

Australia's treatment of refugees has been motivated by political expediency

Age Editorial

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The grotesque folly of shipping asylum seekers to gated camps in poor nations, and forcibly returning others to countries that breach human rights or do not respect international conventions on refugees, has poisoned our regional relations and embarrassed Australia internationally. It is founded on a woeful lack of integrity and heightened political expediency.

Take, for instance, the muddle-headed plan to send refugees to Cambodia. Since June, only four refugees have taken up the offer to be transferred out of detention facilities to live at Australia's expense in a villa in Phnom Penh. A senior Cambodian official has said his government doesn't have any plans to take more refugees.

Immigration minister Peter Dutton says he expects the Cambodian government will uphold the agreement and he hopes many more refugees will go. But paying Cambodia \$50 million of taxpayers' money to house a handful of refugees has been both foolishly extravagant and reckless.

On foreign policy grounds, on regional policy grounds and for failing to observe basic human rights, the government's treatment of asylum seekers is a stunning failure. It is devoid of decency. It denies people their dignity. It strips them of opportunity and hope and it leaves them at the mercy of poorly trained and inadequately supervised service providers. And it abrogates the essential and abiding duty to care for people who come here.

Take the latest report, published on Monday, of the Senate committee examining allegations about conditions at the Nauru detention centre, a series of findings that, of course, are vigorously disputed by Coalition committee members. The committee heard allegations of terrible abuse by staff at the Nauru facility, including dozens involving child abuse, rape or sexual assaults, physical assaults and demeaning abuse of asylum seekers, as well as allegations that staff solicited detainees for sex by offering to provide banned items. The evidence points to a lack of accountability, a lack of transparency and a lack of knowledge or proper oversight on the part of the government, and this underscores a lack of control over what is going on. Every person, no matter where they are from or why they are in immigration detention, has the right to be treated with care and respect. No amount of political sophistry, legal finagling, foreign-aid buyouts or diplomatic inveigling can absolve any government of its responsibilities.

Evidence of cruel and misguided policies, of mismanagement and abuse, is before us. The government has been called out repeatedly by the Human Rights Commission; by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Amnesty International and other independent organisations. Yet it pretends it has no responsibility for what occurs in offshore detention centres. It says the responsibility lies with Nauru or Papua New Guinea. About 40 per cent of the 2000 or so people in immigration detention on the mainland have been held for more than a year. A further 1579 are in offshore centres. One-in-five of all detainees has been in detention for at least the entire period of the Abbott government.

This government has covertly paid people smugglers to take asylum seekers back to Indonesia. It has detained people at sea, then shipped them back to the lands they fled after conducting only cursory checks on requests for asylum.

It cloaks its actions in secrecy. It says it is saving lives by deterring people from coming. But beyond our shores, and fully within the government's line of control, asylum seekers – children, men and women – languish out of sight and, potentially, out of mind of many Australians. This must change. We can and must do so much better than this.