

Refusing to Resettle: Australia's response to the Rohingya Asylum Seekers

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"I'm sorry. If you want to start a new life, you come through the front door, not through the back door." – Tony Abbott, Australian Prime Minister, May 21, 2015

They are in a tight corner of history, and it is shrinking. The Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar are the persecuted minority within a Buddhist state, though it is feared in such areas as northern Rakhine state that they will, in time, outnumber the Buddhist population. With the discovery in northern Malaysia of 139 shallow graves the Rohingya people have also become the public face of trafficking.[1]

There are the usual suggested horror stories: instances of press ganging individuals and listening to the sweet promises of vicious middlemen offering a chance of passage to another country. Then comes the sea – the dangerous, all-consuming aqueous world that takes lives even as it gives passage. The incentive to escape is hardly surprising, given that some 140 thousand have been internally displaced since the communal riots of 2012. They are denied the freedom to move. They are denied citizenship.

Since Saturday, a search for Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants seemingly abandoned by traffickers at sea, undertaken by Malaysia and now Indonesia, has proven fruitless. It is said that up to 3,500 may be afloat in perilous waters.[2] Around the same number have already landed in Malaysia and Indonesia proper. Initial refusals to accept them have been modified, subject to the calls that other countries provide assistance in the resettlement phase.

The issue of how those migrants are being processed has proven to be the biggest bone of contention. Cooperation in this endeavour is fine for some as long as the terms can be dictated by certain parties. This has been the Australian response to the problems of how the Rohingya asylum seekers are treated. As to questions on whether they would be resettled in Australia, the response from the ever mature Prime Minister Abbott was "nope, nope, nope".[3] Quaintly, the prime minister could only envisage "front door" refugees.

The Indonesians have become tetchy over the entire issue. Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, was suitably unimpressed by the line taken in Canberra, one which insists that everybody, bar Australian officials, should deal with the problem. "The cooperation should come from country of origin and country of transit and country of destination." Indonesian Foreign ministry spokesman Arrmanatha Nasir has similarly reminded Canberra that "countries that are parties to the convention on refugees have a responsibility to ensure they believe in what they sign" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, May 21).

Other countries agree. Papua New Guinea's Peter O'Neill has become more vocal about the

need for Australia to be involved. “Those of us who are accepting refugees cannot continue doing that forever.” A collective muck in by wealthier states was required. “Countries like Australia and the United States, the UK, and other developed countries like Japan must assist in addressing this crisis.”[4]

As tends to be so typical about the contrivance of fairness in policy, a closer look at it shows various inner contradictions. Fairness is the slogan of the indifferent who masquerade as moral beings. It is also the slogan of the hypocritical.

Prime Minister Abbott has done what his predecessors have, though perhaps more forcefully: argue that the battle against refugees and asylum seekers arriving by boat is essentially one rooted in a conflict against terrorism. They are to be turned away. “We need to bring the same drive, focus and clarity of purpose to countering terrorism that resulted in stopping the boats under Operation Sovereign Borders.”

Apply the logic of military containment and expulsion, in other words, to both, and Australian security is assured. “I think we’ve demonstrated in the way we have stopped the boats, I think we have demonstrated with our commitment with countering Islamist death cults both here and abroad, that we do take our responsibilities to keep our communities safe very, very seriously indeed.”

That is the same strained logic that was applied in the wake of the death of 1,300 migrants in the Mediterranean coming from Libya. His solution has always been, and it would seem to always be, stopping the boats. It is a sentiment that is winning the sentimentalists over, the bleeding hearts who think that locking up families is at least a better solution than indiscriminate drowning. “As we know now,” argues Derek Rielly, “these wretched boats didn’t stop their perilous journeys until an adult got the reins of government and made a tough decision. And it was tough. Make no mistake. No civilised human being gets any thrill from jailing families.”[5]

Rielly’s reference point here is that of weakness – the clouding weakness of humanity. Be firm, be hard, and be uncompromising. Do not succumb, as fictional Europe does in Jean Raspail’s *The Camp of the Saints*, to the demands made by that “flotilla of one million refugees” which end up paralysing Europe, the Europe of culture and civilisation. The good heart ends up suiciding.

Such casually dished nonsense, the sort that peppers conversation and discussion on the subject of refugee policy, are the reasons why the carceral solution rides high in Australian approaches. It feeds the argument that, if you get rid of the human cargo, expel them, banish them to someone else’s backyard, that some good is, in fact, being done. It also ignores the obvious point that the boats do not stop, so much as find another route elsewhere. Hence the Rohingya dilemma, with its human cargo that will never settle or be processed in Australia, because Canberra has other ideas about it.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/malaysia-mass-graves-is-the-burmese-rohingya-minority-being-trafficked-by-force-10274776.html>

- [2] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/indonesia-searches-for-bangladeshi-and-muslim-rohingya-migrants-at-sea-1432456894>
- [3] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/nope-nope-nope-tony-abbott-says-australia-will-not-resettle-refugees-in-migrant-crisis-20150521-gh6eew.html>
- [4] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/png-leader-peter-oneill-calls-for-australian-intervention-in-myanmar-rohingya-crisis-20150524-gh8gui.html>
- [5] <http://www.watoday.com.au/comment/derek-rielly-europe-looks-to-abbott-for-solution-to-boat-arrivals-20150525-gh6zw2.html>

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