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An unholy union to deport refugees

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Before our pragmatic politicians are wedded to the offshore solution, they may need to check who is hiding under that bed.

The new vows may amount to a civil marriage of convenience with enormous 'discretionary options' for the legal guardians, but they breach previous vows regarding rights of children and rights of refugees.

When the celebrant asks if anyone objects, 54 per cent of the congregation will say 'I do', according to a recent Nielsen poll. Such is the disconnect between Australian voters who prefer a humanitarian onshore solution, and the federal leaders seeking a political offshore solution.



Australia was the first place on the planet to give birth to an offshore solution in 2001, buoyed by the war on terror and the Islamophobia. Only two other countries conceived similar solutions. The first was aborted and the second was abandoned.

In 2003, Tony Blair, then the British prime minister, floated 'A new vision for refugees', whereby asylum seekers would be interned then deported to 'transit processing centres' in non-EU countries such as Albania, Ukraine and Russia. Modeled after Australia's offshore 'solution', these 'refugee reservations' would be as 'close to home' as possible.

The accommodation was to be minimalist – 'the cheaper the better' – to serve as a deterrent for potential refugees. With barbed wire fencing, these 'zones of sanctuary' were more like concentration camps. They made a mockery of article 3 of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention which banned signatory states from sending refugees to countries where political instability reigned. Like the High Court of Australia, the EU torpedoed the Blair vision, and left behind a skeleton.

In 2009, Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi initiated a push-back agreement with Libyan leader Moamar Gaddafi, whereby African refugees caught at sea are sent to Libya, the typical point of departure. While the refugee numbers did not drop, only a 10th of the annual 14,000 reached Italian shores while the rest experienced push-back to Libya. Human Rights Watch condemned the policy and Libya's dangerous detention camps – "What they are trying to do is outsource this responsibility to countries like Libya who are not party to international refugee and human-rights conventions." This familiar verdict, and the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, left behind another skeleton.

In Australia, Liberals are chest-beating about fathering this brainchild but ashamed to acknowledge the real mother. Shadow immigration spokesman Scott Morrison trumpets that the 'Coalition has always supported offshore processing. We have a patent on it.'

But the birth certificate of the offshore solution is a bombshell. Walkley-winning journalist Ghassan Nakhoul accidentally witnessed the birth of the offshore solution, and commemorates its 10th birthday with a revealing book *Overboard* to be launched today. He was the first Australian journalist to interview a people smuggler who ironically and inadvertently conceived the offshore solution.

The birth certificate declares that Phillip Ruddock, then the attorney-general, twice affirmed that "the strongest message that has ever been given was the message to turn around boats. In an interview on SBS radio in July 2001 [with Ghassan Nakhoul], one of the most notorious – and now prosecuted – people smugglers, Keis Asfoor, had this to say: If Australia closes the door and ... a ship is turned back, I will stop this thing."

Five weeks later, the Howard government took his advice and turned back the Tampa, as 'accomplices in the conspiracy of alienating rejected humans'.

Today, both major parties are keen to ensure that any children borne out of this solution are towed away 'out of sight, out of mind'. Their human faces and pleas must be hidden from home 'theatres', so the Gillard Government can save face over the High Court embarrassment.

Given the Prime Minister's latest vow to 'smash what is truly evil – people smuggling', surely she should distance herself from this contaminated conception. Surely, the two skeletons under the bed should be a deterrent.

In Australia, there is only 1.1 refugee for every 1,000 people, which is 0.1 per cent of our population, and boat arrivals are much less. Yet they trigger a disproportionate amount of agitation, because it goes to the heart of what our Prime Minister calls 'our national spirit'.

The solution will continue to bounce between the chambers of Parliament and the chambers of the High Court for so long as it is seen through a political prism – the number of dollars it costs, the number of votes in Parliament, the number of boats arriving, the number of detainees. It is not about numbers at all. It is about our fellow humans and our moral responsibility to be compassionate which cannot be measured numerically.

We need to smash the political prism that reduces refugees to mere numbers.

Joseph Wakim established the Streetwork Project for exploited children in Adelaide in 1986, was appointed Victorian Multicultural Affairs Commissioner in 1991, and founded the Australian Arabic Council in 1992.

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