

The debacle over the asylum seekers

BY BRUCE DUNCAN*

The political furore about the government's misrepresentation of the asylum-seeker issue for its electoral advantage looks set to continue as the Senate Enquiry examines if the government deliberately lied to the Australian people or was the victim of incompetence.

Either way, the moral authority of the Howard government has been mortally wounded. The credibility of the Prime Minister himself and of senior ministers has been seriously compromised, and public opinion is rightly aggrieved at what it sees as cynical opportunism and the exploitation of the suffering of very vulnerable people.

The scandal touches on all members of parliament. Have there been only a few voices for sanity and compassion within the Liberal Party itself? When does silence amount to collusion? Have any members of the government thought of crossing the floor of parliament on the issue, as Mr Ruddock to his great credit himself once did?

And why has the Opposition, spooked though it was by the opinion polls before the election, taken so long to propose a more humane alternative?

Government policy on asylum seekers will likely unravel as it is subjected to detailed and careful scrutiny. It is long overdue. Public opinion has been too gullible on this issue and should much earlier have been incensed about the denial of adequate information, the prevention of proper media scrutiny about the plight of the asylum seekers, and the muzzling and manipulation of the defence forces and public service.

How do we explain the determined resistance by the government to criticism of its policies and suggestions for change? Though sometimes unreported in the media, many Catholic bishops,

clergy, agencies and other spokespeople, along with many other concerned groups and citizens of course, have argued unsuccessfully for years for a more enlightened approach.

No doubt some will see the Church's role here as an illegitimate interference in politics. But Christians are guided by Christ's parable of the Last Judgment when God insisted that when we saw people hungry, ill, homeless or in prison, that was Him we saw. Who better fits that description than the asylum seekers?

There is no denying that asylum seekers must initially be held for health and scrutiny checks, but there is no need to imprison them, including women and children, sometimes for years. Comparable European countries have a much more humane approach of releasing asylum seekers into the community while their refugee status is determined.

But the Australian government wanted to send a message to deter other asylum seekers, and so made conditions as cruel and harsh as it could get away with. Incarceration is regarded in Australia as one of our severest forms of punishment for criminals, yet this is how we treated those who fled to us for protection, often at risk of their lives.

The deeper question is why so many Australians tolerated this shameful travesty for so long. It is in such flagrant contrast to our long tradition of a fair go for the underdog and to fifty years of successful immigration.

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