

# Australian asylum seekers stripped of minimal welfare payments

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As of this month, the Australian government is eliminating the bare income support for an estimated 12,500 asylum seekers living in the country, awaiting the outcome of refugee applications.

The Liberal-National Coalition's move is designed to push them into penury and homelessness, forcing many to return to the countries they fled, in line with the bipartisan "border protection" regime of shutting Australia's doors to refugees.

The asylum seekers have been languishing in Australia for up to five years on temporary bridging visas. For most of this time they have not been permitted to work as they waited for refugee visa decisions.

Until now, the status resolution support service (SRSS) provided a paltry living allowance of up to \$270 a week. This is only 89 percent of the Newstart unemployment benefit, which is itself below poverty levels. The SRSS also provided casework support for housing as well as trauma and torture counselling.

As of April 9, the SRSS is being "transitioned out" and those asylum seekers deemed "job-ready" will soon have their payments scrapped. A list of single female and male asylum seekers will be passed on to settlement services, which are expected to assess their "job readiness" by May 7. Then, from June 4, they will have their financial support cut. Families face the same treatment from late May, with payment cuts starting on July 18.

A Department of Home Affairs spokesperson told the media that the SRSS was not a social welfare program, adding: "Individuals on a bridging visa with work rights and who have the capacity to work are expected to support themselves prior to being granted a substantive visa or departing Australia."

Any asylum seeker studying full-time will have their

payments abolished. "If an adult chooses to study full-time, when they are able to work, they are not eligible for SRSS income support," the spokesperson said. This is particularly punitive because the government recently flagged plans to introduce a university-level English test as a requirement for Australian citizenship.

Thousands of asylum seekers rely on the SRSS, together with charities, for food and housing. Some suffer from acute mental and physical health issues, brought on by the conditions they experienced in the war-ravaged countries they fled. Many are unable to work or will find it impossible to secure employment.

Refugee Council of Australia policy director Joyce Chia said the announcement was "completely terrifying." She told the *Guardian*: "We are already hearing of people self-harming, we're hearing of people losing housing, of huge levels of depression and anxiety." The government was "going to punish these people and some will be driven over the edge."

In a statement, Jana Favero from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, which supports over 1,000 asylum seekers living in the community, described the SRSS as a "life-saving" service. She commented: "The government is confusing us by saying that people need university-level English to become Australian, yet in a cruel twist of irony, the government is preventing people studying English by removing support services."

Shayne Neumann, the Labor Party's immigration spokesman, supported the government's announcement, saying any "abuses" in the welfare system needed to be stamped out. He only added that the Coalition should "stop playing politics" with vulnerable people.

Greens immigration spokesman, Senator Nick McKim, called the announcement a "deeply unfair

decision which could force people into poverty, homelessness and exploitative jobs.” The Greens are attempting to distance themselves from their own responsibility in creating the conditions in which asylum seekers can be stripped of basic income support.

In 2012, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government issued a visa ban on all asylum seekers who had reached Australia by boat, forcing them onto bridging visas. These visas robbed asylum seekers of the right to family reunion and, at the time, forbade them from working.

This affected some 30,000 asylum seekers while the minority Labor government was in office. From 2013, the Coalition government continued the ban on visa applications, which was not fully lifted until 2016.

Under former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, then Malcolm Turnbull, the government has attempted to prevent what it calls Labor’s “legacy caseload” from living in Australia. In 2014, the Abbott government introduced a Fast Track Assessment Program to try to prevent asylum seekers from appealing adverse visa decisions.

In March last year, the Turnbull government announced that asylum seekers on bridging visas had 60 days to complete complex refugee visa applications or face being cut off welfare or deported. Last September, Turnbull’s government stripped 100 asylum seekers of their housing and income support.

These anti-democratic measures flow from the reactionary “border protection” regime which is aimed at vilifying vulnerable refugees and blaming them for the failure of successive governments to provide decent jobs, working conditions and essential services such as education, health care and housing.



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