

Sir / Madam,

Despite the (very welcome) High Court decision, I think a Senate Inquiry into Australia's boat-arrival asylum seeker policy is much needed. The objective of the inquiry should be to inform and defuse the debate of the disproportionate and hysterical impact the issue has on Australian politics, resulting in a serious degradation of our country's international standing, respect for human rights, and most disturbingly, a steady erosion of our traditional ethical values which is rapidly overflowing to other areas of social welfare. Being "tough" on asylum seekers is very much a "gateway drug" to being tough on ourselves.

Some points for consideration:

Fleeing persecution and economic migration can be intertwined, and the difference between them may not be relevant. Is it worse to be shot by your government than to be starved to death by the actions of your government? One would amount to a case for asylum, one economic migration.

There is a wide gulf between the ethics we have signed up to under international law, the values we think we hold as a nation, and our actual treatment of unplanned refugee arrivals. We do not treat people as we would have them treat us. Given this, perhaps it would be useful to have a wider debate on immigration and refugees with a view to dispelling the uncomfortably hypocritical political situation we are currently in.

In this debate, we could discuss to what extent we would be willing to tolerate unplanned arrivals (as a % of total immigration, for example), how we will treat them, and how we will try to manage the numbers arriving without compromising our values. This discussion should also look at the economic cost of maintaining vast prison complexes, of sending asylum seekers to Malaysia or Nauru, as compared with other housing alternatives. The costs of the various options should be transparently discussed, so that the Australian population can make an informed decision on our policy. Currently, there appears to be no economic rationale behind our decision-making process.

In this debate we should be frank about the extent to which we are willing to respect international norms, and what our values actually are in practice. It is important to clarify this to remove the hypocrisy of the policy. An informed debate should serve to defuse the political value of the asylum seeker "problem" and also, by informing people about the relative scale of the problem, accord the problem the appropriate amount of attention. It would also be worth mentioning that boat arrivals should not be considered an unmitigated "problem", even if we agree numbers should be managed; they bring courage, energy, drive and enormous ambition to our country (by definition).

The inquiry should consider the following questions: Would it not be cheaper to house refugees in normal housing, or camps, than prisons? What would the "social cost" (or burden) be if unplanned arrivals were to "disappear" into the wider population? Would it be cheaper to allow them to work while we process their claims? Would the country as a whole benefit from this (i.e. consider the country as a whole, not just various interest groups)? Would it be cheaper to assist them (and their families back home) in moving to third countries, if we deem that too many have arrived, than signing expensive deals with Malaysia? What efforts are we making to police and disrupt international smuggling rings? What efforts are our neighbours making and how can we assist them? In short, have all options been considered thoroughly and publicly discussed, along with their costs and benefits?

Perhaps we could consider a series of measures designed to manage arrival numbers with more severe measures being triggered in case of larger arrival numbers, beyond certain agreed thresholds, and more humane methods applied when the "problem" of unplanned arrivals is considered to be relatively insignificant?

The principle should be that our response is proportionate to the problem¹, allows us to manage numbers without compromising our values, and makes economic sense. When the government proposes to spend larger sums of money than strictly necessary, we should be aware of the basis for this decision; i.e. are we spending more money in the short-term to save money in the long term, to prevent a security risk, to enforce a concept of “waiting your turn”, or because we are pandering to racist sentiment? Inconsistencies and hypocrisies of our approach should be highlighted (e.g. in what other areas of public policy are we willing to invest hundreds of millions to prevent queue jumping, minimal security risks etc.). In short, our policy towards unplanned arrivals should follow the general principles laid out in other areas of government social welfare policy. It should include an assessment of “costs” and “benefits” (which naturally do not include the “political benefits” of whipping up communal fears and hatreds), and the ethical and legal principles involved. In this way we can at least demonstrate that we are being fair to our own values, and consistent.

Currently, the tail is wagging the dog.

Our harsh policy towards asylum seekers, driven by irrational fears, is generalising and “normalising” the notion that it’s ok to treat people inhumanely, and that there are different types of people who deserve different rights. It flies in the face of the ancient ethical principle that we treat others as we would be treated. When it has become an established political truth that the poor and persecuted can be equated with grasping, greedy, criminals, as we have managed to do, then we should expect a very sharp slide towards inequality, intolerance and prejudice within our own society.

Our treatment of asylum seekers is a dress rehearsal for our treatment of our own poor or cultural minorities.

Thank you for taking the time to read this statement, from a descendent of some persecuted boat people who arrived uninvited in 1788.

Alexander Nash

¹ Perhaps a media experiment could be tried, where the arrival of 20 boat people would not be described as a “flood” (as they inevitably are), but as a “trickle” while numbers are below 5,000 per year, a “flow” up to 20,000, a wave, flood, etc beyond that. Or whenever arrivals are described the actual number should also be inserted, and a photo-simulation of that number sitting in the MCG included, to give an idea of the scale of the problem.