

# Saved from the sea, but still adrift in Australia



Ali Mullaie goes to Canberra, a far cry from just two years ago when he was teaching computer skills to boys while in detention on Nauru.

Photo: *Andrew Sheargold*

Ben Doherty  
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ALI MULLAIE is smiling. As he sits in the Great Hall of Parliament, surrounded by 200 of Australia's best and brightest young people, he grins in disbelief at how far he has come, and how quickly.

The National Student Leadership Forum on Faith and Values is a gathering of some of our highest-achieving 18 to 26-year-olds, who rub shoulders with the next generation of leaders.

Mr Mullaie, 24, feels comfortable here, among equals. But his path to the Canberra forum is like no other.

The first Australian hand the Afghan-born Mr Mullaie clasped was a sailor's, dragging him from the sea near Ashmore Reef in 2001. He had floated for two hours, clinging to a plank after a rickety Indonesian fishing boat carrying him towards Australia caught fire and sank.

But it was not until 2005 that he set foot on Australian soil. He spent four uncertain, fretful years in detention on Nauru, the human face of the Federal Government's "Pacific Solution".

Mr Mullaie calls his years on Nauru — during which several claims for asylum were turned down — his "difficult time".

But he is proud of his efforts there. "OK, so I spent four years in detention, but I made sure I did not ... waste my time there."

He taught himself English, picking up words and phrases from security guards and an old dictionary. He taught others everything he knew. From tentative first lessons given under trees, he improved to become a volunteer teacher of detainees and local students at the island's only college.

He was even the college's computer teacher, despite never having laid eyes on a computer before arriving there.

Mr Mullaie came to Australia in June 2005, settling in Melbourne. Through a scholarship with the DOXA Youth Foundation, he enrolled at RMIT, studying information technology. He also landed a job with law firm Allens Arthur Robinson as a technical support officer.

"We're very proud of him," says the firm's Jon Webster. "He's such a humble fellow ... but he's got the makings of a great Australian."

Dorothy Babb is Mr Mullaie's Australian "mum". A long-time supporter and confidant, she put his name forward for the forum. "What he has achieved tells a lot about him as a person," she says. "He is very intelligent, absorbing and retaining information."

Mr Mullaie wants a career in IT in Australia. But, despite his apparent security, there are many uncertainties in his life. When he fled Taliban oppression in his home in Afghanistan's Jaghoori district he was just 18. He left behind his mother, father, and six brothers and sisters. He hasn't heard of his family since the middle of 2002. They might have fled to Pakistan, but there's no way he can find out.

And his own place in Australia is not secure. He remains on a temporary protection visa until June next year, when he can apply for permanent protection. The result is not guaranteed.

"Sometimes it gets me down a bit," he says. "It's very, very difficult for me (being on a TPV) ... I have goals, but I have to make my goals for the next day, or next week, but not longer than that. I'm not secure enough."

This week forum delegates had the chance to meet and question MPs about leadership, faith and values. On Thursday Mr Mullaie met the man whose Pacific Solution saw him detained.

"My name is Ali. I'm one of the Afghan refugees from Nauru," he told Prime Minister John Howard.

"I would like to say thank you for giving us protection to be in a safe country like Australia. My question is how you describe your faith and values in one sentence?"

Mr Howard replied that his fundamental value was that he always tried to do his best for the country.

"I thought it was a pretty good answer," Mr Mullaie told *The Age*. "I think I would like to do the same."