

AFTER MANUS ISLAND'S CLOSURE, CAN WE RESET THE ASYLUM DEBATE?

Risking death at sea doesn't warrant lifelong exclusion from Australia. Simon Longstaff thinks it is time we revisited the basics in our debate about asylum seekers.

The [closure of facilities on Manus Island](#) presents us with an opportunity to reset the debate about asylum seeker policy. While moral outrage, righteous indignation, name calling and political point scoring might soothe the consciences of partisans, they do nothing for those refugees who languish on Nauru and Manus Island. We now have an opportunity to try something different.

Instead of calling our opponents "cold hearted" or "misty-eyed", let's assume a basic level of decency and good will on the part of people on all sides of this debate. I acknowledge there are a few nasty characters who wish to exploit this issue for their own selfish reasons. However, for the majority, the last thing they want is for people seeking asylum to suffer.

We can all agree, providing only our methods do not cause or allow harm to asylum seekers, we should do whatever we can to stop people hazarding their lives at sea.

To say supporters of detention are indifferent to the suffering of refugees on land is no more valid than to say opponents of detention are indifferent to the fate of those who drown at sea. Compassion exists across the spectrum of opinion on this issue.

Let's also recognise each side can draw on valid ethical arguments. People are right to be concerned about the fate of asylum seekers sent to sea in leaky boats by those who exploit them. Such concerns cannot simply be waved away. So even if one disagrees with the means by which the boats are stopped, the basic aim – stopping people from drowning – should be recognised as legitimate.

Likewise, there can be no denying the right of asylum seekers to be received and processed in conditions of safety. So any government policy or practice that exposes asylum seekers to harm is illicit. Surely we can all agree, providing only our methods do not cause or allow harm to asylum seekers, we should do whatever we can to stop people hazarding their lives at sea.

Third, let's accept Australia has both an interest and responsibility in supporting a regional response to the global refugee crisis. The world has more people in need of asylum than Australia can absorb alone – the world needs our region (including Australia) to boost its capacity to assist those fleeing war, persecution and oppression. However a regional response will only be adequate if Australia both invests in the capacity of other nations to offer a safe haven and takes its fair share of refugees.

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On that front, we have a pretty good record – with our nation having benefited from a long-term, sustainable intake of refugees. This dates back to the parents of Australia’s baby boomer generation which is largely made up of the children of post-World War II refugees. Of course some refugees have gone ‘off the rails’ – as do plenty of people born in Australia.

However, for the most part, refugees make a positive contribution to our collective lives – in business, the arts, on the sporting field and so on.

I believe most people will agree with the points made above:

- Asylum seekers should not receive any encouragement to take to boats.
- Whatever measures Australia takes on this front the physical and psychological safety of asylum seekers should not be put at risk.
- We need a regional solution and Australia should take its fair share of the world’s refugees.

Most would agree on these points because each advances the goal of providing safety to those in need – which is the central purpose of offering asylum. According to the [Refugee Convention](#) which Australia is a signatory to, the obligation to offer asylum is based on a promise of safety from being persecuted for being a member of a particular social group (for example, LGBTIQ people or women and girls) or religious, political or racial reasons. It is not a promise for prosperity or relief from general violence.

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It’s a promise Australia has broken on Nauru and Manus Island and cannot honour under current arrangements. Even if conditions were to change and the physical safety of those in detention could be assured, we cannot guarantee their psychological safety as long as being settled in Australia or a similar country (like New Zealand) remains impossible.

The only solution is to give people a measure of hope they will eventually achieve a better life in a country with all the benefits Australia has to offer. Coming by boat to Australia should not warrant a death sentence by drowning, but nor does it merit a life sentence by being permanently barred from the possibility of settling in Australia.

So, the question is: is it possible to preserve hope whilst also deterring people from risking a dangerous crossing by sea?

Australia should consider offering those on Manus Island and Nauru the chance to return to another processing centre

Let's imagine a scenario in which all of these elements are properly put in place. Let's imagine a global network of processing centres that can be reached in safety – most likely by land or by air. Let's imagine these processing centres are well-equipped with decent housing, schools, modern health-care, social amenities and so on. Let's imagine an efficient and effective mechanism for evaluating the status of those claiming asylum – with those found to be refugees given an opportunity to engage in meaningful activity perhaps through employment in the local community.

If all of that was in place, would we care where the processing centres were located? Would it really matter that these facilities were located offshore? Would it be such a bad thing if those found to be risking their lives at sea were towed, in safety, to a processing centre they could have reached by land?

This proposal removes any incentive to take to boats without punishing those who do so with the disproportionate penalty of permanent exclusion from Australia. Deterring boat arrivals is about ensuring no person gains an advantage by taking the risk. It is not about making things worse for them – this goes beyond the logic of deterrence. Yet that is what we have done – even if such an outcome was unintended.

In these circumstances, and at the very least, Australia should consider offering those on Manus Island and Nauru the chance to return to another processing centre, hopefully meeting the conditions described above. There, their status as an asylum seeker could be 'reset' – preserving their hope of someday settling in Australia – without giving them any advantage over any other refugee on the planet. In those circumstances, their route to Australia, by ordered and regular means, would be reopened in conditions of both physical and psychological safety.

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