

LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER

**Catholic Diocese of Darwin
Office of the Vicar General**

The Honourable Mr Malcolm Turnbull MP
Prime Minister of Australia.

18.01.2016

Dear Prime Minister,

I write in regard to some aspects of the Government's Asylum Seekers' Policy, which you inherited from an earlier time.

I wish to suggest some proposals for a way forward.

I am impressed by the Coalition's decision to accept and permanently resettle an extra 12,000 refugees affected by the conflict in Iraq and Syria and by its decision to provide \$44 million in financial aid for refugee agencies, in the form of food, supplies and cash, as people living in Middle Eastern refugee camps struggle to cope with their almost unbearable circumstances.

At the same time, I am alarmed by the number of men, women and children whose lives have been put indefinitely on hold and who must deal with harsh conditions of detention, both within Australia and particularly offshore. I am concerned that so many human beings are being inhumanely dealt with, grievously punished, particularly in isolated and offshore detention centres, **in order to deter any more asylum seekers from attempting to come by boat to Australia.** This is actually a classic and clear case of immorality: an evil thing is engaged in for the purpose of achieving some good outcome. **But how far can one go inflicting suffering on some people to prevent unrelated others from acting in a certain way?**

Along with other Catholic priests here in

Darwin, I have tried to minister to a number of these people in detention and have heard their stories of frustration and despair.

As Australia Day once more draws near, we pause to commemorate the ongoing formation of our nation and we hark back with approval to the arrival by sea in 1788 of people who up till then were foreign to this land. Australia has been significantly built up as a nation by boat people.

By contrast, people arriving in recent years by boat have been mandatorily detained. Your Government, along with the previous Labour-led Government, has demonized them to the point that many good people in the Australian Community now think of these asylum seekers as 'illegals', having no rights and as justly deserving the inhuman treatment being meted out to them.

In reality, they are our fellow human beings, fleeing hostile and inequitable homelands, hopeful of a chance to live and flourish in a more humane and well-ordered country.

Given the opportunity, they too would contribute to the building up of Australian society.

The fact that the "stop the boats" slogan featured strongly during the 2013 federal election campaign should not now prevent changes being made to elements of the current detention policy. The Coalition's mandate to govern was never based on the outcome of a single-issue election. And promises made in good faith prior to an election must sometimes subsequently yield to the pragmatic requirements of real life and in the present

instance should not be used to justify the ongoing and allegedly irreversible policy of keeping thousands of fellow human beings locked away in our Onshore and Offshore Detention Centres, with no hope of reprieve in sight.

That an overhauling of present arrangements is needed is shown by the fact that currently the time that asylum seekers spend in Australian Detention Centres has blown out to a record high under the present government. Department of Immigration and Border Protection statistics show that as of last month, people in onshore immigration detention had been there for an average 445 days, more than double the 200-day wait four years ago under the Labour government.

Meanwhile, Government Ministers blatantly repudiate and debunk the raft of concerns raised by United Nations personnel, the Human Rights Commission, Church Leaders, Medical and Legal Experts, Children's Welfare Organisations and other highly principled members of the public. Our elected leaders simply take cover behind a Jericho Wall of total secrecy regarding Operation Sovereign Borders, the treatment of persons intercepted at sea and those in immigration detention centres generally.

Tragically, as might have been expected, the incidence of self-harm in detention centres has risen to epidemic levels.

The crippling cost of maintaining these detention facilities is now a very real concern, putting huge pressure on the budget. It is clear that the budget will be a pivotal issue in the upcoming election as voters are faced with a variety of cuts, while this unnecessary outlay goes on unchecked.

Here is the first and preferred proposal I would like to make:-

- Operation Sovereign Borders involved from the start a two-pronged strategy, characterized by (1) a deterrence policy ("*Don't attempt to come here by boat or you*

will face the unbearable treatment we are meting out to our detainees") and (2) by the diligent efficiency of our Australian Defence Forces monitoring and controlling the seas surrounding us.

Has not our experience over the last two and a half years shown that the Australian Defence Forces are quite capable by their own resources of achieving the goal of "stopping the boats" to the point that we no longer need the deterrent factor associated with our costly and inhumane detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island?

Let us henceforth guard our shores by military skill and effective intelligence and discretely dismantle our offshore detention centres, re-assuming responsibility ourselves for on-shore processing as swiftly as possible of those currently detained there.

As regards the detainees, **why not even look at the feasibility of a carefully planned, once and for all amnesty?**

What an innovative and really nimble move that would be! Our international standing would be greatly enhanced by such an act.

If none of the above is considered doable, then I would like to make the following (fallback) proposal:

It was back in August 2012 that the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers delivered its Report. I believe it is time for another "Expert Panel" to be set up on cross-party lines to review the situation and to indicate what changes can now be made to the conclusions and outcomes of the earlier Report.

Australia is capable of something a lot savvier than our current harsh and mean treatment of asylum seekers. The majority of people I encounter are most uncomfortable with this ongoing phenomenon and there is a growing sense that, as Australians, we are better than this.

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

***"It is in pardoning that we are pardoned"* — Prayer of St Francis**

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