Thanks Niko

Thanks to all here.

It is a great honour and privilege to speak about freedom. I would like to start by acknowledging the Wathaurong people, the traditional custodians of this land of opportunity where we found home. As we are talking about freedom, it is important for me to say sorry to them.

I am Neil Para, living in Ballaarat, Victoria since 2013. I came to Australia in 2012 by boat with my two daughters and pregnant wife, to escape persecution and danger in Sri Lanka. We were detained in Darwin and my third child was born there.

We were released into Community Detention in Dandenong; Victoria in January 2013 and we moved to Ballaarat in September 2013 upon receiving our Bridging Visa E with work rights. Before we established our life in Ballarat, our visa was revoked in February 2014. We were on this land on a visa for just 5 months and 3 days. After that we did not have any visas or work rights until September 2023.

Even though I could not speak English, I started to go to find friends. As my dad said, I did not wait for people to welcome my family, instead, I went to them to say who we are. We wrote Christmas cards to neighbours, participated in working bees at my children's school and in the community. I realized that my English was improving, and we were getting known by people every day.

As I could not speak English well, I was telling my family stories by action and those actions were appreciated by the wider Australian Community. Building a circle of contacts was helpful when I started groups and committees, worked with the community, public and council, I did all of this as a volunteer. I joined the Victoria State Emergency Service even before I was confident in my English. Now, I am a crew leader, mentoring other members, and I have made so many new friends, not only in Ballaarat, not only in Victoria, but in wider Australia.

I have also written a book in English about my family, which can be found at the Rural Australians for Refugees website.

Freedom, in my opinion, is the right that lets me make my own decisions and actions. Freedom is vital for a happy and fulfilled life. Freedom gives me power and I should be able to use this power in a way for the best interest of my community, my people and myself.

In a way, even though we did not have a visa, I had freedom to grow in this country because I could make my own decisions and live in greater freedom. I was not discriminated against because I was Tamil or Hindu.

So that is my story now: what can we do for other refugees in Australia. There are

so many refugees doing so many good things in the community, but how many stories are reaching the wider Australian community? We don't do enough to let people know the good things refugees do, but it is vital that we should let people know us by our actions. This will create a positive image.

My suggestion:

I am talking with people about refugees at every single opportunity. Do we need to do millions of protests and rallies? Maybe yes, maybe no. We have the freedom to protest but I think if we protest it is important that we leave a positive image. Talk to your neighbours and workmates about the issue. Promote positive news about refugees.

I also see a very small number of protesters showing anger at "Peaceful protests". It will not win friends particularly, when they look different to some Australians. How many of you are reading comments, "send them back" when there were angry protesters. We should handle the freedom of democracy in a better way. Our freedom cannot be a nuisance to the public. We will be more successful if we win friends. This worked for me.

Manageable step.

Are we asking for bulk intervention now via protests? I think every refugee who has been left in limbo should write a ministerial intervention request and that may be a bit easier for the government rather than a bulk intervention like 19000 Resolution of Status Visa.

I also see that we are taking all issues and fighting for all issues. But, if we can fight for the people who live in our community and next door, to get permanency for them, then, they can reunite with their families who are tormented by family separation. There are so many refugee issues in the world, but we can't fight for them all.

We are only speaking to the Australians who welcome refugees, but there are other people who don't want refugees coming in. As a government, they want votes. In my experience, the people I speak to are saying, we want refugees like your family Neil. Don't you think it is a lack of hearing positive stories about refugees' contributions? I have friends from all major parties, a friend of mine, he was voting for the United Australia Party and One Nation, has written letters to grant my family a permanent visa. He changed his mind because he got to know my story and see my contribution to the community.

The question was, are we losing our freedom in Australia?

We are not losing our freedom.

We have freedom in Australia but that doesn't mean we are always going to get what we see as right. Politics in Australia has two clear sides. Our job is to win more friends like my One Nation friend. Freedom is our weapon, please don't abandon it and use it wisely. But we are losing hope, we are losing trust because change is taking so long.

Yes, there are many refugees who want faster change in their situation, and others who have refugee status who are struggling to fit into Australian culture. I know it is not easy. I was there for ten years.

In conclusion, in Australia I had the freedom to create friends and supporters. I did this by creating a positive message. This worked for me. I suggest it could work for you. Thanks for listening.

Thank you.