

ERC Opinion Editorial

Bean-bag bullets or a better way? Australia's asylum policy at a crossroads

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<http://apo.org.au/commentary/bean-bag-bullets-or-better-way-australias-asylum-policy-crossroads>



Phil Glendenning

It was once said that the use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations. The firing of 'bean-bag bullets' at protesting asylum seekers on Christmas Island will have taken many detainees straight back to the battle zones of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, where they have seen the effects of bullets on family members or neighbours. But, the bean-bag guns wound us too – as a nation. All the more so because, in terms of asylum policy, there is a better way.

The causes of the protests on Christmas Island lie within the machinations of our politics. When compassion for vulnerable people is seen as weakness, rather than our greatest civilising strength, then it's not just the Department of Immigration that has a problem. We do - all Australians. The Australian Government recently told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that 'detention in immigration detention centres is only to be used as a last resort and for the shortest practicable time'. That is not what is happening.

The asylum seekers' experience and trauma is something we struggle to understand. For them, war is not just another item from between commercial breaks on the 6pm news. Fortunately, what has happened to them has not happened to most of us. If it had, we would not treat them the way we do. We would not build bigger and more remote detention centres. We would not allow them to be the political football they have become.

At the Edmund Rice Centre we know too well their narratives of war. We hear their accounts, there, back in the war zones, when we travel there to interview Australia's deportees. We see the guns everywhere.

The slow gnawing torture of the detention process, and the frustration that leads to these protests and acts of self-harm, comes on top of their war trauma. Faceless, nameless, numbered people, in remote locations, waiting for months at a time - for some more than a year - to be given some indication of their processing outcome. Mental health experts have repeatedly warned the Federal Government of the profound psychological damage that mandatory detention has on vulnerable people.

Australia's mandatory detention system obviously has serious problems: overcrowding, lengthy delays in processing, and the detainees' resultant frustration and well-documented psychological illness. However, the problems with mandatory detention will never be resolved by building



more detention centres and resorting to ever-increasing punitive methods, including those used at Christmas Island last week.

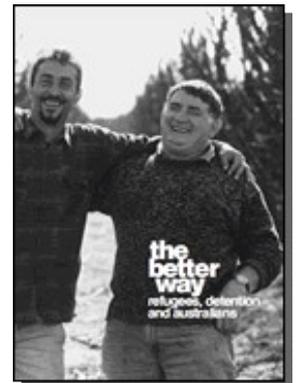
We have got it right before. Malcolm Fraser and Bill Hayden combined to deliver a humane policy of dealing with boat people in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Minister Ian Macphee and Shadow Minister Mick Young actually travelled the country together, speaking at public meetings and visiting churches and community organisations to promote a spirit of welcome to asylum-seeking Indo-Chinese boat-arrivals. It is this sort of leadership which turns its back on the short-term gains of poll-driven myopia and enables our aspirational nation to aspire to the better way.

Macphee and Young showed Australians they had nothing to fear from refugees. There is still nothing to fear. They did not need remote detention centres, tear gas, bean-bag guns, and private security companies. What they had was bi-partisan commitment and a sense of leadership, appealing to the better angels of the Australian people, who responded accordingly.

At some point we have finally got to discover the decency to accept that this way of detaining and punishing people has got to stop. We need to join with those western nations that provide community supervision of asylum seekers. It's time for a system overhaul to bring us into line with these standards.

Such a system has been enunciated for a decade now by many within the immigration and asylum sectors. The 'better way' begins with an early assessment on the grounds of health, security and identity. The vast majority of asylum seekers would thus move quickly to a setting where they can be appropriately supported to have their claim for protection assessed through the status determination process. Overseas experience demonstrates that it is effective.

The policy document *The Better Way* enunciates three accommodation options: community based accommodation for low-security; hostel accommodation for medium security; and full detention only for those assessed as posing a security risk. The document assesses potential cost savings of more than 60 percent per detainee per day.



Many of those seeking asylum on Christmas Island will be found to be refugees. This is what history tells us. One day they will be citizens. History also tells us that within the next decade or so, one of the children from a recent boat arrival will be playing full-forward for Collingwood, another will be starring for the Rabbitohs on the wing, and his sister will be studying medicine at Melbourne Uni. That's what happens in this country. What additional harm must have been done to them by the events of last week?

As long as immigration policy and particularly asylum policy remains within the gloves-off, no-holds-barred domain of 'robust political debate' our nation will be the loser. Clearly, there is a better way.

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