Kansky by Ann-Mari Jordens, TRC 5968, Oral History Collection, National Library of Australia.

¹³ Helen McCue interview.

¹⁴ Records of Rural Australians for Refugees 2000–2008, MS Acc08.200, MS Acc10.037, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

¹⁵ For participants' perspectives on the postwar history of refugee intake and settlement polices in Australia see Jordens, *Hope*.

¹⁶ For further information on the interaction between citizenship and immigration see Ann-Mari Jordens, 'Legal and Non-legal Aspects of Immigration' in *Individual Community and Nation: Fifty Years of Australian Citizenship*, ed. Kim Rubenstein (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2000), 84–91.