We hear these words every day in our newspapers, on our television screens, and from our highest politicians. We hear them uttered with condescension, tainted by fear. Essentially, 'asylum seekers, boat people and refugees' are going to decide our federal election. And yet, do we really know what these words mean? Do we see these 'asylum seekers, boat people and refugees' as individuals, as families fleeing from persecution, seeking a better life? Or do we simply see them as a homogenous, voiceless mass who are an inherent burden on Australia? I ask you these questions because I believe that the fear of the unknown, the xenophobia that pervades the asylum seeker debate in Australia, has brought with it a litany of lies that disallows us to see this pertinent issue in its entirety.

Coming from our media and especially our vote-hungry politicians in this electoral climate, is a keen reluctance to deny the truth about asylum seekers. Only recently I watched 'Between the Devil and The Deep Blue Sea' which is a short film which strived to provide the truth about asylum seekers – giving the silenced a voice. What I saw was this: I saw the reality; I saw the need in these people’s eyes; the desperation to find peace in their lives and freedom from persecution, death and destruction; all basic human rights. I saw that they just want a new life. The truth galvanises us to take action, which is what I am doing here today. Taking action, no matter how small, against the negative political rhetoric of Australian society, and not allowing this to cloud our intent or mask our pursuit of seeking truth. So today, I ask you to hear the truth of which I speak. We must identify the myths that surround our asylum seeker debate. We must seek the truth of this issue, the reality at its core, and disregard the common myths that breed ignorance in order to make peace.

**MYTH no. 1:** Australia is being swamped, and is a refugee magnet.  
This is the truth:  
- The latest statistics show that Australia takes in 0.6% of the world's refugees. 0.6% of the world's refugees. With this in mind, we are not being swamped by a tidal wave of refugees, the tide is simply irritating Australia's feet.

**MYTH no. 2:** Asylum seekers are illegal immigrants  
Here's the truth:  
- In 1951 Australia signed the Convention on the Status of Refugees. In doing so, Australia recognises the right of any individual to enter a country for the purpose of seeking asylum, regardless of the means by which they arrive. There is no difference in International law to an asylum seeker coming by plane and an asylum seeker coming by boat.  
This leads me to my next point.

**MYTH no. 3:** Most asylum seekers come to Australia by boat  
Here is the truth:  
- In fact, just over 96% of Australia's asylum seekers in 2008 arrived by plane. That is 4,768 asylum seekers arrived by plane in Australia. On the other hand, only 161 people arrived by boat.  
- Moreover, Australia also has domestic protocols to ensure the allowance of asylum seekers - irrespective of whether one comes by boat or plane. It is in fact both internationally and domestically illegal to "turn back the boats" - yet this complete and utter defiance of international and domestic law has the capacity to decide this year’s election. Not dissimilar to
John Howard’s Pacific Solution of 2001, and Julia Gillard’s proposed Malaysia solution, PM Kevin Rudd’s PNG solution is just another reiteration of Australia's conservatism towards outsiders.

**MYTH no. 4: Asylum seekers are taking our jobs**
- This generalisation, borne from an ill-legitimate fear, is completely wrong. Those who are still seeking asylum in Australia and are living in the community are permitted “bridging visas”. They cannot apply for a job, nor can they actually work. Refugees on these “bridging visas” are given a small allowance of $220 a week for food, rent, clothes and everything else in between, and are not allowed to work. Just to put things into context, the average Australian family spends $1,200 a week.

**MYTH no. 5: Asylum seekers don’t assimilate or contribute to the community**
- It is statements like this that perpetuates the dehumanisation of asylum seekers.
- There are many instances that suggest that asylum seekers who acquire Australian residency contribute as much to the community as the next Australian citizen. For example, Australia received quite a large influx of Vietnamese in the 1970’s after war ravaged the state. I’m sure most of you have heard about Anh Do, now a well-loved Australian comedian and author who came by boat with his family as a small child. In his autobiography, "The Happiest Refugee" he highlights the utter difficulties he endured in trying to assimilate into the community.
- Secondly, Richard Pratt who emigrated from Poland with his family in 1938 lived in Shepparton, Victoria. As the Head of Visy - this cardboard magnate was worth an estimated $5 billion when he died. You need only look in the corner of any classroom of this school to see the impact he made!
- These hard workers, these people with grit, epitomise - hard work, determination and strength - qualities that are admired and rewarded by Australians.

**MYTH no. 6: We can just turn the boats back**
- We cannot wipe our hands clean of this ‘asylum seeker issue’. Turning the boats back does not signify our attempts at stemming our so-called "refugee problem" it signifies our "political problem". We cannot simply turn boats back and leave these people on rackety boats, in unbelievably squalid conditions. It is perfectly legitimate both internationally and domestically to seek asylum, to be a refugee. We cannot simply turn the boats back.

In doing so we are actively denying our international obligations, and denying basic freedoms to these desperate people, freedoms that we bask in, in blissful ignorance.

So, what I ask you today is not to merely accept everything you hear as pure, unmitigated, solid facts. You've heard the myths, you've heard the truth. It is up to each and every one of us to now strive for justice in this complex issue. However complex this may be, however tangled and intricate the web of lies is surrounding asylum-seekers, we must seek the truth. It's not an easy thing to do, but it is imperative that it is done - no matter how hard. The only way that we can truly achieve justice, the only way we can make peace, is to be educated to search for the truth and to discern fact from lies, and the truth from myths. Then and only then can we identify justice from injustice, then and only then, once we are seeking the truth, once we have sought the truth, can we truly make peace.