

Stopping Boats and Saving Lives Four Years On

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How much longer will we continue to punish proven refugees who are our responsibility while they await interminable, uncertain futures in Nauru and Manus Island? Everyone knows that not all the proven refugees will be resettled in the USA even once the USA resumes taking refugees in October 2017. Kevin Rudd first announced the most recent plan for removing unvisaed asylum seekers offshore on 19 July 2013, seven weeks out from the 2013 election. Richard Marles helped with the negotiation of the deal.

15 months ago, which was two months out from the 2016 election and immediately after the PNG Supreme Court had struck down the indefinite detention of asylum seekers as unconstitutional, Richard Marles speaking as the ALP Shadow Minister for Immigration told *ABC Lateline*: ‘What we were not seeking to do was make an example of 2,000 people as a form of deterrence. We were absolutely not seeking to put people in a form of indefinite detention. And we totally acknowledge that the vast majority of those on Manus and Nauru who have been assessed have been found to be genuine refugees. They are deserving a safe, humane and dignified refuge.’ (See

<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2015/s4450975.htm>)

The boats have stopped and will stay stopped. They’re stopped by joint military and diplomatic co-operation between Australia and Indonesia. They have remained stopped despite the promise that a significant percentage of the proven refugees on Nauru and Manus will be permanently resettled in the USA. The boats would remain stopped with ongoing diligent military and diplomatic negotiations even if the refugee remnant on Nauru and Manus Island were to be resettled in New Zealand and Australia, as they were in John Howard’s time. Meanwhile, all that’s changed since the Marles *Lateline* interview is that the lives of genuine refugees have been further destroyed by another 15 months of uncertainty. And now our two major political parties are preparing for yet a third federal election when they think it makes sense to direct that these proven refugees rot in the Pacific. But for what purpose? When does the inhumane treatment of a child who is a proven refugee become too costly for the purchase of votes, especially when there is no ongoing coherence to a four year old policy (whose

architects thought it would run its course in 12 months!) other than response to fear in the electorate? Voters have to accept that when it comes to voting in the Senate, they can't trust the major political parties acting alone or even in concert to do the right thing by children who are proven refugees languishing in the Pacific, in our name and at our cost, as well as theirs.

Sadly for the third election in a row, it seems that both Liberal and Labor will be seeking to 'make an example of 2,000 people as a form of deterrence'. They completely fail to 'acknowledge that the vast majority of those on Manus and Nauru who have been assessed have been found to be genuine refugees. They are deserving a safe, humane and dignified refuge.' The motions put forward by the Left of the ALP at this week's NSW Party Conference are to be welcomed. Those wanting to save the lives of refugee children being punished in our name should not have to rely only on the Greens to put things right, especially when it was the ALP which put these children in harm's way in the first place. Voters need a real choice on this moral question. And yes, by all means keep the boats stopped by all authorised military and diplomatic means. Just stop punishing proven refugees in our name. We can't afford a third federal election with no choice on this issue, and with no moral principle underpinning the approach of both major political parties.

(The first of our articles arguing for a breaking of the nexus between stopping boats and inhumane treatment of refugees on Nauru and Manus Island appeared almost a year ago at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/a-solution-to-our-refugee-crisis-20160812-gqqvhl.html>)