

and the current Opposition. At that time, you were out to convince the Australian public that you could be harsher and more ruthless than your opponents. You have succeeded in desensitizing many Australians to the misery, frustration and endless uncertainty these earlier arrivals are being subjected to.

In regard to an offshore ‘solution’, both major political parties are guilty.

If there is one humane goal I would urge your Government to engage in, it would be to proceed with vigour and with speed the processing of asylum seekers who arrived here under previous legislation, that would again allow genuine refugees to be re-settled into Australian society.

Finally, political parties are not things: they are collections of human beings. And so, political parties, like every human being, are capable of good and capable of evil. History is littered with examples. Governments need to

take on board the well-intentioned scrutiny of their actions. Good governments lead the community in fostering goodness, in appealing to the best in people. Bad governments appeal to the less noble elements of people’s characters.

The eyes of the world and in particular the eyes of Asia (I can again speak from considerable experience) are on Australia’s mean handling of the asylum seeker phenomenon.

More and more Australians are coming to the realization that Australia is capable of something much better than our current harsh and inhumane response.

Prior to engaging the media, I would appreciate some response to this letter.

Yours respectfully,
 Father Malcolm P. Fyfe msc
 Vicar General,
 Catholic Diocese of Darwin.

Appalling silence or a voice for the voiceless

EDMOND NIXON CSSR

I SOMETIMES wonder whether a future Australian prime minister will rise in the House of Representatives and make a speech that might begin:

I move that: Today we honour the peoples who were confined to unduly long, oppressive and sometimes cruel detention by successive governments, for their simply daring to seek asylum for themselves and their families— asylum from all manner of discrimination, and from terror, torture, and violence of every stripe.

On behalf of past parliaments, past governments and the Australian citizens of that period I say to those asylum seekers, ‘We are sorry; we are sorry for the way we treated you and for the trauma we inflicted; we are sorry for supplanting your originality, and for extinguishing your hope, most especially the trust of your little ones.



Fr Edmond Nixon cssr is a Redemptorist missionary stationed in North Perth, WA.

It is no secret that recent Australian governments have had their hands full facing an extraordinarily difficult challenge—how to respond to that very small proportion of the world’s 45,000,000 displaced citizens who seek refuge on our shores.

Governments are duty-bound to make a response, but they also have the obligation of

making a just response.

Both sides of politics have failed in that regard, especially when they have kept and continue to keep already traumatised people in unduly long and gratuitous detention which is itself traumatising. Yet not all parliamentarians have been complicit in this failure and a good number have fought the good fight for justice. Their stance did not come easily—many were ignored in their party rooms and often ridiculed in their electorates.

There are many issues that make it difficult for governments to arrive at a balanced and just response. I mention just two: firstly, people smugglers parasitically piggy-backing on the misfortune of the stateless and, secondly, the steady stream of misinformation deliberately broadcast by some sections of the media about who asylum seekers are and what they do.

The first issue causes governments to settle on policies of deterrence, and in some instances this makes sense. But it makes no sense if the deterrent policies are cruel and unjust. The second issue prepares the population to accept the policies of deterrence uncritically. However, to unduly detain asylum seekers in order to deter people smugglers is inherently unethical. The end does not justify the means. A human person may never be used to justify a separate outcome. Extended detention is not altogether unlike persons being used as human shields, just as they were in some of the countries from which asylum seekers fled in the first place.

Asked once what was most important for world peace the Dalai Lama answered: ‘Critical thinking followed by action.’ Jesus would have said ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ Maybe the wisdom of Jesus and the Dalai Lama are opposite sides of the same coin.

Pope Francis often shows how love and critical thinking go together. In his first visit as Pope outside Rome, in July 2013, Francis visited the island of Lampedusa (Italy’s ‘Christmas Island’), and in the face of the asy-

lum seekers struggling ashore he cried out ‘Has the world wept?’

Science can tell us that there are more messages going from the emotions to the brain, than from the brain to the emotions. Perhaps the Pope is onto something. If we are to think critically in a way that leads to action it might be only after we have begun to empathise with and love sisters and brothers fleeing oppression and violence.

In 2014, wouldn’t it be marvellous if the Australia Day fireworks booming out across the night sky were a harbinger for its citizens, including Christians, finding their voice—a voice with which to break through the appalling silence surrounding the plight of asylum seekers, a voice for the voiceless!

‘Detention should be only to establish asylum seekers’ identities and to ensure they are not a threat to Australia’s health or security. These checks should take no longer than three months,’ says Broome’s Bishop Christopher Saunders and a regular visitor to the remote Curtin Immigration Detention Centre near Derby.

Thirty young people, including minors, have been in detention near Port Augusta for around a year. While the nearby Catholic school would accept these children, they are not permitted to attend. Port Pirie’s Bishop Gregory O’Kelly, SJ, said ‘No parent and no politician would want their own children to undergo such a regime for so long.’

I know there is popular rhetoric about turning the boats around. But the important focus for me is not the boats but the fact each boat is full of human beings. This is not a legal matter but a matter of human rights, indeed a matter of morality, says Darwin’s Bishop Hurley. Quoting the words of Patrick McGorry, the eminent psychiatrist and 2010 Australian of the Year who called detention centres ‘factories for producing mental illness’, Bishop Hurley says he prays that we might embrace those who land on our shores in the same way our forebears were welcomed.

The piece first appeared in the North Perth monastery church bulletin for Australia Day and then on the Australian Redemptorists’ website.