

## **Celebrations at last as Murugappan family to be back in Biloela for youngest daughter's birthday**

*Labor's decision to release the Murugappans means that four-year-old Tharnicaa will finally have a birthday outside immigration detention*



*Priya and Nades Murugappan and their Australian-born daughters Kopika and Tharnicaa.*

Tory Shepherd  
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Tharnicaa Murugappan will turn five on 12 June. It will be the first birthday the Australian-born child can celebrate outside detention.

Tharni was in a Melbourne detention centre for her first birthday in 2018.

She was denied a birthday cake.

In 2019, her second birthday, Tharni was still in the centre. Again, she was denied a birthday cake. That was after her mother, Priya, accused the government of failing to provide proper medical care.

In 2020, her supporters took a birthday cake to the office of David Coleman, the former Liberal minister whose Queensland electorate includes Biloela, Tharni's home town, asking for mercy. By then, the family was in detention on Christmas Island, which is where Tharni had her third birthday.

Last year, Tharni was in Perth Children's hospital for her fourth birthday. The little girl had developed sepsis, likely from untreated pneumonia. **For 10 days** she had suffered a fever, vomiting, diarrhoea and dizziness before being airlifted to Perth.

Her mother, Priya, was with her. Her father, Nades, and big sister, Kopika, remained in detention on Christmas Island.

But this year, the whole Murugappan family (also known as the Nadesalingam family) will finally be home, in Biloela, for Tharni's fifth birthday.

Priya and Nades Marugappan came to Australia a decade ago as Tamil refugees, fleeing violence in Sri Lanka. They were granted bridging visas, married, had Tharnicaa and Kopika, and became valued members of the Biloela community.

In 2018, Australian Border Force officials turned up at 5am, gave them 10 minutes to pack, flew them to Melbourne and prepared to deport them. They were saved by a last-minute injunction, and have been in detention ever since.

As promised before the election, the new Labor government has issued the family bridging visas so they can return to Queensland and keep working towards permanent residency.

Home to Bilo has been fighting for the Tamil asylum seekers for years, as the Morrison government kept them in detention. During the election campaign, former prime minister Scott Morrison said the family were "not owed protection".

Home to Bilo spokesperson Angela Fredericks said on Friday the journey back to Queensland would mark "the end of a long, painful chapter" in the family's lives, "and the beginning of a lifetime of healing and recovery".

Through Home to Bilo, Priya Murugappan said: "Finally, everything is here. I cannot believe it."

On Friday, exercising his power under the migration act to grant bridging visas, interim home affairs minister Jim Chalmers said he had spoken to the family and "wished them well for their return".

"This decision will allow them to get 'home to Bilo', a big-hearted and welcoming Queensland town that has embraced this beautiful family," he said.

He emphasised this exception did not indicate a weakening of border control.

"This government remains committed to Operation Sovereign Borders and keeping people smugglers out of business," he said.



*The Murugappan family in Perth.*

It has been a long, complicated, and distressing legal battle for the family. Fredericks said they thanked the Australians who had supported them.

“We cannot wait to welcome our friends back home to Bilo with some warm hugs, happy tears, and a very big welcome home party,” she said.

Despite her own good news, Priya Murugappan said she was thinking of other refugees.

“My prayer is that this government will make a change to the lives of every single refugee who comes here,” she said.

“All refugees are survivors. They need hope. I had the support of Nades and we had the support of the people of Bilo. But many others don’t have that support. So I want to help.”

Fredericks said many other Tamils in Australia had not yet been guaranteed safety.

“We sincerely hope that the newly elected Labor government will recognise what the international community already knows: that Sri Lanka is not safe for Tamil people,” she said.

“We hope that the new government can acknowledge the distress that prolonged detention and uncertainty has caused for many Tamil people in Australia, and grant them the safety and security that only permanent protection can bring.”

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre welcomed the announcement, but called for permanent protection for people “subjected to arbitrary and cruel policies of a broken asylum regime”.

The centre says that while Labor has promised permanent protection for 19,000 people who are part of a “legacy caseload” on temporary visas, there are 9,500 others set to remain on temporary visas.

The centre’s advocacy and campaigns director, Jana Favero, said the “fight isn’t over”.

“They have been granted bridging visas ... meaning the limbo and uncertainty continues,” she said.

Favero has previously warned about the impact life in limbo can have on children’s mental health.

Earlier in the day, prime minister Anthony Albanese said it was incomprehensible the family had been detained for so long “at enormous cost”.

“We are a strong enough society to say that we should not treat people badly in order to send a message to others,” he said.

“We’re better than that, Australia is a more generous and kind country than that.”

Fredericks said there were some legal and logistical challenges to deal with, but that Home to Bilo was “confident we’ll have them home in Biloela before [Tharnicaa’s] fifth birthday, which is in mid June”.

“We can’t wait to celebrate that birthday with her, her first birthday not in detention,” she said.