



(Woodhouse, M., 2013)

Michael Woodhouse

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Mass arrivals bill passes into law

The Immigration Amendment Bill passed its third reading today, meaning New Zealand will now have the legislation needed to effectively manage a mass arrival of asylum seekers, says Immigration Minister Michael Woodhouse.

"This legislation is about ensuring our system can handle a mass arrival should one occur, and sending a clear message to potential people smuggling ventures that New Zealand is not a soft touch.

"New Zealand is a growing target for boats from Asia, as demonstrated recently by the Geraldton boat carrying 66 Sri Lankan asylum seekers, which was on its way to New Zealand when bad weather struck."

Mr Woodhouse says while there has been a high level of scaremongering and political commentary about the bill, it is clear in what it does and does not do.

"The legislation defines a mass arrival as being more than 30 people. It enables those who arrive as part of a mass arrival to be detained, if necessary, for up to six months. And it allows this detention period to be extended for up to 28 days at a time, if a District Court Judge determines that is necessary.

"It does not introduce arbitrary or indefinite detention, as has been suggested by some opponents of the legislation. It does not breach our international obligations to asylum seekers. And it most certainly does not reduce the government's commitment to providing support to refugees and asylum seekers.

"The arrival of a vessel carrying asylum seekers has the potential to quickly overwhelm New Zealand's immigration and court systems. It could also have significant security implications – overseas experience shows it is often difficult to establish the identity of those arriving on such vessels.

"Having the ability to detain people being smuggled into New Zealand is vital to give agencies time to establish and confirm identities, and assess whether an individual poses a risk to national security or public safety."

Mr Woodhouse says the Immigration Amendment Act is part of a wider package of work under way by the government to disrupt and deter people smuggling ventures from targeting New Zealand.

Supporting changes include limits on family reunification and reassessment of a claimant's refugee status after three years and before a person can apply for permanent residence. Immediate family can only be sponsored once the person is approved residence, but extended family will be ineligible to be sponsored.

"These policy changes are considered to be an important deterrent to a mass arrival. Asylum seekers may be less likely to endanger their lives by attempting to travel to New Zealand by sea if they know they must wait for three years and have their claim reassessed before they can apply for residence, and if they are unable to reunite with extended family members.

"As I have said before, I make no apology that these measures are in part designed as a deterrent. People smugglers are willing to exploit vulnerable people and put lives at risk in exchange for a quick buck."

Michael Woodhouse Immigration



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