

The Australian people trading venture

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His most recent book, "The Quest for Justice" was published in 2010.

Those not enraged by the Gillard government's commitment to the "Malaysian solution" must fail to understand it or be devoid of both common sense and human decency. This bizarre venture into people trading involves taking 800 people who have fled to our shores claiming asylum from repression and swapping them for 4,000 other claimants already found to be refugees. Australia is to treat men, women and children as tradeable commodities or stock. We are to put them into a ship, like slaves consigned for sale, and send them to Malaysia, a country which frequently canes and otherwise mistreats refugees. And, incredibly, the Prime Minister has refused to exclude pregnant women or babies in arms. Is this still Australia? When did we ever treat people like this? What of our obligations under the international covenants concerning refugees and the treatment of children? Can we no longer be trusted to keep our word?

This five for one Malaysian deal is to cost a staggering \$292 million, with more than \$90,000 to be spent disposing of each of those rejected whilst we pay more than \$50,000 for each of the replacements. The government's attempts to justify this Monty Pythonesque scheme have been disingenuous and hypocritical. First, it has pretended that there is a real crisis to be managed. When interviewed by John Laws in October last year our Minister for Immigration made the astonishing claims that Australia takes more refugees per capita than any other country in the world, that we are "third in total" and that, together with the USA and Canada, we take the "vast majority of the world's refugees." This is at best delusional. The UNHCR has recently revealed the countries that received the most refugees in 2010: Pakistan 1.9 million, Iran 1.1 million, Syria 1 million, Germany 594,000, Jordan 451,000 and Kenya 403,000. And Australia? Well, we took 13,779, one for every 138 taken by Pakistan or every 43 taken by Germany.

In the same interview the minister made it clear that it was the genuine refugees who were the real target of the policy; false claimants can simply be sent home. This nautical rendition is also supposed to "send a message" to people smugglers, those miscreants rightly denounced by we God-fearing people traders. Yet civilised countries deter criminals; not innocent people. If this policy is implemented, men, women and children who have done nothing wrong will be forcibly transported and exposed to possible cruelty, purportedly in the hope that those who exploited them may change their ways. This is not 'tough', as the Prime Minister claims; it is unconscionable. More recently, the government has claimed that this will save lives. Really? Do people not drown en route to other countries? And if that is really the justification, should we not start imprisoning mountain climbers, sky divers and anyone else who takes risks? In reality, of course, these are mealy mouthed excuses for a cruel policy intended to exploit ignorance and prejudice. If we did care about the lives of asylum seekers we would spend some of that \$292 million on more effective naval patrols to ensure maritime safety.

Julia Gillard may protest that the Howard government started this shameful cycle of exploitation and that Tony Abbott has maintained it by his irresponsible threat to turn back the boats. That does not make it right. Furthermore, even Howard did not engage in people trading or send children to Malaysia. It is no wonder that senior Labour figures have questioned whether the party has lost its soul. Of course, their counterparts in the Liberal Party may leave such religious questions to Tony Abbott, secure in the knowledge that he is unlikely to mention Christ's words about taking in strangers.