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On Tuesday this week a small boat sank off the coast of Java. Eight people drowned, 15 are missing. They were probably asylum seekers trying to get to Australia. They may have perished because of the carelessness – or perhaps the inexperience – of a people smuggler. It was a tragedy which will be fastened on by politicians as a justification for measures designed to deter would-be asylum seekers from trying to get to Australia.

It is easy to attack people smugglers. They are not a group who attract much sympathy. It sounds a worthy idea to deter people from risking their lives on a dangerous voyage. Hence the new mantra: 'smash the people smugglers' business model'. But it is not that simple.

Most Australians have trouble understanding what it means to put your life in the hands of a people smuggler, or why anyone would do it. Try to imagine that you are a refugee: you are part of an ethnic minority in Afghanistan. Your people are the target of ethnic cleansing. You have friends and family members who have been killed by Taliban snipers and suicide bombers. You know children who were blown to bits when the Taliban used them as mine-sweepers. You know of the teenager who was forced back to Afghanistan from Nauru in 2002 and who was hunted down by the Taliban: when they found him in his village, they dragged him out of his house and threw him down the village well, and a hand grenade was dropped in after him.

You have borrowed enough money to get to Australia: it is cheaper than getting to Europe or America. With your family you make your way to Indonesia, passing through Muslim countries which allow free passage to Muslims, but they do not offer protection because they have not signed the Refugees' Convention.

In Indonesia you can go to the UNHCR and get a card which vouches that you are a refugee, but it doesn't mean much because the Indonesian government will jail you if they find you, and you aren't allowed to work, and you can't send your kids to school. You will wait in the shadows until some country offers to resettle you. It could take 10 or 20 years.

There is one line of escape: you can pay a people smuggler who will take you to Australia by boat. It is dangerous, but it is a chance for freedom and safety, for you and for your kids.

Imagine yourself there. What would you do?

What would most Australians do? What would our political leaders do, if they were in that position?

I know I would take the risk, and I suspect most Australians would do the same. You know that if your luck runs out you could die trying to reach safety. But if the Taliban get you, you are just as dead as if you drown.

Most Australians don't have to make these agonising choices but if we did, we would not be grateful to a government for cutting off our last line of escape. But that is exactly what Australian politicians want to do. By 'smashing the people smugglers' business model', we cut off the last line of escape for people who are desperate enough and brave enough to take a risk, just like we would if we were in their shoes.

Not much of the political rhetoric about refugees can be taken at face value: it is all about keeping refugees out. Tough treatment and indefinite detention to 'send a message' means mistreating innocent people so that no-one else will dare come asking for our help. 'Illegals' is a lie, because they do not break any law by coming to Australia without papers and asking for protection. 'Offshore processing' means sending them away and closing the door behind them

If Australian politicians were genuinely concerned about decency and the Australian ideal of a fair go, they might look at the terms they negotiated with Malaysia. It is an interesting fact that the deal required Malaysia to hold people transferred there only briefly, for initial health and security checks, then they were to be released into the community with work rights. Why can't we do that here? If we did, overcrowding in detention centres would be resolved overnight; the catastrophic mental health damage caused by indefinite detention would end; and instead of spending a billion dollars a year harming innocent people, the detention bill would fall by about 90%. And Australia's reputation would be restored.

But political parties no longer set policies by reference to founding principles, or even basic standards of decency and ethics. Newspolls and focus groups in key marginal electorates are where policies are set. A man wrote to me recently, criticising my views on this subject. He declared himself to be 'a proud racist and discriminator'. He said that he would sink the boats and let the people drown, because they are 'illegal'. These views exist for any politician willing to harness them for electoral advantage.

Both major parties are willing, it seems, to scratch up a few extra votes from people like this, by creating fear based on falsehood. The refugee policies of both major parties are a miserable appeal to the worst of our instincts instead of calling on our highest aspirations. They bring out something shameful, something that is false to our character. We deserve better.