

Popular sense trumps policy and media elite

GREG SHERIDAN THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 05, 2013 12:00AM



Boatpeople arrive at Christmas Island this week; the people-smuggling trade now carries more illegal immigrants than genuine refugees. Source: Supplied

NO issue did more to kill Labor in office than boatpeople. Not even the carbon tax was as powerful. But there is an even bigger reality.

For more than 10 years, there has been no issue, not even climate change, in which the policy and media elite have been so

divorced from general public opinion, and indeed divorced from reality itself, as on boats.

Most of the media and the policy elite have completely misread the reality on the ground and the way the Australian people see this issue. Julian Burnside, David Manne, David Marr, Malcolm Fraser and virtually the whole of the ABC current affairs television and radio programming have put the view that this is a simple question of human decency.


This rests on a series of factual and moral errors - that all boatpeople are refugees, that their numbers are trivial, that opposition to illegal immigration to Australia by boat is a sign of racism, or at least extreme callousness, and has no serious policy foundations.

Since John Howard turned back the Tampa in 2001 and made sure the asylum-seekers on board did not come to Australia, the media and policy elite, and fitfully the Labor Party, have been disgusted not only with Howard's policies, but with the Australian people who overwhelmingly supported them.

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[facebook](#) [twitter](#) [linkedin](#) [google](#) [reddit](#) [email](#) people were right, the elites were wrong - though mostly the key media figures have refused to acknowledge reality.

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 week in Jakarta, Prime Minister Tony Abbott made significant progress on the issue with Indonesia. He got Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to commit to joint action and enhanced co-operation to combat people-smuggling.

[email](#) Yudhoyono said his nation, too, was a "victim" of people-smuggling.

Abbott's officials are already in Jakarta following up. The most important change in the past few weeks has been the numbers of boatpeople rescued by Australia, presumably in Indonesia's search-and-rescue zone, who have been transferred back to Indonesian custody, presumably at sea, and landed back in Indonesia.

This is normal maritime practice - people rescued at sea are returned to their nearest safe port. But under Labor the Australian navy was rescuing people virtually just off the Indonesian coast and then being forced to bring them to Australia.

The last significant effort Labor made to buck this absurd practice involved the Oceanic Viking in 2009, when Kevin Rudd was prime minister the first time. But when the Sri Lankans on the vessel declined to get off at an Indonesian port, they were induced to do so by a promise that they would quickly be resettled in Australia.

After that, Indonesia rarely allowed Australia to disembark people rescued at sea, no matter how close to Indonesia this rescue occurred, on Indonesian soil. This was a critical test of wills, which Labor failed.

A similar failure of government will occurred when asylum-seekers in detention centres in Australia rioted and burned down buildings. The Labor government talked of dire penalties, but in fact the net result of the rioting was that the period in detention was shortened and almost no one suffered any penalty.

At every point when the people-smuggling industry tested the will of the Rudd and Gillard governments, it was the government that

buckled. This was partly because the leading media, especially the ABC, always presented the asylum-seekers entirely in one dimension, only as a story about innocent victims.

If Abbott can get the new practice of people rescued in Indonesian waters being disembarked in Indonesia established as routine, it will go a great distance towards giving life to his turn-back-the-boats policy and will be a huge disincentive to the people-smuggling trade.

Abbott not only maintained his message discipline in Jakarta. He showed a deftness of touch, a warmth of personality and an ability to engage Indonesia's leadership, which is completely contrary to the image of him cherished not only by the Labor Party but by much of the media as well.

Abbott wrote the speeches he delivered in Jakarta himself. It was very much a personal decision for him to apologise to the Indonesians for the actions of the previous government to suddenly suspend live cattle exports and to effectively restart the people-smuggling trade by abolishing Howard's Pacific Solution.

Apologising for your predecessors is normally a Labor art, arising from the black-arch view of history. In this case it allowed Abbott to look to the Indonesians humble, considerate and reflective. It worked a treat.

Of course, it is now a question of how effectively the Indonesians and the Australians can co-operate on this issue. This is a central test of Abbott's prime ministership. He and Scott Morrison are right to restrict the operational information they allow out to the media. There is no other effective way to operate with Indonesia.

There is no moral equivalence between people-smuggling and terrorism, but the political dynamics have a certain similarity. The people-smugglers work in part through dramatic media events, framing narratives of despair, often fraudulent, to invoke compassion. In this emotional manipulation of public opinion they have a raft of enthusiastic, indeed loving, advocates in the Australian media and policy establishment.

The change of government has not altered this. The media and academic commentators are apparently impervious to facts. To take almost random examples, last Thursday on ABC Local radio's The Conversation Hour in Victoria, three guests - an educator, an author and a psychiatrist - were united in their view that the two main parties had presented election policies of determined "cruelty" to asylum-seekers, that the parties were peddling hatred and that the nation would be traumatised by such cruelty and hatred. This was not a discussion about asylum-seekers. The issue came up incidentally. It reveals the world view of the class of people who routinely populate the ABC's air waves.

In formal debates about asylum-seekers, the ABC does often get someone from the Liberal Party to present the pro-deterrence view, but the general moral and political atmosphere of the ABC, and of most university discussions, is that the Howard policies,

and now the Abbott policies, are unnecessary and immoral, wicked and inhuman.

Even yesterday, Labor lawyer Liberty Sanger was telling 774 ABC Melbourne that boatpeople were a complex regional issue and it was wrong for Abbott to present the matter as one of Australian sovereignty.

Labor, first in opposition, then in government, was constantly torn between the views of the elite, which it basically shared, and the settled determination of the Australian people that this illegal immigration had to be stopped. It was endlessly seduced by its own comforting but poisonous conviction that Howard had somehow or other "tricked" the electorate, that the problem was only a political problem, that Abbott was contemptibly trying to repeat the trick. It never confronted the substance of the issue. It never worked out what it truly believed.

This was evident during the 2010 election campaign, when Julia Gillard announced the East Timor solution. She had agreed, she told a nation transfixed, with East Timor's then president, Jose Ramos-Horta, to establish a regional processing centre in the country. All future boat arrivals would go there, and none would be guaranteed entry to Australia.

This probably got Gillard through the election, but it was the last time anyone believed anything Labor said on this issue. For after the election it became clear the East Timorese government had given the matter no detailed consideration, Gillard had secured no agreement, there was no serious plan to achieve this, and ultimately it fell away. As much as the broken promise never to introduce a carbon tax, this fatally undermined Labor's credibility.

Rudd came at the last minute to adopt Howard-like policies on boatpeople. But it was always clear Labor's heart was never in this. When the Rudd government abolished Howard's Pacific Solution in 2008, then immigration minister Chris Evans described Howard's policies as "a cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful exercise introduced on the eve of a federal election".

This statement was wrong in every respect, and is symptomatic of Labor's intellectual and policy failure. Howard's policy was successful and, compared with what came after, astonishingly inexpensive. But to characterise it as cynical and only driven by an election was a telling mistake by Labor.

You can describe all policies as cynical if you like, and certainly politicians want to win elections. But the idea that Howard's response was only about winning an election, that there was no real policy challenge to Australia in illegal immigration by boats getting out of control, was a crippling intellectual mistake by Labor and all the boatpeople cheer squad.

I have attended numerous bilateral and regional conferences involving Indonesians at which Labor people and senior media figures told their Indonesian counterparts that Howard's motivation was purely the cynical, opportunistic, political exploitation of unfortunate asylum-seekers.

But the Indonesians were unhappy with Rudd's actions at another level. Once the policies were softened, the illegal people-smuggling trade started up again. There are a lot of people in Indonesia illegally, there are a lot of Indonesians in other countries

illegally. But a new cohort of illegal travellers was attracted to Indonesia: those who went there only to get to Australia. And this cohort grew into the tens of thousands. Thus the Indonesians learned, from this and many other episodes, that Labor was not serious about the boatpeople issue and didn't mind creating trouble for Jakarta along the way with its unstable, almost whimsical, approach to policy.

No one has helped mislead the debate more than Burnside and Fraser, both awarded a kind of Talmudic scholar status by the ABC and the Fairfax press. Two of the most preposterous egos in Australian public life, each garlands himself in the undeserved raiments of moral greatness. Yet neither figure was even able consistently to get basic facts right.

In *The Age* in July 2010, Burnside wrote: "It is easy to forget that the Fraser government received about 25,000 Indochinese boatpeople each year, without a murmur from the community."

This is completely wrong. In the whole life of the Fraser government, from 1975 to 1983, about 70,000 refugees came to Australia. Of these about 2000 arrived directly by boat. Fraser himself, in his equally error-riddled memoirs, claims he was taking in 20,000 refugees a year in the latter part of his prime ministership. That also is completely wrong.

In fact, Australia accepted far more refugees under Howard than it did under Fraser. Would any regular consumer of the Australian media know that?

Australians will welcome refugees, under Fraser, under Howard, under Abbott, provided they come in an orderly manner and are chosen by Australian officials and are genuine refugees, not just determined illegal immigrants wanting to live on Centrelink and access Medicare, state schools and the Australian living standard.

Both Burnside and Fraser implied Australian moral responsibility for drownings at sea. This also is against all known facts. The Australian navy and Customs authorities are heroic in their devotion to saving lives at sea. This bizarre mindset reached a kind of apotheosis last week when Australian authorities were regarded in some circles as responsible for drownings that took place 50m - yes, 50m - from the Indonesian shore.

There are a series of facts that illegal immigrant advocates never confront. Among them: the trade now is hugely one of illegal immigration rather than refugee flows, as the rise of middle-class Iranians flying to Jakarta and buying passage on a boat evidenced. People are seeking an affluent life in Australia rather than shelter from persecution. Why else would Tamils leaving Sri Lanka ignore India, with 70 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu, just nearby, and instead sail for weeks to come to Australia? It is extremely easy to game the refugee assessment procedures. Tell the right story, without documents, and it cannot be disproved and therefore you are inevitably given refugee status. Everyone involved in this knows how easy it is to scam. Genuine refugee status is generally not a lifetime condition. If your homeland settles down, you can return. The overwhelming majority of displaced people and refugees will not be permanent resettled in any country.

Similarly, those favouring soft policies offer no numerical limit on how many illegal arrivals Australia should resettle. Yet there are 40 million displaced persons in the world. If any of them who can physically get to Australia are allowed to stay permanently, why would there not be millions more coming, and indeed millions more on top of that pretending to refugee status?

ABC and SBS interviews and feature programs on these issues never ask these questions. They almost always proceed from the Burnside/Fraser mindset, with all the flawed Burnside/Fraser moral assumptions. Labor's misfortune was to accept that mindset. The Australian people never did.

Since Labor abolished Howard's policies, about 55,000 people have come to Australia illegally by boat. If this route is not blocked, eventually there will be hundreds of thousands of people involved.

That Howard and Abbott gave expression to the popular Australian will in this matter does not make them irresponsible populists. Popular opinion on this issue, informed by the plain facts and the evidence before people's eyes, and formed in the great common sense of the Australian people, was always more accurate than elite views. It was the media and policy elite which was irrationally resistant to evidence and facts, their views shaped by political correctness and intellectual dogma.

If Abbott succeeds in stopping the boats, the contrast between his success and Labor's paralysis will be devastating.