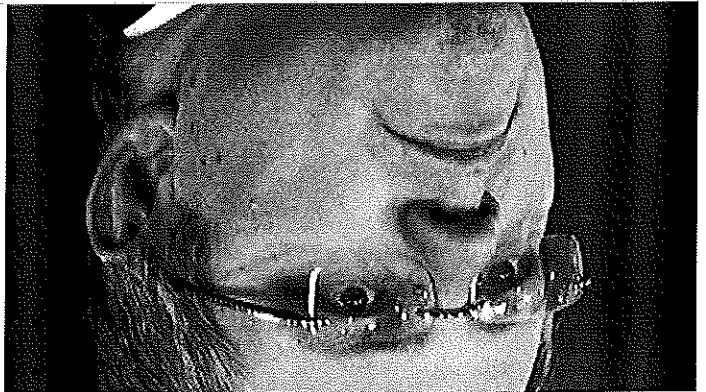


Politicisation of asylum seeker funerals reeks of xenophobia

Joseph Wakim
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Christmas Island funeral fallout

Coalition Immigration spokesman Scott Morrison has admitted that the timing of his comments regarding the Christmas Island funerals were "insensitive".

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Coalition comments are not a case of poor timing - they lack all humanity.

MY WIFE is buried not far from the three victims of the Christmas Island tragedy in Sydney's Rookwood Cemetery. During my regular visit this week, I was saddened by the bleaker plight of my fellow mourners, but ashamed by the opportunistic politicisation of this tragedy.

The fact that my wife was buried in Sydney was a decisive factor that led my family to stay put rather than move back to Melbourne, where we spent most of our life. It was essential that we could regularly visit the site which is now sacred to our family.

If the victims of the shipwreck tragedy of December 15 were buried on Christmas Island, the grave sites would remain abandoned and inaccessible to the relatives. Joe Hockey respectfully declared that "to be there for the ceremony to say goodbye" was totally understandable. It should go without saying, unless what you are saying is that the victims should be blamed for their tragedy. Indeed, this was what his colleague, opposition Immigration spokesman Scott Morrison, implied when he questioned the cost to the taxpayer of these funerals. Morrison has fanned the flames with his concession that "the timing of my comments was insensitive".

Does this mean that a debate about funeral costs for shipwrecked asylum seekers should be adjourned, and this will be the extent of our interest in this global humanitarian epidemic?

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott was quick to contextualise the division within his party and regurgitate his boat-stopping, vote-buying mantra - "the most humane thing you can do is put in place [border protection] policies that stop the boats". Apart from this being a narrow and xenophobic perspective, the concepts do not flow.

Rather than being fixated on border protection and channelling taxpayers' money at the symptoms, it makes more sense to understand the inhumane conditions from which these asylum seekers are fleeing.

For example, Australia was a proud partner in the US-led coalition that forced regime change in Iraq in 2003. This strategy unleashed a civil war that has rendered the country so unsafe that thousands of citizens have fled. How could we be complicit with the bombardment of Iraq, then blame the victims when they land on our shores seeking refuge?

Australia is also a proud partner of many of the undemocratic countries in the Middle East that have driven this desperation for a new homeland. Our political leaders are happy to shake hands and raise glasses for the cameras with Israeli, Saudi Arabian and Egyptian leaders. But when families flee from the oppression of these same regimes, we halt them with the same hands and call it "border protection".

How extreme do conditions need to be for families to endure border after border, detention after detention, queue after queue, then risk what is left by paying smugglers who dispatch them onto the wild seas?

We hear rumours that boat people are future terrorists, queue jumpers or risk takers and must never set foot on our soil. Many of us were even sucked in by the "children overboard" rumour in 2002. Yet most refugees I have met are the exact opposite; they love law and order and have kissed Australian soil. Where are the statistics to verify how many asylum seekers were ultimately deemed to be telling the truth all along and granted refugee status?

Like us, these people also hear rumours about a safe passage to Australia's friendly shores, where they will live happily ever after. Like us, they too get sucked in. They find that the boat is overcrowded, with no life jackets, and the ocean voyage is treacherous. Many perish at sea with no funerals, no faces and no names. After all, they had no citizenship, no home, no passport, and no record of their departure. If they survive to reach Australian waters and are intercepted, they are then at the mercy of interpreters and officials who need to make a prima facie assessment before the detention and deprivation ensues.

Tony Abbott's proposed tougher border protection looks superficially at the symptoms of a far more serious humanitarian crisis - a crisis that Australia cannot pretend to have clean hands over, as we have been complicit and supportive in sustaining the very regimes that have become intolerable for these people. Only when we face the international sources of these asylum seekers, rather than the symptoms, will we seriously find a solution to "stopping the boats".

If the Catholic Abbot asks what Jesus would do, he would find a familiar story about a family fleeing persecution. Herod ordered a mass murder and the parents feared for the life of their baby. They were prepared to cross as many borders as necessary to save his life.

The problem with the politics is not the timing. It is the tapping into the simplistic victim-blaming that absolves us from any responsibility for the plight of fellow humans. Cemeteries remind us of our common humanity that temporary politicians prefer us to forget.

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