

Opinion

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Manus Island: The government uses the logic of terrorism in its treatment of asylum seekers

Nick Riemer

The public has much to fear from politicians who haven't flinched before the sadism of their refugee policies. We must speak up now

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Seven-hundred men taking part in a week-old hunger strike and protest; unconscious bodies strewn over the ground from lack of stretchers; between 30 and 40 cases of stitched lips; parched asylum seekers desperately grabbing for the water bottles placed tauntingly just beyond their reach. The scale of the humanitarian disaster on Manus Island now defies our basic capacity to imagine it.

In the Howard years, shocking images of refugees stitching their lips in protest at the inhumanity of their treatment triggered widespread horror. Now, more than a decade later, those same images – and others even more terrible – seem to have lost their power to move us. Following both the Sydney siege and the Charlie Hebdo attacks, politicians lined up to mourn the victims of blind fanaticism. Jihadism, Abbott declared after Martin Place, goes “against our common humanity”. All people, he said, “are diminished when something like this takes place”.

How selective we are in the victims that provoke our outrage. Manus, where attacks are not inflicted by extremists on westerners, but by the Australian government on asylum seekers, is not presented as an affront to our collective humanity, but as a necessary response to an existential border threat that undermines the very essence of the “peaceful and generous society” Abbott claims Australia is. Everything in our political imagination leads us to see a yawning gulf between the unbridled zealotry of terrorists and the civilised, democratic rationality of our own elected governments. But how clear would that contrast be to a complete outsider? How might it seem to a Martian observer objectively comparing the behaviour of Australia’s political leaders to that of Man Haron Monis or the Kouachi brothers? Australian politicians do not storm buildings to summarily execute members of the public. But for 15 years now, both sides of politics have harnessed the full coercive power of the state to inflict needless, intense and protracted suffering on vulnerable people who have done nothing more than ask us for our help. The feared PNG mobile

squad, funded by Australia, has been accused of “extreme and excessive force” against Manus asylum seekers; it is only a matter of time before it intervenes in Delta compound - to what effect, we can only speculate.

The crimes committed in our name are nothing short of chilling. Coalition and ALP immigration ministers have imprisoned thousands of people without charge, sometimes indefinitely. They have orchestrated a living hell for detainees, whether onshore or off, that is directly responsible for numerous tragic and unnecessary deaths. Governments’ barbaric “asylum” regime severs people from their loved ones, dashes hope and breaks lives. People have mutilated, starved, poisoned, harmed and killed themselves from desperation. They have swallowed razor blades and set themselves on fire. They have died from medical neglect. Reza Barati was murdered. Throughout, government ministers have remained callously and pathologically indifferent. In relentlessly compounding asylum seekers’ suffering, governments have ignored the advice of the highest medical and legal authorities here and overseas. They and their morally bankrupt lawyers have spared no ingenuity or chicanery to foil attempts made through the courts to discipline their brutality. And they have justified their actions by cynically calling into question the bona fides of refugees fleeing oppression, and by consistently lying to the public that coming to Australia by boat is illegal. These are serious crimes. Terrorists attack selected victims in order to cow an entire population. How, in principle, is this different from Australia’s cold-blooded persecution of boat arrivals? Our vicious campaign of imprisonment and deprivation against asylum seekers exists to deter people fleeing persecution from coming here. The logic is strikingly close to that of Paris or Martin Place: violently attack the few to intimidate the many. Australia faces a choice. Peter Dutton’s comments that refugees had been coached into acts of self harm by refugee advocates, and that he would not change his position on asylum seeker policy, have made it clear that the government is contemplating no let-up in its assault on refugees.

How long will we remain silent? At the end of last year, insistent calls for the release of children from detention had some minimal effect, with Scott Morrison freeing minors detained on Christmas Island. Limiting those calls to the release of children was a mistake, since refugee advocates’ silence about adults tacitly suggested that harming them could be justifiable. Calls for freedom and justice for refugees must now no longer be arbitrarily restricted to children. It’s not just children who don’t deserve the hell of detention: *people* don’t.

Australia’s refugee policy doesn’t just affect refugees. The public has much to fear from politicians who are ready to countenance the barbarism to other human beings we have been witnessing. Steeled by his period as immigration minister, Morrison is now in charge of social services. It’s hard to believe that the indifference to suffering honed in immigration will somehow be magically suspended as he oversees the government’s obligations to needy people in the community at large. Do Australians really want to be governed by politicians who have not flinched before the sadism of their refugee policies? What possible prospect can there be of a just society for all of us when its most desperate members - asylum seekers - are made the objects of the systematic state violence whose effects we are seeing on Manus? It’s not just for refugees’ sake that we must cauterise this wound on our society. We must do so for our own sake too, so that the violence with which refugees are met does not set the tone for the way that governments treat everyone.

Nick Riemer is a member of the Refugee Action Coalition Sydney, which is in close contact with asylum seekers on Manus Island.

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