

I have been consistently appalled and seriously disappointed at the failure of the two major political parties to arrive at a humane immigration policy that is not constantly the topic of petty and cruel political ranting. My understanding is that a bipartisan policy on this issue existed in the past. We need it more than ever today as we move into an era of increasing global uncertainty. Of course Australia will be subjected to continuing and increasing immigration pressures, just as will the rest of the so called 'developed' world. One doesn't have to do very much reading at all to know that this is an inevitable feature of our world in the future. It embarrasses me that our leaders cannot behave like adults on the question of immigration detention centres. The only reason we can afford to have such centres is because our numbers of unorthodox arrivals are so much smaller than those of other countries such as the UK and Malaysia, just to mention two very different situations. Detention centres should be reserved for initial assessment processes and for persons awaiting deportation or requiring imprisonment for criminal behaviour. We need to learn from other countries how to manage refugee populations in the mainstream environment. Our country also needs to contribute significantly and effectively to processes that will lead to global programs for managing movements of refugees out of situations of impossible hardship, including starvation at one extreme and political persecution at the other. With regard to child migrants, children with families should be given as much security and support as possible. The question of children on their own, however, must be acknowledged to be extremely difficult. We must not develop policies that encourage parents to place huge burdens of responsibility and potential physical, emotional and psychological risks on their children, even where children understand what they are being asked to do when sent as unaccompanied minors and when they accept that it is the best way to help their families. Clearly, as part of the global community, our efforts and money must go to helping families in such extreme distress where they are, in the first instance, and then assisting families as whole groups to move together into better situations in new locations. This is a global problem and I appeal to all political parties to have the courage to face it as such.

Just as side note, I was appalled when I learned on the SBS series "Go Back to Where You Came from" that the sister of the African woman we had seen settled with her family in Australia had been given a chance for resettlement in America, not with her family here. My heart ached for the Australian sister who had suffered enormous tragedy already and was so clearly desperately worried for her sister and for the girl herself who would not be reunited with her. I do hope the Immigration Department was able to talk with the UN body concerned and reunite the sisters. If it is the case that the sister in Africa was HIV positive as the result of rape (this was not completely clear in the documentary), I still believe that the appropriate thing would have been to allow her to come to this country and the care of her family and sympathetic friends around that family. I cannot see any point in separating members of families when so much has already been lost for the people concerned.