

Former international footballer and sports broadcaster Craig Foster led the campaign to secure the hard fought release of refugee footballer Hakeem al-Araibi from a Thai prison. He delivered a keynote address at the STARTTS Refugee Ball.

The power of human rights

I CAME to thank you all for your support – not just of the campaign, but for what you do. I gave my time tonight to come and say: “well done!”. What are the reasons? Because I met the wonderful people from STARTTS for the first time throughout this campaign, and I came to understand the power and the importance of the work that you, and all of those who support it, do at STARTTS 365 days of the year because, as you’ll agree, there are many, many Hakeems.

Why was it important to capture this story in a book that we launched in the last couple of days? It was to tell the world about sport, what sport was and perhaps more importantly, what sport was not capable of doing in this case. It was also important to let Australia know what you did, what people outside this room did and what we’re all capable of. That’s what’s most important here.

This campaign, we hope, demonstrated the heart, the love, the care, the compassion that exists within not just people who work in this field, not just within the NGO and Human Rights sector – and yes, they are extraordinary people here who I have met in the last couple of years, and particularly in the past 12 months since Hakeem

al-Araibi was incarcerated for the third time in his life – but for everyone else in broader Australia and, indeed, around the world.

At a time when the treatment of immigrants and immigration certainly when treatment of asylum seekers is in such a horrible place around the world including in this country, we have shown that we can come together. We showed the power of enough people who care, of enough people with a sense of humanity. As I’ve said so often since that campaign and those fateful few months, one of the keys to it was this: we reached over 30 million people around the world. More than 150,000 people signed petitions in Australia alone and several million shared content on social media, we trended in 81 countries – and not one of those people looked at Hakeem al-Araibi and said, “There’s a kid over here who is in trouble, but...” No one said “but” and no one should. Certainly in our game of football the word should be barred, and here it should be barred because we are a nation of immigrants.

In this country, to think that we can paint people who want to seek asylum as somehow different, as less worthy, is really disheartening, extraordinary and quite incredible in a country that is so wonderful in many



Craig Foster at STARTTS Refugee Ball. Photo: Milan Acosta.

respects. I believe in this country, I always will. We have significant challenges and all of us in this room know that in this sector we have been in a bad space for a long time, but I'm an optimist.

I believe we can get out of it and I'm hopeful that this campaign can play just a tiny part of that role because no one said "this kid Hakeem al-Araibi" – who we'd never met, Australia didn't know – no one said "yeah, but he's a Muslim". Not one person said that. No one said: "Yeah, but he's a refugee. Yes, he's being tortured; yes, he's being detained; yes, his life is in jeopardy, but he's on a protection visa, so why should we give him our help?" No one said that, and rightly so.

In this campaign we saw what Australia really is and we showed the best of what we're capable of, in my view. The day that Hakeem came back to Melbourne Airport was a wondrous day. He spoke to Australia and he was so grateful for what Australia had done for him. He went off to see his young wife, who he hadn't seen for months and who he thought he'd never see again, and she thought likewise. The next day I had a letter published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [addressed] to Scott Morrison and Bill Shorten in which I said: "We really did a fabulous

job together." And to be clear to everyone here – and thank you to Tracey Holmes for her wonderful comments, but I'm not Superman. I'm the same as you. There is no difference. That's what the campaign was about. Hakeem is me, I'm Hakeem. We speak a different language. He's so smart, he's learning English. I'm not learning Arabic very well, though I promised him I would!

There's no difference between us because I played football to a certain level, so what? We came together, two human beings with different life experiences, different passports and different age. He was exactly half my age. He was 25 years old, if you want to know. He was 25 years old and I said to my beautiful wife, Lara, who's here today: "My darling, we have lived double his life. We have had an extraordinary experience, we have a beautiful family and we must give this young man the same opportunity." Thankfully, with your help and [that of] so many others, we were able to do so.

I work at SBS but I worked for around 15 years with one of the most marvellous human beings I ever met. His name was László Üрге. You might know him as Les Murray. People wrote songs about him. He wrote songs himself. He dreamed of being a musician. Nevertheless,

he became an iconic broadcaster, one of the best this country has produced. In fact, he was produced by another country, Hungary, and came here in 1957 when his family paid people-smugglers for him to be able to seek a new life, as so many have done since and will continue to do.

I sat next to Les for 15 years and learnt from a master of his craft, and someone who Australia looked to as a guide, someone who was an elder of Australian society, certainly in the multicultural space. I know we have an SBS table here this evening and there'll be some tears during this talk about Les. People at SBS loved him, and rightly so, because he was a wonderful human being. He was an Australian-Hungarian. Hakeem al-Araibi is an Australian-Bahrainian, but the beauty is this country welcomed them and gave them a home, and they contribute to this country, Les and so many others, in extraordinary ways.

They contributed to my life. I'm a better person, I hope, because I know them or I knew them. Hakeem al-Araibi is just another and there are so many others in this room. There is no difference between us. Australia needs to understand, through this campaign, what they achieved and that that is the rule that we should apply every minute of every day of our lives. Are you with me? I believe that we can, [through] collective power, unity and humanitarian values. We are all the same. We all deserve respect. We deserve equality irrespective of any difference between us and we all have immutable, universal human rights.

I have three extraordinary children. Like you, what do we dream for them? I dream for a safe home. I dream for them to have opportunity. I dream for a great education. I work hard for that every day. So does everyone else. Everyone else has a right to seek those things in their life, to be safe, to be free from tyranny and torture. Hakeem al-Araibi today is free from torture because this country is an extraordinary place.

We're going to capture that spirit that we all believe in, but which has wavered in recent years, and we've lost a little bit of that essence, but we can get it back. Hakeem al-Araibi is free from torture but this room, and this campaign, proves that we can give others the same chance.

Just before I finish, I will tell you that I went last week to Port Moresby. When I wrote the letter to Scott Morrison and Bill Shorten, I said: "We did a wonderful job here, thank you to you." The government really stepped up with enough public pressure and that's the importance of community grassroots support. The government did a fabulous job in the end to get him out, but [in the letter] I said, "That's great. We've done this

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incredible work for this young man, but what we're doing to asylum-seekers elsewhere is just not right." The difference between what we did there and what we're doing over here is so great that they can't be reconciled. It's not possible.

People in Australia can disagree on many things and this talk is not about policy, but I'll tell you one thing that's a hundred per cent sure and which I believe Australians know and will fight for: it's that we're all the same. It doesn't matter if you're seeking asylum or otherwise, you deserve to be treated humanely and you deserve to be given an opportunity at life.

Here's the hard part. Last week I went to Port Moresby and spoke to refugees, asylum-seekers, who have been there for almost seven years and, having been involved in this campaign, played for the country, had an opportunity to captain the team – to see what's happened there is something that's impossible to reconcile with who I believe we are. To speak to them and hear their stories about the trauma they have suffered is something no Australian could ever expect to have to do.

I sat with a large number of them last week and felt their pain. I listened to their stories and I pledged to them my support, as much as I can give, and to come back to Australia and to say to everyone here: "We did a wonderful job together for Hakeem. We need to let these people go and have mercy. Let them get on with their lives."

We are not metal. We are not stones. We have the same heart as everyone else and we just want an opportunity at life; that's what we did for Hakeem; that's what Australia is capable of. I believe we're capable of getting back to a space where everyone can be treated humanely, irrespective of where they come from, their religion, whether they're seeking asylum or otherwise.

I congratulate you on all of your work. It's a marvellous organisation. You have my full support and together, let us show Australia the best of who we are. R



STARTTS Refugee Ball, Hyatt Regency Sydney. Craig Foster with Jarrod Galbraith-Marten, Project Officer of Multicultural Futsal series and guests. Photo: Milan Acosta



STARTTS Refugee Ball, Hyatt Regency Sydney. Craig Foster with STARTTS CEO Jorge Aroche. Photo: Milan Acosta