

Response to

Declaration by a Group of Religious Communities on the Deportation of Asylum Seekers

20. 11.02 Steps of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney

We belong to a strong and vibrant nation. We have a proud history of love of freedom and a willingness to stand up for the under dog. We have inherited institutions which safeguard freedom and which recognise and champion the rights of individuals.

I can hardly believe that we are standing here with this Declaration. We are, as it were, begging the executive arm of Government to put into practice the principles which I thought we held as important.

What has happened to us that we have to ask that people be treated in a way which preserves their safety? Why is it that we have to beg for people to be accorded their rights under International law and convention? Why on earth do we have to put a call to Australia in writing that humane solutions be found for the removal of people from our land? Or that we have to suggest that there has not been in some cases fair, accountable and transparent procedures?

How will our grandchildren and their children judge us as they read about us separating children from their parents as a result of deportation? When they study examples of the administering of drugs to get traumatised people onto planes to get rid of them? What will they make of the ineptitude of Government Departments in the early 21st century which give opposite rulings, e.g. in the case of two brothers with similar experiences claiming asylum in Australia. One brother is given refugee status and becomes a citizen. The other brother, with a different case officer, is rejected, still pleading his case after nine years. This is not only bizarre; it is a criminal abuse of power.

The case studies of deportation from Australia which this Declaration seeks to address make chilling reading indeed. Once we rid ourselves of these people's inconvenient presence, some deportees are found to be genuine refugees in other Western countries. Some have been tortured and/or murdered upon their return. Some have disappeared or have gone to prison. Some haven't even had the opportunity to put their case, as is their right, because they have been turned around at airports and sent back to who knows what.

Our Government, in the person of Mr Ruddock, has dismissed this Declaration as a misguided campaign, which will eventually embarrass the Church leaders concerned. The suggestion of monitoring the outcomes of deportation the better to inform Government practice is dismissed out of hand as being impossible. We can pluck members of the foreign leisured classes out of the sea at a cost of millions of dollars, but we can't install any form of monitoring for traumatised deportees.

The truth of the matter is that there is no political will to follow up the unfortunates who are forced to return to the nation which oppressed them. There are no votes among the poor who do not hold Australian citizenship. Votes are to be found in appealing to the most primitive instincts of self-preservation in the ageing Australian population, those of fear and greed.

Character smears against those knocking on our doors for help became a successful Federal election ploy. We all know now that children weren't thrown overboard, but the knowledge has come a little late. The coupling of 'asylum seeker' and 'terrorist' is another deft manoeuvre, successfully employed. This month we have Mr Ruddock smearing the East Timorese. We're told they've been 'outwitting' us all these years, tying up the process with constant litigation. Yesterday Mr Ruddock said they had been 'secreting themselves away in the community for 15 years' and that he certainly wasn't going to reward them for their illegality. A little slur here, a little smear there; it all adds up in the mind of a docile electorate.

The mandatory detention of asylum seekers by a private company with no accountability is a public disgrace. The covert and often cruel removal of people from our country is equally reprehensible. It

seems that human rights apply in Australia only if you're the right sort of human. Preferably white, but rich will do. The colour of your money can override even the colour of your skin here. Anything contributing to the national capital appears to be in the national interest, particularly compound interest.

The asylum seekers question in Australia, and indeed, throughout the world is one of the major religious issues of our time. There are 22 million refugees worldwide and none of us can shirk responsibility for them and their situation. Australia lacks integrity insofar as we deny those who come here an open-handed welcome, properly conducted processes for judging their claims and a willingness to investigate and address the causes of this huge human movement. We have a particular duty to the ones who come here, by whatever means, the ones who present themselves at our door.

The very least we can offer them is outlined in the Declaration. Let them live in the community while their claims are being assessed. Allow them the fundamentals of a civilised society while they are here, particularly full legal rights and access to fair and accountable application procedures.

These people have escaped from societies where the rule of law is weak, badly administered or manipulated by the powerful for their own advantage. The result of this chaos and injustice is war, abuse and all manner of human suffering. Only true justice brings peace. Here in Australia we need to be very careful that the acts of this or that Government do not erode the principles of law upon which our nation was built. Unless the law is applied justly and fairly, peace will begin to disintegrate. It is deeply concerning that laws applying to asylum seekers can be changed with the same ease and speed that our borders were changed 'for migration purposes'. It is deeply concerning that Australia seems willing to thumb its nose at international instruments designed to promote justice, peace and human dignity.

Pontius Pilate could wash his hands till the skin came off. The fact remains, he was the Governor. He was responsible.

Let our Governors cease their side-stepping and face reality with compassion and fairness. And let us not cease to encourage them to do just that.

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20.11.02