

Title of Event: Building Bridges: Advancing Refugee Protection in a Divided World

Notetaker: Brynn Duggan, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

Host of Event: UNSW Sydney and UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

Date: 23-10-2025

Toplines:

- While Australia has made progress recently, it still has a long way to go.
 - The Australian government detains anyone who arrives without a valid visa, including children and their families.
 - People arriving by boat are banned from settling in freedom and safety in Australia, even if they are found to be refugees. Instead, they are transferred to Nauru, where human rights violations have been well-documented.
 - More than 80% of people seeking asylum arriving by boat in Australia over 40 years were found to be refugees. Yet, only a small fraction of people who are screened at sea are found to have a potential refugee claim.
 - In August, the Australian government passed a new law stripping refugees and other migrants of their right to procedural fairness when the government attempts to remove them overseas to third countries.
- Hugh de Kretser calls for meaningful collaboration with other countries in the region, redirecting money spent on deterrence measures to the UNHCR and refugee-led organizations, increasing the number of refugees Australia takes from the UN resettlement pool, and expanding complementary pathways.
- To address rising anti-migrant sentiments, Hugh urges the creation of a Human Rights Act and a national human rights education plan, the implementation of the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework, and the telling of better stories.
- Andrew Lynch ends the conference with a call to keep building bridges, stand together across differences, reach out despite differences, and carry the insights of today into collective action.

Closing Keynote Address

Presenters:

- **Hugh de Kretser**, President, Australian Human Rights Commission
- **Andrew Lynch**, UNSW Dean of Faculty of Law and Justice

Circulated Materials: [Full Conference Live-stream](#) (Session begins at 7:50:00)

Key Points:

Keynote Address (Hugh)

- No one chooses to be a refugee.
- The current Australian government has taken some positive steps to protect the rights of refugees:
 - Granting permanent protection to over 20,000 people previously on temporary visas.
 - Accepting New Zealand's offer to resettle people from our offshore processing system.
 - Agreeing with Tuvalu to provide a migration pathway for people affected by climate change.
 - Making pledges at the global refugee forum.
- Issues remain:

- People who come by boat are intercepted at sea and turned back following cursory screenings that carry serious risks of returning people to harm. **Historically, more than 80% of people seeking asylum who arrive by boat in Australia over a 40-year period have been found to be refugees.** Yet, only a small fraction of people who are screened at sea under our turnback policy are found to have a potential refugee claim, highlighting just how flawed these processes are.
- The Australian government mandatorily detains anyone who arrives without a valid visa, including children and their families.
- **People arriving by boat are banned from settling in freedom and safety in Australia, even if they are found to be refugees.** Instead, they are transferred to Nauru, where human rights violations are well-documented.
- **In August, the Australian government passed a new law stripping refugees and other migrants of their right to procedural fairness when the government attempts to remove them overseas to third countries.**
- We can have fair, well-managed refugee policies that comply with our human rights obligations to people seeking our protection, while preventing dangerous journeys by sea, combating human trafficking, and maintaining the integrity of our migration system.
- **We must create safe pathways to protection and redirect the enormous political, financial, and diplomatic resources away from our current harmful approach towards a better, more humane approach.**
- **Measures Australia could immediately adopt:**
 - **Work more meaningfully with regional countries** to improve conditions and legal protections for people seeking asylum there, and to save lives at sea.
 - **Redirect money spent on deterrence measures to increase funding to UNHCR and refugee-led organizations.**
 - Australia has spent over \$13 billion on its offshore processing system.
 - **Increase the number of refugees we take from the UN resettlement pool.**
 - In 2025-26, the refugee humanitarian program will remain at 20,000 places. It should be much higher.
 - Over 10 years, to December 22, Australia recognized or resettled 180,000 refugees, 0.75% of the global total recognized or resettled in that period. On this measure, Australia was ranked 30th overall, 41st on a per capita basis, and 77th relative to gross domestic product. We need to increase our contribution.
 - **Increase complementary pathways** in addition to core humanitarian program.
 - **Address the root causes of why people flee** by human rights through diplomacy, leadership, accountability, and development assistance.
- **Rising polarization, racism, and anti-migrant sentiment in Australia:**
 - Surveys show continuing and strong support for multiculturalism in Australia, but a rise in **anti-migration sentiment.**
 - Despite the challenges, there are strong fundamental values around fairness and compassion that help us in Australia.
 - **There are many ways Australia can address rising polarization and anti-immigrant sentiment:**
 - **Establish a Human Rights Act**, legislation that translates the promises we have made at the international level to protect human rights into Australian domestic law
 - **Create a national human rights education plan.**
 - **Implement the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework**, 63 recommendations to eliminate racism.

- **Tell better stories to humanize refugee policy issues.** This must be done ethically, and it must be led by refugees.
 - Proximity to human stories brings empathy, compassion, and change. Governments know this, which is why they make it hard to achieve this proximity.
 - We should also better explain the economic and social benefits that refugees bring to Australia.
- **We must...**
 - **Get out of the echo chambers. Engage people with a range of views in respectful dialogue, and work harder to find common ground.**
 - **Highlight success stories**, big and small, and build community understanding and connections.
 - Evidence from Canada shows the promise of community sponsorship schemes in building stronger support locally and more broadly for more compassionate refugee policies.
 - Take a **generational approach** and not work in political cycles.
 - Proactively, strategically, and **effectively communicate. If we vacate the public debates, the void will be filled by hostile narratives.**
- It can be easy to lose hope when things are so challenging, but if we work together, **I firmly believe we can build better bridges in this divided world.**

Closing Address (Andrew)

- The theme of today's event, **Building Bridges in a Divided World**, could not come at a more important time. We live in times of rampantly expressed racism, polarization, division, and miscommunication.
- Today's discussions have shown that building bridges is not simply a lofty aspiration or a good tagline to put on a conference flyer, but the essential work of advancing refugee protection.
- The foremost test of our human rights commitments is how we treat those who reach out to us for safety.
- **May this be our shared task: to keep building bridges, to stand together across differences, to reach out despite differences, and to carry the energy and insights of today into the collective action that the moment in which we live demands of us.**