

Sorry, Mr Abbott, there is no war

The Age, January 11 2014

Time and again, new governments begin their work under the mistaken belief that they have been given unlimited authority to enact what they want and how they want, irrespective of public criticism. They talk of "mandates" and the majority view of "right-thinking" people. They will duly say how determined they are to implement the policies they promised, then fob off questions by saying they need to get on with the job. The best governments, however, conduct their work openly so that success can be measured with confidence. They do not try to avoid public scrutiny by closing down the flow of information, thus denying the people they represent the ability to know what is being done in their name.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott believes he can hear the drums beating. Yesterday he commandeered the analogy of a nation at war to excuse his decision to shut down information about his government's treatment of asylum seekers. Mr Abbott says he has no problem with being a "closed book" about border control because, as he sees it, "we are in a fierce contest with these people smugglers, and if we were at war we wouldn't be giving out information that is of use to the enemy just because we might have an idle curiosity about it ourselves". Worse, he dismisses concerns about undue secrecy by saying "I will be accountable to the Australian people at the next election".

Mr Abbott fundamentally does not understand that his government, like every democratically elected government, is and remains accountable at every point between elections. Even in times of war. Voters do not grant power only to surrender accountability.

Indeed, it seems we need to remind Mr Abbott that Australia is not, in fact, at war. Cloaking the whole asylum-seeker issue in the guise of a heavy-duty militaristic operation - dubbing it Operation Sovereign Borders and putting a general in charge - might suggest a nation under attack, but that is a perversion of the reality, and does not provide a licence to shut down information. That is not the conduct of a government in a modern and free democracy. It is something altogether more sinister, and it is when people are kept in the dark that abuses of power go unchecked.

This week, we learnt the Royal Australian Navy towed two boats to an Indonesian island, and the Abbott government is buying engine-powered lifeboats as part of a plan to shift asylum seekers from their derelict fishing vessels to one of these and then send them back to Indonesia. We have also learnt that Nauru, where Australia is being levied \$1000 a month for each of the asylum seekers housed in detention facilities on top of the actual operational costs, will charge Australian journalists \$8000 per visa, a move we believe is a deliberate and co-ordinated attempt to impede media scrutiny.

The Abbott government is not even ashamed of these tactics. Indeed, it takes pride in secrecy and obfuscation, saying it is necessary to block the activities of people smugglers. It is a specious excuse. Governments that lack transparency eventually lose the trust of their people; information will out, as we have seen on the tow-backs courtesy of Indonesia's media. The government will continue to be hounded by this issue, no matter how cavalier it may be.

While many Australians apparently support punishing people who arrive here seeking asylum, The Age does not. This is not how great and strong nations are built. Asylum seekers do not cross borders "illegally", as Mr Abbott would have you believe. They come without authorisation, but with the cover of international conventions that entitle them to seek asylum if they fear being persecuted - conventions that Australia helped formulate, and signed.

Tory Shepherd: We're too complacent about how we are being treated over asylum seekers

- by: *Tory Shepherd*
- From: *The Advertiser*
- January 12, 2014 7:02PM

MANKIND has been reduced to pockets of shivering wrecks and packs of marauding bandits. It's *The Walking Dead*, and the zombies are winning.

In the surreal serenity of a big white farmhouse, a ragtag mob of survivors gather to decide what to do with a kid who poses a threat. He's been separated from a larger mob looking for stuff to raid, and if he ever escapes, he could lead that mob back to this oasis.

The leaders have decided he must therefore be killed. They're pondering a noose, or a bullet.

One man, Dale, a bushy-eyebrowed older man, is reduced to tears as he asks what has happened to their humanity, that they would execute a young man, a boy, for a crime he has not yet committed.

Most of the group stay silent. They want others to just deal with the situation. They want to close their eyes and hope when they open them, the problem has gone away.

Which is how, it appears, much of Australia feels about the asylum seeker situation. They just want someone else to sort it out, and they don't want to face up to the broader issues it presents. A poll out last week found six in 10 people think most boat arrivals are not genuine refugees (they're wrong), and the same amount want asylum seekers treated more harshly.

They don't care who gets hurt, they just want someone else to sort it out.

Warning: At this point I have no idea how I'm going to tie the *Walking Dead* episode's gore-splattered end back in to this column.

What I am sure about is that we are being far too complacent about the asylum seeker situation - not the wrongs and rights of our hard line offshore processing policy, that's another issue - but the way the Government is treating us like mushrooms. And not in a fun guy kind of way.

The Government is counting on the fact we will be like the people in the *Walking Dead* who just want someone to take care of the situation, to get their hands dirty, and to let them stand by, eyes averted.

Even using the old mushroom analogy is flawed, because mushrooms may be kept in the dark and fed composted manure, but they're not treated with the contempt that the Government is showing you, fellow Australian.

If it wasn't gauche hyperbole to compare leaders, I'd say Scott Morrison is doing a fair Kim Jong Un on this issue, with Prime Minister Tony Abbott crooning his approval a la Dennis Rodman.

Mr Abbott does few press conferences, preferring friendly interviews.

The Coalition is walking further and further down the path of political censorship. Often censorship is hiding something fun, but in this case it's hiding something tragic. Something they don't want in the papers.

They want to hide just how bad things are getting for some humans.

Let's go back to a previous episode.

In 2010 the Coalition introduced the Just How Many Asylum Seekers Are There? billboard. It was a big sign that kept a live tally of boat arrivals under the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd Government. They were advertising the numbers to draw attention to how Labor's policy was failing.

Once they were in power, they pulled a swiftie switcheroo, and declared they would not (never!) run a shipping news service, telegraphing the situation to people smugglers who might use it as a marketing tool.

It was good to advertise the numbers in Opposition. Bad in Government. You following?

Things have only got worse since then. There was a weekly press conference, at first. A chance for journalists to ask questions - even if the answers weren't much chop. Now there's a weekly press release. It's threadbare, a few numbers, a quick crowing about the reducing number of boats.

It's chockers with phrases such as: "The Government's policy of no public comment on operational matters is based on the advice of (the) border protection agency and operational leaders to protect the security of our operations and to ensure that they can be conducted with maximum safety and effectiveness for all involved."

In the recent weeks there may not have been many boats, but there has been plenty going on.

Boats have reportedly been towed or forced back to Indonesian waters, which has caused a diplomatic fracas with Jakarta. Mr Morrison has refused to confirm or deny if Australia has also bought lifeboats to send asylum seekers back to Indonesia.

The cost of covering what happens on Nauru - where hundreds of asylum seekers are kept in detention - just got wildly expensive as well. They are bumping the media visa price from \$200 to \$8000. As far as we know that has nothing to do with the Government, but it will nevertheless help their secretive causes.

Mr Abbott says he will stop the boats at all costs. It's a "non-negotiable". They'll do whatever it takes.

Apparently that includes trashing human rights, sullyng our relationship with Indonesia, and edging closer to being the sort of secretive, harsh, harsh country that people get on boats to escape.

So, back to Dale, the voice of human sympathy. He ends up having his guts ripped out by a teeth-gnashing zombie. That zombie was wandering around the farm because a dumb little kid didn't tell his family that he'd seen him earlier that day.

Dale died because of that secret.

What, you wanted a better lesson from a trashy TV show about animated corpses?

Asylum seekers and the language of war

By [Mungo MacCallum](#)

Posted Mon 13 Jan 2014, 12:37pm AEDT

The cloak of a military campaign has been adopted to inflate the importance of the asylum seeker issue and to justify the Abbott Government's cult of secrecy, writes Mungo MacCallum.

Operation Sovereign Borders is in real danger of spinning out of control.

Not only are Generalissimo Tony Abbott and his First Sea Lord Scott Morrison now firmly ensconced in Fantasy Land (the happiest kingdom of them all), but their fantasies are becoming a serious risk to Australia's reputation and even its wellbeing.

It is no longer just a matter of boys playing battleships in the bathtub, as Senator Sarah Hanson-Young indulgently describes it; a series of statements from various participants last week make it clear that reality is starting to overtake the rhetoric.

Abbott opened the bidding by justifying his paranoid secrecy over the whole issue with the remark: "If we were at war, we would not be giving out information that is of use to the enemy." We were engaged in a "fierce contest" with the people smugglers; we had to stop the boats because it was a matter of our national sovereignty. In other words, we actually were at war.

Now hang on a moment. A war is an armed conflict between nation states about the conquest of territory or at least a dominant economic advantage. A few score people smugglers pose no conceivable threat to Australia and Abbott knows it. When he talks of "national sovereignty", all he really means is his own pride; he has puffed up the concept to try and lock the rest of us behind his political posturing. To compare the current situation with war is to insult and belittle those who fight and suffer in real wars, the very soldiers Abbott affects to idolise at every photo opportunity he can arrange.

The cloak of a military campaign against the hapless asylum seekers has been adopted as political camouflage, partly to inflate the importance of what is, by any normal measure, no more than an irritant, and partly to justify the cult of secrecy ("we do not comment on operational matters") that Abbott and Morrison have invoked to cover their own mismanagement. And it appears that there is a fair amount to cover.

Despite Abbott having fervently and repeatedly denied after the election that he had a policy to "tow back" boats to Indonesia, [it now appears that in two cases that is precisely what has happened](#); and in two others, perhaps three, boats were "pushed" back before being effectively abandoned in Indonesian waters. In international law, this is a distinction without a difference - both procedures are illegal.

Abbott's policy, that boats would be "turned back when it is safe to do so", was always dubious, and depended on Indonesian co-operation. This was never going to be forthcoming and again last week both the foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, and the office of president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono reiterated that the policy was unacceptable. Any hope that it might be tacitly approved, as suggested by reports that the Indonesian military chief General Moeldoko had given a nod and a wink to his Australian counterpart General David Hurley, were firmly repudiated.

And now the United Nations High Commission on Refugees is demanding an explanation of the incidents from Canberra, and also of reports that Australia had bought large lifeboats from Singapore, which will be used to facilitate further turn-arounds from unseaworthy Indonesian vessels. This totally unprecedented idea has been widely ridiculed in the Australian media, but it is another indication of Abbott's obsessive single-mindedness: stop the boats at any cost, and we do mean any.

But the stakes are getting higher. The head of the Indonesian parliament's foreign affairs committee, Mahfudz Siddiq, has said that the lifeboat ploy means that the Australian government plans to become a people smuggler itself, despatching boat loads of unauthorised immigrants into another country's territorial waters. And, as the Australian Navy has been used to repel boats from Indonesia, so the Indonesian navy may have to repel the boats from Australia. The situation could escalate quickly and very dangerously. Suddenly Kevin Rudd's pre-election warnings of a possible military confrontation between the two countries look a lot less fanciful.

The air needs to be cleared, urgently, and a full and frank public statement by Abbott would appear to be the only way to do it. Both the Indonesian government and people and the Australian people need to be told just what the policy is, what if any are its limits, and how it works on a day-by-day basis. As it is, trust and support are being dissipated in a cloud of rumour and scuttlebutt. And, as Bill Shorten and numerous others have pointed out, it is ludicrous that Australians are getting more information from the Jakarta Post than from their own government. Even if this was a real war, the situation would be unacceptable.

In the eyes of the rest of the world, Australia's hardline approach looks selfish and primitive - even barbaric. In Australia, a total of 7,983 boat people arrived in 2011-2012 - the time the great panic over unauthorised arrivals set in. In Italy, 30,100 migrants arrived by boat from North Africa between January 1 and September 30 last year. Yet the Italian government handled the situation calmly and humanely - there was never any talk of using military operations to turn boats back, or of offshore prison camps, or of temporary protection visas or any of the paraphernalia of cruelty successive Australian governments have employed as a deterrent. Instead, the asylum seekers were recognised by everyone from the Pope down as neighbours in need - not always refugees in the full and technical sense, but the wretched of the earth, to be treated with compassion and understanding.

But far from following this pontifical lead, Abbott and Morrison have consistently taken the low road of persecution, secrecy and shame. And, like their operational matters, they have ended up lost and confused - and all at sea.

Mungo MacCallum is a political journalist and commentator. View his full profile [here](#).

Tony Abbott compares secrecy over asylum seekers to wartime policy

'If we were at war we would not give out information that is of use to the enemy just because we might have an idle curiosity.'

By Helen Davidson theguardian.com, Friday 10 January 2014 11.32 AEST

The prime minister Tony Abbott has brushed off questions about government secrecy over the Coalition's approach to border protection, saying that if Australia was at war he would not give out information that was useful to the enemy "just because people have an idle curiosity".

Abbott also said people held in immigration detention were doing "something they must have known was wrong" when they sought asylum by boat, adding that the government didn't apologise for the fact that detention centres were "not five star or even three star hotels".

Appearing on the Ten network's Wake Up program on Friday morning, the prime minister was asked by hosts James Mathison and Natarsha Belling about the [lack of transparency](#) resulting from the refusal of his office and that of immigration minister Scott Morrison to answer questions about asylum seeker policies, and whether the public had a right to know what was being carried out by the government.

"The public want the boats stopped and that's really what they want – that's really my determination," said Abbott.

"If stopping the boats means being criticised because I'm not giving information that would be of use to people smugglers, so be it. We are in a fierce contest with these people smugglers. If we were at war we would not be giving out information that is of use to the enemy just because we might have an idle curiosity about it ourselves."

On Thursday Abbott [defended the government's secrecy](#) regarding asylum seekers and refused to comment on reports that Australian authorities had towed boats back to Indonesia.

Abbott was also questioned by the breakfast TV hosts about whether he was happy with the [conditions inside detention centres](#).

"I am confident that we are running these centres competently and humanely," replied Abbott.

"Just on that though, we talked about transparency. We have to take you at your word on that," said Mathison.

"Reporters aren't allowed to get in there, journalists aren't able to get in there. So we don't really have any confirmation that the conditions in these centres are up to the standards that are acceptable to the Australian public. Do you understand that allowing people in there to have a look so that we know these conditions are up to standard would put people at ease?"

Abbott replied: "Let's remember that everyone in these centres is there because he or she has come illegally to Australia by boat. They have done something that they must have known was wrong. We don't apologise for the fact that they are not five star or even three star hotels.

"Nevertheless, we are confident that we are well and truly discharging our humanitarian obligations. People are housed, they're clothed, they're fed, they're given medical attention, they're kept as safe

as we can make it for them, but we want them to go back to the country from which they came. That's what we want."

When asked if he also meant people who may be legitimate refugees, Abbott said, "the vast majority of these people, as the former foreign minister Bob Carr said, are economic migrants."

He said he could accept "the yearning for a better life that beats in the heart of every human being", but said he has a responsibility to Australians to keep the country secure and its borders safe.

Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young [said on Twitter](#) shortly after the interview that Abbott's comments were "fear mongering".

On Tuesday a [Guardian Australia investigation](#) revealed the scale of the violence and chaos inside Papua New Guinea's Manus Island detention centre, and that between March and June 2013 there was an average of two significant incidents every three days.

A [UNHCR report](#) from October 2013 found conditions inside the Manus Island centre did not provide "safe and humane conditions of treatment".

It was reported on Friday morning that Morrison's [Operation Sovereign Borders](#) press conference, currently on hold, would not go ahead and that another written update would be give