



Senator Chris Evans
Leader of the Government in the Senate
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin *Julia*

Thank you for your letter of 2 June 2008 concerning a number of petitions recently submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions by the Synod of the Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne regarding income support and work rights for asylum seekers.

I am aware that the current Bridging visa arrangements can leave some people destitute in the community without the capacity to work and earn a living. I believe that we need a more flexible system; one that strikes a better balance between making a reasonable allowance for people to work to support themselves while their claims to remain in Australia are considered, and encouraging claims to be made in a timely way. The new system must also reflect the Government's expectation that people who have been found to have no claims to remain in Australia should depart. To achieve this, I have directed the Department to pursue the issue of work rights for asylum seekers as part of a broader, coherent Bridging visa policy.

Bridging visa holders are currently not eligible for Centrelink benefits and there is no plan to change this policy. Protection visa applicants in the community may be eligible for publicly funded assistance under the Asylum Seeker Assistance (ASA) Scheme, which is administered by the Australian Red Cross. The ASA provides financial assistance similar to that available to Australians receiving Special Benefit payments and also includes access to general health care, pharmaceutical assistance, torture and trauma counselling services and bereavement assistance.

Changes to work rights raise complex issues that require careful consideration to avoid unintended consequences. Formal consultations with the community sector and other agencies will be undertaken to determine the best approaches prior to a policy decision on this matter.

The Government takes its international human rights obligations very seriously, and as part of the overall reform process is intent on providing a Bridging visa framework that treats people fairly while their claims to remain in Australia are considered.

Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention on behalf of the petitioners. I agree that this response should also be applied to previous petitions on this issue from the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, and trust the information provided is useful.

Yours sincerely

CHRIS EVANS

24/8/8.