Asylum seekers: breakthrough or debacle?

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‘A race to the bottom’ is how former Liberal Party leader, John Hewson, described asylum seeker policies of both major political parties. He is not alone. Many Australians are dismayed by the refusal to accept refugee claims from people arriving by boat, transferring them instead to remote Manus Island in Papua New Guinea or to Nauru. None of these asylum seekers will be allowed to settle in Australia.

The political debate has been fraught, particularly in a tight parliament with an election imminent. The bipartisan approach of the Fraser years is long past.

The Rudd government is taking an enormous gamble in refusing to accept asylum seekers arriving by boat. If the prospect of spending years languishing on Nauru or Manus Island is a strong enough deterrent, it may end or slow boat arrivals and the loss of life at sea. Some 1,100 people have drowned since 2008 trying to reach Australia.

But the boats may keep coming, and the numbers of asylum seekers may overwhelm the limited capacity of offshore centres. The worst case scenario is for further rioting, self-harm, and suicides, centres in flames, systemic human rights abuse, and disintegration of community life in the islands - truly nightmarish prospects.

Why has Prime Minister Rudd in his policy announcement on 19 July made such a dramatic break with his previous views about welcoming the stranger and refugees?

His change is driven by belief that, in the current political debate, only a tough policy to curtail unauthorised boat arrivals can win the election. Labor leaders are spooked by the sharp increase in numbers of people arriving by boat to nearly 25,000 in 2012-13, and the prospect of their rising much higher. John Menadue commented in New Matilda on 29 July, “Least worst option and minimising PNG”, public opinion would not tolerate such numbers of boat arrivals.

Both Labor and the Coalition have embraced very high-risk strategies to stop the boats reaching Australia, at vast financial cost to Australia. Including naval and air surveillance, the cost of border protection and detention systems is more than $8 billion, greater than the disability insurance scheme and the national broadband network together. And how does one measure the immense personal cost to asylum seekers?
The people smugglers, presumably also linked to criminal networks involved in human trafficking, have made huge profits from these wretched boats, and may well try to flood the camps in Nauru and Manus Island with new arrivals. By 5 August, more than 1,760 asylum seekers had arrived on Christmas Island since the new policies took effect, and the offshore centres on Manus Island and Nauru are far from ready to receive them.

Even if the boat arrivals slow or stop, it is highly unlikely that the camps in Nauru and PNG could provide humane and acceptable conditions. At least 80% of the buildings in the Nauru detention centre were destroyed in a riot on 19 July, involving many of the 545 male detainees, and causing an estimated $60 million worth of damage. Some 152 asylum seekers were arrested, overwhelming Nauru’s miniscule legal and prison systems. The rest of the asylum seekers are reduced to living in tents, with minimal facilities. Fifteen security guards were injured, and the president of Nauru had to call on the island’s male population to help security guards contain the riot and round up the 300 escapees. Nauru is the smallest country in the United Nations, with an area of only 21 square kilometres and a population of 9,400 people. What effect will the drama over asylum seekers have on the people of Nauru?

The Rudd government intends to expand capacity on Nauru to 1500 by the end of 2013, though the Coalition immigration spokesman, Scott Morrison, claimed Nauru could be expanded over time to hold 5,000 asylum seekers.

A “cruel and degrading policy”

Thirty two Salvation Army personnel who had been working on Nauru for ten months issued a statement after the riot, claiming that it was “an inevitable outcome from a cruel and degrading policy”. Unrest on Nauru had grown serious, and the staff had long predicted such a tragedy. “We watched their numerous peaceful protests against the uncertainty of their future. We saw the scars of self-harm and suicide attempts.” The Salvation Army people said that the “mental health impact of detention in this hash physical and policy environment cannot be overstated”, yet their concerns had been “continuously ignored by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).” (See “Nauru staff condemn cruel conditions”, http://newmatilada.com for 24 July).

The situation in Manus Island is similar: remote, isolated, with poor facilities and water shortages, and likely to plunge asylum seekers into deep distress and trauma. Manus Island also has a particularly virulent form of malaria. The Australian government is planning to expand the holding capacity of the centre from its current 300 to 600 people, and later to 3,000, with additional facilities for 200 staff.

Deeply troubling is the secrecy surrounding the offshore detention centres, especially in the light of claims by whistle-blowers of significant human rights abuses and mistreatment. According to ex-G4S manager,
Rod St George, there is an almost complete lack of transparency and little accountability. Media are firmly excluded, and staff are bound under confidentiality agreements.

Even in detention facilities in Australia, there are many hundreds of incidents, from scuffles to serious assaults, from hunger strikes to self-harm and suicides. Facing a hopeless situation in Manus Island or Nauru, asylum seekers will likely experience increased acute depression and mental trauma. The prospects for these refugees are grim, and will likely trash Australia’s international reputation.

Under the Refugee Convention, Australia is not required to settle all refugees in our own country, but ensure that if refugees go to a third country they are treated well, with reasonable security and support. If all nations simply pushed asylum seekers and refugees out to other countries, particularly very poor ones, the whole Refugee Convention would collapse.

Developing alternatives

How do we honour our moral obligations to people in desperate situations in a way that is socially and politically sustainable?

**John Menadue** is undoubtedly correct that only a coordinated effort can succeed, with countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia providing temporary accommodation, and resettlement countries like Australia, Canada, the USA, and New Zealand funding the programs. “Nothing else will work”, says Menadue, one of the architects of the resettlement programs after the Vietnam War.

Menadue added that Orderly Departure Agreements also need to be set up in source countries, as Australia did with Vietnam in 1983, bringing out 100,000 people over some years. This will offer a safer and more humane process for asylum seekers than risking the lives of their families in unseaworthy boats.

Refugee advocate, **Kevin Peoples**, has developed a proposal to help resolve the asylum seeker crisis in his “Boat People and Australia: Towards a Solution” published on the SPC website. In accord with Menadue’s thinking, Peoples proposes setting up regional processing centres in transit countries in Southeast Asia. These centres would be funded by Australia and other developed nations, which would offer resettlement to increased numbers of refugees. He argues that Australia should take most of its refugees from this region.

Also very important are **processes of reconciliation** between opposing groups after civil wars or conflict, as in Sri Lanka, so that people do not feel compelled to flee in fear. Australia needs to increase its support for such efforts, not only to restore infrastructure and livelihoods, but to foster cultural and religious reconciliation. The South African experience of truth-telling and reconciliation provides models that could guide such healing elsewhere.

The scale is huge of people fleeing war, persecution, and natural disasters. By the end of 2012, over 45 million were forcibly displaced people, including 10.5 million refugees under the mandate of the UNHCR. Some 80% of refugees are hosted in developing countries. In cooperation with the UNHCR, Australia settled nearly 109,000 refugees between 2001 and 2009, 13.5% of the world total of such settlements. Since World War II, Australia has settled over 750,000 refugees. This is an honourable record, but clearly new emergencies ask much more of us.

As now a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Australia must play a key role in dealing with refugee issues, to help stem the flow in source countries and aid resettlement where needed. But first we need to put our own house in order. Unless it is a step to a wide regional solution, it is hard to see the Nauru and Manus Island ventures becoming anything but a complete debacle.
Pope Francis on Lampedusa Island

In an immensely symbolic gesture, Pope Francis visited the tiny Sicilian island of Lampedusa to express his solidarity with refugees arriving by boat from North Africa, many of them unaccompanied minors. The Pope celebrated Mass with a chalice crafted from the wood of a rickety boat, and the altar made from a fishing boat.

With a population of only 6,000, Lampedusa has been a gateway to Europe for over 200,000 people since 1999, with about 4,000 arriving in 2013. Many asylum seekers have drowned crossing to Italy, an estimated 20,000 in the last two decades, with about 500 being reported dead or missing in 2012.

Pope Francis praised the people of Lampedusa for helping the boat people. “May your example be a beacon for the world as a whole to have the courage to welcome those who are looking for a better life”.

In his homily on 8 July, he said he wished to challenge consciences and lead to a change of heart towards asylum seekers. “How many of us, myself included, have lost our bearings”. Many asylum seekers “fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God!” He lamented that “we have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters”, resulting in “globalised indifference”. “We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion.”

Church responses

Religious and humanitarian groups have been especially critical of the harsh government policy on asylum seekers. Speaking for the Australian Catholic Bishops, Bishop Gerard Hanna said it was “fundamentally untrue” that people had no right to seek asylum in Australia. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, Australia had a legal and moral duty to give sanctuary to people fleeing persecution. He said it would be tragic “to bypass their legal protections” and send asylum seekers to “indefinite mandatory detention” on remote islands.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea on 21 July protested that PNG does not have the capacity “to welcome a sizeable influx of refugees and provide for their immediate needs.”

Bishop Philip Huggins, chair of the Melbourne Anglican Social Responsibility Committee, urged humane treatment of asylum seekers and an end to punitive measures against them. He welcomed
improved regional co-operation, but was concerned about PNG’s lack of national capacity and expertise to process and resettle refugees.

The Uniting Church was also dismayed at the draconian response to asylum seekers. The President of the Uniting Church Assembly, Rev Prof Andrew Dutney, said denying refugees resettlement in Australia would have a devastating impact on already traumatised people fleeing persecution. The facilities on Manus Island were grossly inadequate, and “ongoing human rights violations and extreme poverty in Papua New Guinea mean it is not a safe option for permanent resettlement of refugees. It is burden-shifting at its most base.”

The lobby group, Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace, rejected the government’s Pacific Solution as a “dangerous” response to the “toxic debate on asylum seekers”. “Dumping thousands of displaced people on Papua New Guinea has all the hallmarks of an election quick fix”, and placed unfair burdens on impoverished Nauru and PNG.

The Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea on 24 July felt “embarrassed and ashamed” of the “dangerous” decision of the PNG Prime Minister to accept refugees, since PNG itself faced huge issues of poverty and unemployment. Some 40% of the population lives on less than $1 a day in 2010, and there is no welfare system. Violence, particularly against women, is commonplace, and health care, education and housing are rudimentary in a basically subsistence economy.

Leader of the Mercy Sisters in Australia and Papua New Guinea, Sister Berneice Loch, wrote: “Our Sisters continue vehemently to condemn such actions which increase the suffering and anguish of asylum seekers and, simultaneously diminish our common humanity.”

Sr Annette Cunlife src, President of Catholic Religious Australia, the peak body for about 8,000 sisters, brothers, and religious order priests, expressed shock at the new policies, and called for long-term solutions that protect asylum seekers and their human rights.

Jesuit Refugee Service condemned “this cruel and inhumane policy” as “punitive, ill-considered and rushed”. It opposes offshore processing, noting that PNG already had 10,000 refugees from West Papua, who were denied the right to freedom of movement, education, housing and employment. Australia hosts only 0.3% of world refugees, and is spending $2.3 billion on offshore processing, while it has ample capacity for processing onshore.