

Asylum seekers just like us: trying to live

In the same circumstances we would do the same, writes **Julian Burnside**.

ON Tuesday 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 that 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”. 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 that 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



DESPERATE: Preventing asylum seekers from taking the risk of boarding boats is a complex issue.

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 to take you to Australia by boat. It is dangerous, but 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. 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. 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; 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 per cent. 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 to scratch up a few extra votes from people like this, by creating fear based on falsehood. The refugee policies of both parties are a miserable appeal to the worst of our instincts instead of calling on our highest aspirations. They bring out something shameful, something false to our character. We deserve better.

Julian Burnside, QC, delivered the human rights and social justice lecture at the University of Newcastle yesterday.

Young researchers depend on community

Their work makes the city a force in world health, writes **Maree Gleeson**.

THANK you is a very small word, but when expressed with sincerity it carries great weight.

Last night, in an awards ceremony held at Newcastle City Hall, the Hunter Medical Research Institute had the chance to say a very sincere thank you to our community and the 930 researchers who provide the backbone for our organisation.

Over the past 13 years HMRI has built strong partnerships with donors and supporters, and strong relationships with our politicians and community leaders.

This has contributed to the global research efforts in stroke, cancer, obesity, infertility, premature birth, asthma, mental health and more. It

has changed the way health care is delivered locally and globally. It has contributed to government policies, such as ageing populations and obesity, and public health interventions in smoking, alcohol and drug strategies.

It has contributed to the global surveillance of diseases such as swine flu and influenza and helped keep our country safe.

Thanks to the support of our community and the efforts of the HMRI Foundation, a record number of grants and awards were handed out last night. Five years ago we distributed \$340,000 on the awards night and \$875,000 in total grants for the year. Last night, alone, we announced almost \$870,000 in funding, to bring the yearly total to over \$2.3 million.

The quality of the research applications for this year’s awards was outstanding. The HMRI Award

for Research Excellence went to Professor Amanda Baker, the first woman to receive this award.

As a clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Newcastle, Professor Baker’s innovative work focuses on developing and disseminating psychological interventions for co-existing mental health and alcohol and other drug problems.

Her pioneering smoking cessation research with people with psychosis has received wide recognition. She also led the largest randomised controlled trials of treatments for substance use in major depression.

This year we had nine applications for the PULSE Early Career Researcher Award, and all nine applicants were worthy contenders.

It was ultimately won by Dr Mark Baker, whose research focuses on investigating the basis for male

infertility, which affects about one in 20 Australian men. Dr Baker is a future leader in Australian medical research.

This year our researchers have been the recipients of many national and international research awards – too many to mention.

Noteworthy were Dr Nikola Bowden, who received the University of Newcastle’s Young Alumni of the Year award, Professor Phil Morgan, who won the Leadership Award, and Professor Chris Levi, who was a finalist in the prestigious Eureka Award for Medical Research.

The future of HMRI is in good hands as these younger researchers move into leadership roles.

Professor Maree Gleeson is the director of the Hunter Medical Research Institute.



Time for action

Save Our Figs won a court injunction yesterday to temporarily halt the removal of the Laman Street figs, news met with frustration by most of our online commenters.

Democracy really?? SOF or rather SOC (Stall Our City) had a democratic decision handed down. They didn’t like that so they rioted. Then they signed an agreement and when that didn’t go their way they rioted again. All the while the city bleeds to death around them. \$1 million and counting for nothing and they haven’t disproved the council’s evidence yet. All of this for 14 trees that will be replaced – what a joke.

Really
I could not be more happy than to hear the news that SOF have won an injunction! Hopefully this will ensure that the figs are protected and will remain in place for future generations to enjoy!

Hannah
Sooo, at the next council election, remember this, and vote for someone else. This is absolutely ridiculous, a complete waste of our money!

george
Considering that despite the recent high wind and storm activity none of the trees in Laman St have fallen or dropped limbs can we, the Citizens of Newcastle please have our street back now?

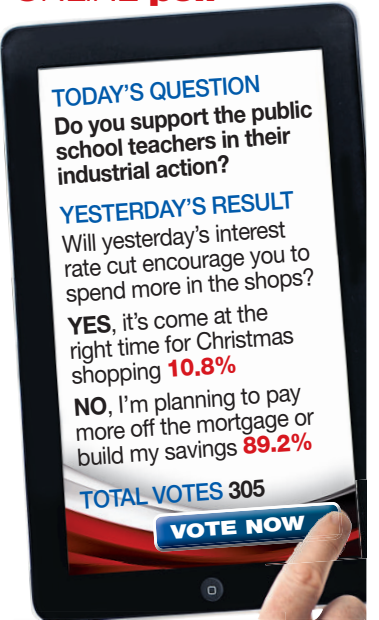
Skeptic
Why is this city being held ransom to save our figs?? Their numbers are not that great and more novocastrians want this resolved now! The decision was made, if SOF get in the way lock them up

why
What a waste of ratepayers’ money. Please send SOF the complete bill for the \$1 million they have wasted. The trees are old, they will kill someone one day. Please common sense prevail. Laman Street requires renewal. SOF only care about themselves.

Figpudding
Yeeeeee haaaaa! You go you good things (SOF)! Thanks for standing up and protesting for those of us who can’t be there in person . . . we are with you in spirit though.

Freddie’s cat

ONLINE poll



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