

Office of the Vicar General

The Honourable Tony Abbott MP,
Prime Minister of Australia,
Parliament House, Canberra.

20.01.2014

Dear Prime Minister,

I write to express my deep concern at your Government's current Asylum Seekers' Policy.

I am alarmed by the number of men, women and children whose lives have been put indefinitely on hold and who must deal with harsh conditions of detention, both within Australia and particularly offshore. As a Catholic priest here in Darwin, I have tried to minister to a number of these people and have heard their stories.

So many people with whom I mix are deeply alarmed by the deliberate renaming of asylum seekers as illegals. Renaming some reality doesn't change its nature. Operation Sovereign Borders is widely regarded as fudging the truth.

Have asylum seekers always been illegals? Seemingly under Malcolm Fraser that was certainly not true. At what point in time did they become illegals and on what grounds?

Your Government, along with the previous Labour-led Government, has followed a policy of demonizing these people to the extent that many good people in the Australian community now think of these asylum seekers as having no rights and as justly deserving the inhuman treatment being meted out to them. Is this what we are being asked to celebrate on the upcoming Australia Day, a day when we hark back with approval to the arrival by sea in 1788 of people who up till then were foreign to this land? In reality, Australia has been significantly built up as a nation by boat people.

“Stop the boats” is a clever and mindless mantra. It overlooks the critical fact that the ‘boats’ are actually full of human beings. I know the story of many of these people – it makes the slogan very ugly. The expressed concern about people drowning is greatly discounted when I discover that it is an acceptable risk for these people as an alternative to the horrors they have experienced.

Does it no longer concern you that so many people, especially families, are being grievously punished, particularly in isolated and offshore detention centres, in order to deter people from attempting to claim asylum in Australia? How far can one go in inflicting suffering on some people in order to deter others from acting in a certain way?

Though I have no first-hand knowledge of Manus or Christmas Island, I am personally quite familiar with the Island of Nauru. You must know that living there may be fine for Nauruans, I-Kiribatis and the few expatriates they are in a position to employ, but for others it is an island prison and a dead-end.

You are damaging, ruining in some cases, the lives of people who arrived here before the recent election contest between your Party and the current Opposition. At that time, you were out to convince the Australian public that you could be harsher and more ruthless than your opponents. You have succeeded in desensitizing many Australians to the misery, frustration and endless uncertainty these earlier arrivals are being subjected to.

In regard to an offshore ‘solution’, both major political parties are guilty.

If there is one humane goal I would urge your Government to engage in, it would be to proceed with vigour and with speed, the processing of asylum seekers who arrived here under previous legislation, that would again allow genuine refugees to be re-settled into Australian society.

Finally, political parties are not things: they are collections of human beings. And so, political parties, like every human being, are capable of good and capable of evil. History is littered with examples. Governments need to take on board the well-intentioned scrutiny of their actions. Good governments lead the community in fostering goodness, in appealing to the best in people. Bad governments appeal to the less noble elements of people’s characters.

The eyes of the world and in particular the eyes of Asia (I can again speak from considerable experience) are on Australia's mean handling of the asylum seeker phenomenon.

More and more Australians are coming to the realization that Australia is capable of something much better than our current harsh and inhumane response.

Prior to engaging the media, I would appreciate some response to this letter.

Yours respectfully,

Father Malcolm P. Fyfe msc
Vicar General,
Catholic Diocese of Darwin.