

DETENTION CENTRES

BISHOP EUGENE HURLEY

REMEMBER WELL the statement of the ex-Captain of Australia's cricket team, Ian Chappell, after he made a visit to the Baxter detention centre. He was asked by the journalist how he felt after being shown through the Baxter facility. Unhesitatingly he replied that he felt, "..... angry."

When asked why he felt angry, he replied that he always felt angry when he was made to feel ashamed to be an Australian and having seen Baxter, and seen what was happening there, he felt quite ashamed.

I shared Ian Chappell's views as a result of my frequent visits to Baxter and the evidence from the diocesan team who visited much more frequently. It was a relief to see Baxter closed even though the traumas live on in so many peoples' lives.

Now we face another crisis as we see something of a 'race to the bottom' by both the major parties as they not only continue with mandatory detention of men, women and children, but have sloughed off their international responsibilities by sending asylum seekers to other countries for processing.

We now have asylum seekers being sent to Nauru and Manus Island which is generally understood to be a message to deter others from claiming asylum by coming to our shores, especially by boat.

I was distressed to hear on a TV interview recently, Dr. John Valentine of the International Health and Medical Service, saying that having worked in our offshore detention facilities that he too 'felt ashamed to be Australian.'

It seems so odd that we would send people to Nauru and Manus Island, when in fact they have arrived on our shores seeking asylum, as they have a perfect right to do.

I have just spent some time on Christmas Island, where I had unfettered access to the

detention centres there.

Each day, in fact many times each day, I stood and prayed above the cliffs where the Siev-221 boat smashed to pieces on 15 December 2010 killing forty eight people—so many children, women and men.

Not only was that in itself a dreadful event, but it was traumatic for all the local people who stood on the cliff, unable to help in any way, although desperate to help. They simply had to watch as so many other human beings were smashed to death. I met a person whilst on Christmas Island who was there that day. I can only say that this person is still enormously traumatised.

In so many ways, this should have been a game-changer for our community, in much the same way as the Cornelia Rau saga was during the time of the Baxter detention regime. We were appalled that she could be treated that way when we discovered that she was an Australian. However, whilst we assumed that she was an 'illegal' intruder, we felt comfortable with her treatment. Many Australians began to revisit their attitude at that time and concluded that the system was flawed in the way it treated human beings.

Politically astute advisors have been keen to label people who arrive here by boat.

They label these people as illegal, even though they have a perfect right to seek asylum, as queue jumpers even though there are no queues. They are labeled terrorists, despite the logic that would suggest that it would be unthinkable to train someone for years to do a specific job, and then put them on an unseaworthy vessel that may not reach Australia, and if it did, the person would be taken into detention and closely examined. Surely if there were terrorists coming to our country they would come with full documentation, a three piece

suit and travelling first class. ...yet we mindlessly go on repeating this nonsense.

Why do spin doctors persist with this?

Clearly if we can label people in this way, we can generate a community attitude that is hostile. If we label them, then we can demonise them, without ever seeing their faces. I was struck by a statement from a person in response to the recent arrival of the boat in Geraldton. He said, "I have always been against boat people, until I actually saw them."

That's the reason we keep these people in remote areas and in detention.

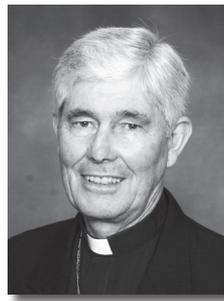
The great danger is that once we label people....any people, as anything other than human beings, we run the risk of treating them unjustly. There are famous historical examples of this.

It seems reasonable that we ought not to judge until we know the story. In my experience, most times when I know the story, then I have nothing to judge, except how to be compassionate.

When we realize that 6000 people have been killed in Syria in March alone and people are fleeing in the thousands, where do we expect them to go? Who do we expect to care for them? If and when they arrive here by boat, why would we be so determined to turn their boats around? What does such an attitude say about us as a community of Australians who live in a country not originally ours?

In our diocese we have two priests who are boat people...I'm so glad we didn't turn their boats around.

Whenever I go to Timor Leste I sense a great affection for Australia and Australians, because of the way we received so many here during the tragedies in their country. Whilst they came without suits and without the necessary documentation, we understood the turmoil and the tragedy that prompted their need to flee and to come here. We received them



Bishop Eugene Hurley is the bishop of Darwin. He writes a welcome message in the quarterly diocesan magazine, Unity. This was his message for the June 2013 issue.

with immense compassion and that is well remembered.

This certainly makes me proud to be an Australian.

I wonder whether those presently coming to Australia to escape torture and persecution, have the same sense of affection for us.

Whilst urging a more compassionate and decent policy, everyone recognizes that we have a duty to manage our borders and manage the cohorts of people who claim asylum. Undoubtedly there are some villains among the thousands of people who are genuine refugees. There should be no compunction in sending them back. However that is not what refugees and asylum seekers need.

The major political parties claim that the present policy is about avoiding the tragedy of deaths at sea. The claim seems to be that if they make coming here by boat so punitive, then it will deter others from coming and so avoid deaths at sea.

Whilst I presume this is a genuine concern, it does not in any way justify the present policy.

When I asked those in detention, including families with little children, why they would undertake such a perilous journey, they shared stories with me that inevitably ended up by explaining that even though they were aware of the real possibility of dying, it was a much better option than staying where they were.

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