Refugee resettlement and activism in New Zealand

Murdoch Stephens

From 2013 the Doing Our Bit campaign has been calling for New Zealand to double its refugee quota from 750 places to 1,500.

Until Canada’s recent intake of Syrian refugees, New Zealand was the only country in the world that received more refugees through a UNHCR resettlement system than through asylum seeker applications. To make up for the fact that only 300 asylum applications are made every year, New Zealand seeks to do its fair share through a quota system. The limited number of ‘quota refugees’ welcomed into a population is based not on the claims made by asylum seekers based on rights, however, but on what public representatives think the public wants.

A rights-based framework asserts the rights of people to seek protection regardless of economic value. A rights-based framework is also useful for organisations representing quota refugees once they arrive in resettlement countries. However, democratic institutions – not simply politics and elections, but also the media, advocates, activists and government departments – can offer an additional avenue for the protection of refugees with the number of quota refugees welcomed into a population based not on the claims made by asylum seekers based on rights but on what public representatives think the public want.

In New Zealand, a lack of public debate about refugees meant that the size of the annual quota – 750 – did not grow for 30 years. In that time the country’s population grew by 41% and real GDP per capita more than doubled. Those who advocated for a larger quota during this time, however, did so with only limited engagement with the wider public.

In 2013 I started the Doing Our Bit campaign to double New Zealand’s refugee quota. The campaign began with no funds and no established public profile. That made social and alternative media the only way to begin. We also focused on friends in the arts, academic and activist communities as a way to amplify our message to the general public. These connections led to our first meetings with sympathetic Members of Parliament from opposition parties and we were able to convince the major opposition party, Labour, to include an increased refugee quota in their election manifesto – a step in the right direction.

By February 2015 other advocacy groups also were campaigning to double the quota. In time we also drew in celebrity endorsements and the support of mayors and

Campaigners protest outside government buildings, Wellington, New Zealand.
of other refugee service provision agencies. Engagement with the general public was pursued through public meetings, pamphlet drops and art exhibitions. Two years into the campaign, and before the migrant crisis arrived in Europe, one poll showed that 53% of New Zealanders were in favour of a quota increase. In September 2015 the government announced that it would provide 600 more quota places (for Syrians) over three years.

Despite our focus on democratic institutions, claims on the values of human rights were important for the campaign. However, human rights were used to make an appeal to the public via democratic institutions, rather than as a basis for a legal claim in court. Alongside human rights, the campaign was also based on narratives of fairness (‘doing our bit’) and driven by compelling statistics that compared our contribution with that of other countries. An important message for the campaign was that even though Australia, for example, treats asylum seekers terribly, New Zealand also shirks its responsibilities through having a tiny and stagnant refugee quota.

We, and refugee service provision groups, had been showcasing positive stories about resettlement outcomes and had framed the wider narrative around the lack of an increase in the quota. A campaign for higher refugee quotas can be made without creating a narrative where the quota becomes the only legitimate avenue for refugee protection, especially if advocates work with the mainstream media to clarify the two categories of refugee protection. In fact, a focus on the quota led to less traction for overblown, negative news stories about asylum seekers, and most discussions of security issues around bringing refugees to New Zealand are now based on the government screening of the refugees arriving through the quota.

Resettlement shortcomings
In New Zealand the refugee resettlement quota is planned at three-year intervals. This allows planning for incremental increases to the quota while avoiding narratives of chaotic intakes or ‘floods’ of refugees. So while asylum seeker applications would be expected to fluctuate with changes in conflict and persecution, groups advocating on the refugee quota must mobilise public support around these moments of review as well as at elections. Though the international focus on the recent refugee crisis helped to speed up the increase in our permanent quota, we were confident we would achieve an increase.

In June 2016, the government announced that the refugee quota would permanently grow to 1,000 places from 2018, with developing opportunities for community sponsorship. That increase did not match what we and others had campaigned for; however, both main opposition parties have now adopted the policy of increasing the quota to 1,500 places, editorials in all major newspapers condemned the small growth in the quota, and public sentiment is still broadly in favour of accepting refugees.

There are four main challenges with New Zealand’s resettlement intake of refugees. First, it is easy for states like New Zealand to prioritise certain kinds of refugees. Without the recent public interest in refugees, policymakers have picked refugees who they think will settle best rather than focusing on the most vulnerable. While categories were established for medical and disabled cases these have been substantially curtailed since 2009. The current government has also limited new quota refugees from the Middle East and Africa only to those who already have family in the country, in direct rejection of UNHCR’s focus on the most vulnerable people.1

Second, government selection and transportation of refugees through a quota system normalises a system that requires refugees to wait for places that are far fewer than the number required.

Third, the focus on refugee quotas in times of crisis can detract from other immediate needs such as aid to countries that host most refugees. Ultimately the calls for increased refugee quotas need to be tied to calls for increased aid rather than made in competition with those calls.

Finally, New Zealand is only just beginning community sponsorship programmes that would allow for public
Differential treatment of refugees in Ireland

Natalya Pestova

The Irish government makes considerable efforts to resettle Syrian refugees arriving through the UNHCR resettlement process but offers no support to those refugees – some of whom are also from Syria – who individually seek asylum under the international protection system.

In response to the war in Syria, the Irish government undertook to welcome 4,000 refugees. Civil society and the Irish people at large shared the feeling of solidarity for those who suffered in Syria and the cry ‘refugees welcome’ has been widely articulated over the last year. The Irish state is putting significant effort and assistance into supporting the programme for Syrian refugees resettled under the process organised by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, as a part of their commitment to welcoming these refugees.

Between its beginning in 2000 and late November 2016, the UNHCR-led resettlement programme supported 1,705 vulnerable persons from 27 countries, including Iraq and Syria, to start a new life throughout Ireland.1 Under its recent commitment to welcome 4,000 Syrian refugees, the government commenced resettlement planning for families based in refugee camps outside Syria. By mid-2016 several cohorts of Syrian people had arrived in Ireland and had been placed in a number of locations throughout the country. Financial resources are allocated by the government to support people through the first year of transition, to provide immediate assistance to the families to engage with schools, health services, housing authorities and so on. Statutory agencies are mobilised to ensure adequate access for the refugees to services. Interpretation, child care or other immediate specific needs of refugees are taken into account and provided for where possible. Community engagement and integration are also a part of the resettlement support process. This well thought-out and practical approach to resettlement, although limited to possibly little more than one year, would be a credit to the Irish government, if considered outside the broader context of its immigration policy and practice.

At the same time as these refugees are being resettled, 4,209 asylum seekers – who have made their own way to Ireland – are awaiting decisions on their protection claims and are accommodated in open prison conditions under the system called Direct Provision under which asylum seekers are not allowed to work, study or cook for themselves. There have been 109 applications from Syrian asylum seekers registered in 2016 in Ireland.2 It can take up to ten years before a final decision on the granting of asylum is made by the authorities. No structured...