

Doing Our Bit: The Campaign to Double the Refugee Quota

By Murdoch Stephens.

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Over the past few decades the world has seen a large increase in the number of people seeking asylum. The reactions from Western nations have been varied and the question of responsibility is of social and political significance. When Murdoch Stephens began his campaign in 2013, New Zealand had not increased its refugee quota in 30 years, and amidst this global refugee crisis, their intake figures were poor by international comparison. In *Doing Our Bit – The Campaign to Double the Refugee Quota*, Murdoch Stephens reviews his campaign, and issues the challenge that New Zealand is not just a passive spectator in the refugee crisis.

The topic of refugees and asylum seekers has seen increasing global interest over the past few decades. In their recent end of year reporting, the UNHCR counted the highest number of displaced people on record with around 20.4 million of these being recognised refugees. The 'European Migrant Crisis', Australia's 'Stop the Boats' campaign, and the 'Muslim Ban' in the United States of America have been big news, resulting in a range of responses across the political and social spectrum. Because of New Zealand's geographical isolation, the country is not confronted by asylum seekers or refugees arriving unannounced, *en masse*. Most of New Zealand's refugee intake comes through the quota system, where recognised refugees are referred to New Zealand by the UNHCR, prior to their entry into the country. With this physical distance and the 'orderly' process by which they accept a number of refugees, it is easy to assume that New Zealand is exempt from the disorderly crisis facing other countries. But is the New Zealand state really doing enough to fulfil its commitment to refugees?

In *Doing Our Bit – The Campaign to Double the Refugee Quota*, Murdoch Stephens reviews his campaign and issues the challenge that New Zealand is not just a passive spectator in the refugee crisis. Stephens points out that "since the quota was first set in 1987, our population had grown by more than 40 per cent" yet "the only movement in our quota in those years had not been up but down; cut from 800 to 750 places in 1997" (33). Their record is also poor by international standards. New Zealand takes in around a quarter of Australia's intake of refugees on a per capita basis.

Doing Our Bit is a chronicle of experiences, a how to guide for future campaigners, and a footnote to a point in history. Stephens begins by providing a personal account of his time in Syria, prior to the Syrian war, setting out the origins of his interest and passion for refugee issues. The book then follows the campaign as it reaches key milestones – the 2014 General Election, the 2016 Quota Review, and the 2017 General Election. By the campaign's end the National party has committed to raising the quota from 750 to 1,000 places in 2018, and the incoming Labour party government has committed to doubling the quota, raising it from 1,000 to 1,500 by 2020. Stephens tracks the successes and pitfalls of the campaign, providing an honest appraisal of the journey and the end result.

Many of the lessons Stephens learns are transferable, making the book an excellent tool and guide to campaigning and political change. One of Stephens' key observations is on the importance of setting and keeping within parameters. Stephens is clear that this was to be a

‘pressure campaign’ – where pressure is put on particular individuals to achieve a defined outcome – and not a ‘social change’ campaign – consisting of big plans and big budgets with a much broader end goal. In Stephens’ words, “The refugee quota is *not* a cure to world poverty and suffering, but a very specific response to acute persecution” (159).

The simplicity of the campaign’s goal, and the tangible solution it provided to a complex situation enabled Stephens to draw interest, and support, from a variety of people. This was important as Stephens had a limited budget, albeit one that grew throughout the campaign. He relied heavily on social media and opinion pieces to get his message out there. As awareness of the campaign grew, so did the support base. Stephens had assistance from artists, community groups, religious groups, large NGOs like Amnesty International, brands like Lush Cosmetics, and from politicians. There were also external factors that propelled the campaign and the public’s interest in it. The European Migration Crisis and on-going coverage of the Syrian war meant refugees were constantly in the public eye, and people, for the most part, wanted to help.

So often though, even the best intentions do not lead to positive results. There is a moment in the book where Stephens refers to Alan Kurdi, the three-year old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to escape with his family. For a while, the image of Alan lying dead on the beach dominated Western media, accompanied by outrage and calls for ‘more to be done’. Stephens quotes Alan’s father stating, “Everyone claimed they wanted to do something because of the photo that touched them so much. But what is happening now? People are still dying and nobody is doing anything about it” (97). Without momentum and results, people forget and move on. In offering a small, but practical response, with no delusions of grandeur Stephens made change accessible. As the campaign went on, groups began calling for far bigger increases in the quota. Doubling it had become accepted as common-sense.

Stephens takes little praise for the work he undertook to double New Zealand’s refugee quota. At the campaign’s end Stephens reflects, “Our celebrations were not about a win in the campaign, but about a change of government to one that had embraced our campaign” (156). The book is not about heroism. At its heart it is an invitation for others to undertake their own campaigns and fight for change they believe in.