

Asylum seekers can be managed with cheaper and more humane options

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The Labor party has just rejected a move to close Nauru and Manus Island as places for processing asylum claims. If the move had succeeded, it would have been a welcome retreat from the intentional cruelty of the present system. It is profoundly regrettable that the Labor party has decided to stay with a flawed system which disfigures this country.

Australia's treatment of boat people needs a radical rethink. It is shameful that we are now trying to treat asylum seekers so harshly that they will be deterred from seeking our help at all. It is shameful that this deliberate mistreatment of asylum seekers has been "justified" by describing them falsely as "illegal", when in fact they commit no offence by coming here and asking for protection. It is shameful that the deliberate Coalition lies about asylum seekers have not been roundly condemned by the Labor party.

There are better ways of responding to asylum seekers. If I could redesign the system, I would choose between two possible models.

The Regional and Tasmanian solutions

Boat-arrivals would be detained initially, but for a maximum of one month, to allow preliminary health and security checks. That detention would be subject to extension, but only if a court was persuaded that a particular individual should be detained longer.

After that period of initial detention, boat arrivals would be released into the community on an interim visa with a number of conditions that would apply until the person's refugee status was decided:

- they would be required to report regularly to a Centrelink office or a post office, to make sure they remained available for the balance of the process;

- they would be allowed to work;
- they would be entitled to Centrelink and Medicare benefits;
- they would be required to live in a specified rural town or regional city.

A system like this would have a number of benefits. First, it would avoid the harm presently inflicted on refugees held in detention. Prolonged detention with an unknown release date is highly toxic: experience over the past 15 years provides plenty of evidence of this.

Second, any government benefits paid to refugees would be spent on accommodation, food and clothing in country towns. There are plenty of towns in country areas which would welcome an increase in their population and a boost to their local economy. According to the National Farmers' Federation, there are more than 90,000 unfilled jobs in rural areas. It is likely that adult male asylum seekers would look for work, and would find it.

However, even if every boat person stayed on full Centrelink benefits for the whole time it took to decide their refugee status, it would cost the government only about \$500 million a year, all of which would go into the economy of country towns. By contrast, the current system costs between \$4 billion and \$5 billion a year. We would save billions of dollars a year, and we would be doing good rather than harm.

A variant of this would be to require asylum seekers to live in Tasmania instead of regional towns. As a sweetener, and to overcome any lingering resistance, the federal government would pay one billion dollars a year to the Tasmanian government to help with the necessary social adjustments. It would be a great and needed boost for the Tasmanian economy, and Australia would still be billions of dollars better off.

Genuine regional processing

Another possibility is to process protection claims while people are in Indonesia. Those who are assessed as refugees would be resettled, in Australia or elsewhere, in the order in which they have been accepted as refugees. On assessment, people would be told that they will be resettled

safely within (say) two or three months. Provided the process was demonstrably fair, the incentive to get on a boat would disappear instantly.

At present, people assessed by the UNHCR in Indonesia face a wait of 10 or 20 years before they have a prospect of being resettled. During that time, they are not allowed to work, and can't send their kids to school. No wonder they chance their luck by getting on a boat.

Genuine offshore processing, with a guarantee of swift resettlement, was the means by which the Fraser government managed to bring about 80,000 Vietnamese boat people to Australia in the late 1970s. It worked, but it was crucially different from the manner of offshore processing presently supported by both major parties. In addition, other countries also resettled some of the refugees processed in this way. It is likely that Australians would be more receptive to this approach if they thought other countries were contributing to the effort.

A solution along these lines would face some practical problems. At present, the end-point for refugees who reach Australia via Indonesia is a dangerous boat trip. You have to be fairly desperate to risk the voyage, which probably explains why such a high percentage of boat people are ultimately assessed as genuine refugees: over the past 15 years, about 90 per cent of boat people have been assessed, by Australia, as refugees lawfully entitled to our protection. If the end-point is less dangerous, it is obvious that a number of people will set out who are not genuine refugees. That would cause a problem for Indonesia, and Australia would have to help Indonesia deal with that problem. But since our current system is costing about \$5 billion a year, we can probably work out some arrangement with Indonesia which suits them and us.

There is another problem. Because we have been indelicate in our relations with Indonesia in recent years, the Indonesian government may not be receptive to an approach like this. Their reluctance may be softened if Malaysia was also recruited for a similar role.

Both of these solutions have these features in common: they are effective, humane, and less expensive than our present approach. But more than that: they reflect the essential decency of Australians – something which

has been tarnished and degraded by our behaviour over the past 13 years.

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/asylum-seekers-can-be-managed-with-cheaper-and-more-humane-options-20140618-zscza.html>