In reflecting on the adequacy of the support of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, we have to begin by acknowledging that the shrill nature of the national political and public debate about refugees makes good policy very difficult to achieve. One of the most striking elements of the Australian debate is how myopic and parochial it is. At the Federal level, the main political parties are failing to bring any sense of balance or perspective to the debate.

Last year, around the world, 1.67 million people sought asylum. Australia received 15,400 asylum claims – less than 1% of the global total. While our country was arguing over its influx of asylum seekers, last year Liberia, Kenya and Tunisia each received between 150,000 and 200,000 asylum seekers. During the course of this year, more than 340,000 refugees have left Syria, with more than 110,000 each going to Turkey and Lebanon, 62,000 to Jordan and 50,000 to Iraq. Serious unrest in Mali has led to 265,000 people taking refuge in Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso.

My counterparts in other countries have great difficulty understanding why asylum is so controversial in Australia and how it is that Australia gets away with such draconian policies. Australia is the only western country and the only Refugee Convention signatory to have a policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers who arrive without visas. No other country involved in refugee resettlement deducts places from its resettlement program each time an asylum seeker is recognised as a refugee. While the European Court of Human Rights has ruled this year that it was a breach of international human rights law for Italy to force asylum seeker boats to Libya, the Gillard Government is busily reconstructing the Howard Government’s Pacific Solution arrangements in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The Australian Parliament seems set later this month to make our country the first in the world to excise its entire landmass from its own migration zone for people arriving by boat to seek asylum.

Australia’s visa system actively excludes people who may wish to come to Australia with a valid visa if there is any serious likelihood that they may seek asylum while here. Australia spends billions of dollars on strategies to try to keep people away through anti-smuggling measures, intelligence, airport liaison officers, police operations and through funding detention operations outside of Australia. Those who make it through all these nets to seek safety in Australia are chided for their unlawful or irregular method of entry, are put behind bars and are now being told that they should not and will not receive any advantage over other refugees in the region – despite the fact that most refugees in Asia have no access to any durable solution.

The implication of all of this is that seeking asylum is illegitimate and unwelcome – and those seeking protection here are somehow undeserving of our support. Sadly this thinking is so pervasive that it does affect thinking about how asylum seekers and refugees should be supported in Australian society. One impact of this is that government agencies, including DIAC, are hypersensitive about refugees and asylum seekers being perceived by the public to be receiving benefits which Australian-born people do not receive. In a world of downward envy, need seems to count for very little.
To act in the interests of the most vulnerable and also in the wider social interest in seeing new arrivals settle successfully, we have to be prepared to argue the case for different forms of targeted support for refugees and asylum seekers. One of the saddest aspects of the current Australian asylum debate is that it masks decades of achievement in improving settlement support for new arrivals. In the 12 months to July this year, I was involved in Australia’s chairing of the global UNHCR-government-NGO dialogue on resettlement and had greater opportunities than previously to learn about post-arrival support for resettled refugees in many countries. There is no doubt in my mind that Australia is a world leader in this field because we have a tradition of seeing successful settlement as beneficial to the whole society. We must fight to keep that focus and work on constant improvement of our settlement support systems.

Each year, the Refugee Council conducts community consultations across Australia and right now we are in the middle of more than 40 local consultations in different parts of the country. For refugees who have been resettled or given permanent protection, the main concerns are getting the family safely back together, finding affordable housing, getting fair access to appropriate education and training and getting a job – a secure and fulfilling job. Family reunion and employment dominate much of the discussion. It is sad to see people who arrive with such enthusiasm to work and succeed in Australia slowly lose that enthusiasm through month after month, even year after year, of disappointment in job hunting.

Our community consultations are also highlighting the pressing need to improve levels of support for asylum seekers living in the community. A year ago, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen, to his credit, embarked on a humane and practical policy of releasing large number of asylum seekers from detention into the community on Bridging Visas. We have seen the average length of time in detention cut by two thirds to less than 80 days and unrest in detention largely disappear. Unfortunately, the new policy of holding people indefinitely in detention pending transfer to offshore processing is going to lead again to overcrowding and unrest in detention – but, in the meantime, the community release of asylum seekers who arrived before August 13 continues at a rate now of 2000 people per month nationally, with about 500 people coming each month to NSW.

There is absolutely no doubt that people are far better off in the community than in locked detention for indefinite periods. That said, there is widespread concern that the support being given to released asylum seekers is not enough. The great majority of them have the right to work and access to the Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme but the transitional support with short-term housing and practical help lasts only for the first six weeks – nowhere near long enough for people to get on their feet. And, sadly, at the core of this lack of sufficient support for asylum seekers is the toxic political debate about asylum.

One person with 20 years’ experience in the settlement sector who spoke at a consultation I conducted in recent weeks said it seemed that, in our treatment of asylum seekers on Bridging Visas, we were forgetting everything we had ever learned about how to support the settlement of new arrivals. We now seem to be expecting that people will find a house, learn sufficient English and find a job all within six weeks. Needless to say, it is generally not happening.

Our community consultations give us quite unfiltered feedback on how different government agencies are doing in their support of refugees and asylum seekers. On a Federal level, Centrelink gets a “thumbs up” for its work in all areas except income management where that policy is applied, whereas the performance of the Job Services Australia network is widely judged, to use modern teenage parlance, as an epic fail.
The NSW Government agencies which get positive feedback are the NSW Refugee Health Service for the positive role it plays in advocating for refugees and asylum seekers within the health system, NSW Legal Aid for its constructive support of people going through the processes of asylum and family reunion and the NSW Department of Education for its support in quite a few schools for refugee children and for its very positive role in providing access to schooling for asylum seeker children living in the community. NSW’s Intensive English Centres are a model for other states and a model which could be replicated more widely within this state.

The NSW agency which gets the most negative feedback – and deservedly so – is Family and Community Services for its failure to get involved in a constructive relationship with the Federal Government to support unaccompanied minors. It is embarrassing for NSW people involved in refugee support to see the stark differences in support offered to unaccompanied minors by the NSW, South Australian and Victorian governments.

A widespread view among the people we consult in this state is that the state of Victoria generally does a better job than NSW in supporting refugee communities and assisting initiatives of practical assistance for refugees. There is clearly more funding for community initiatives available from the state multicultural agency in Victoria, agencies trying to support refugees and asylum seekers in seeking employment have greater opportunities for state funding, asylum seekers have greater access to TAFE and asylum seekers receive state transport concessions – a small measure which makes a huge difference to people living well below the poverty line. While the budgets of all states are under pressure, there is growing concern among settlement services that NSW government agencies and local government will be less responsive to refugee communities as agencies experience funding cuts.

In supporting asylum seekers, the ACT Government is now leading Australia’s eight states and territories with its ACT Services Access Card for asylum seekers. This card not only brings together information about territory services available to asylum seekers but also highlights the impressive range of services the territory extends to them – health services, schooling, English language classes, access to libraries, transitional housing, bus transport at concessional rates and access to the taxi subsidy scheme.

We cannot allow the skewed and politically self-serving national debate about asylum to divert us from the important task of ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers get the best possible introduction to Australia and can maximise their future contribution to Australian society. I include asylum seekers in this because their introduction to Australia begins when they first arrive, not when they get a permanent visa. At recent refugee recognition rates, more than half of the asylum seekers now living in NSW will get permanent residency. Anything we can do to enhance their opportunities to settle well ultimately is in the best interests of our country and our state. And for asylum seekers whose Protection Visa applications are unsuccessful, it is far better that they return home with additional skills which may assist them to reintegrate into their home society, rather than with deep resentment about ill treatment and time wasted in Australia.

I applaud the NSW Community Relations Commission for organising today’s forum and thank the CRC team for the opportunity to speak. As a life-long resident of Sydney, I am proud of this city’s diversity and of the role that this state and this nation play in providing a new start for people who have lost everything due to persecution and conflict. But I know that NSW can always do better. Being prepared to learn from good practice in other states and territories and to acknowledge local good practice is critical to achieving this.