



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Two decades of moral failure on asylum seekers must end

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What do Australians think when they see images of desperate Afghans trying to clamber on US military planes taking off from Kabul Airport, to flee the Taliban? Twenty years ago this week, Prime Minister John Howard used legalistic arguments to deny mercy to equally desperate Afghans fleeing the Taliban, after the Norwegian freighter MV *Tampa* rescued them at sea. Howard was facing an election he was on track to lose; his hard line against the *Tampa* refugees was a blatant dog-whistle to stoke Australians' racial fears. His actions put in place a system of institutionalised mistreatment of innocent people which continues to this day.

In the pandemic, many Australians have endured the frustration, boredom and inconvenience of 14 days or more in hotel quarantine or home isolation, and all Australians have experienced periods of stay-at-home restrictions. Nobody has enjoyed it. Yet there are young men in their 20s and 30s who have been locked in hotels in Melbourne for more than two years, following five or six years of detention on Manus Island or Nauru. They are condemned to endure indefinite limbo in the prime years of their lives. Occasionally, after concerted campaigns to expose their plight, one or two will be released into so-called community detention, where they are at least outside for the first time; but they are still in limbo, denied visas. On 22 August an Iranian family of four was released from detention in Darwin, where they had spent 18 months following seven years on Nauru; instead of being accepted into Australia, however, they were released into community detention in Brisbane. These cases are few and far between. Meanwhile, the government refuses to accept the New Zealand government's offer to settle up to 150 of the refugees across the Tasman.

Why? Why does the Australian government, with the acquiescence of the majority of the Australian people, subject innocent people to the mental torture and anguish of indefinite detention, including in the hell of the equivalent of never-ending hotel quarantine? For one reason: simply because they tried to come by boat. Don't be fooled by the argument that they could always choose to go home. PM Scott Morrison, the self-proclaimed Christian who was one of the architects of this merciless system, reiterated this week that if desperate Afghans, who definitely don't have that option, try to come to Australia by boat, they will still be subjected to Australia's current policy—indefinite offshore detention. Even the 4,500 Afghans currently in Australia on temporary protection visas will never be allowed to settle permanently, despite what's happening in their country, because they did not come "the right way", Morrison said.

The rationale behind never allowing refugees who try to come by boat to settle in Australia is supposedly to save lives, to stop refugees from drowning at sea. Except the story of the *Tampa* proves that rationale is a myth: John Howard decided to make an example of the *Tampa* long before anyone had drowned at sea.

The *Tampa* story started on 24 August 2001, when a fishing vessel with 438 people, mostly Hazara Afghans and some Iraqis, became stranded in international waters north of Christmas Island. On 26 August, the Norwegian vessel MV *Tampa* responded to a message from Australia's Rescue Coordination Centre and sailed to provide assistance. A dispute ensued over whether to take the refugees to Christmas Island, which was closest, or to Indonesia. Captain Arne Rinnan insisted sailing with 438 people on a ship designed for 27 crew was unsafe, and he requested permission to unload the asylum seekers at Christmas Island. The Howard government refused; Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told Parliament: "It is important that people understand that Australia has no obligation under international law to accept the rescued persons into Australian territory."

This was the beginning of Australia's current policy, including offshore detention. The *Tampa* refugees were stuck on the ship for weeks, and were still there on 11 September when the 9/11 terrorist attack occurred, allowing the Howard government to connect asylum seekers with the danger of terrorism. Eventually 150 were accepted by New Zealand—where they have contributed as good citizens—and the rest were marooned on Nauru.

Howard continued to exploit the issue for electoral support: on 7 October, the government infamously

lied that refugees on another boat had thrown their “children overboard”, and on 19 October, a boat designated SIEV-X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel) sank with the loss of 353 lives after the government started deploying the navy to intercept refugee vessels at sea. In his 2001 election launch speech nine days later, John Howard made no mention of the tragedy when he proclaimed: “But we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.”

From the beginning, one of the staunchest critics of Howard’s policy was former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. In the post-Vietnam War years Fraser provided the moral political leadership to welcome 50,000 Vietnamese refugees into Australia, who went on to make a wonderful contribution to Australian society. At the time, an estimated 400,000 Vietnamese perished at sea trying to flee, but instead of pretending our callousness would magically overcome their desperation—which is the premise of our present policy—Australians proudly led the efforts to rescue and resettle them. This was beautifully recounted in the 23 August 2021 ABC Australian Story “[Saving MG99: A rescue story with heart](#)”. Australia’s Vietnamese community publicly honoured Malcolm Fraser when he died in 2015.

Malcolm Fraser welcomed the refugees, but came to vehemently oppose the Anglo-American wars from which they fled; Howard and his successors have all supported the Anglo-American wars, but have denied humanity to the desperate refugees that have inevitably resulted. How long will Australians tolerate this? Australia is one country that should most welcome refugees, not only to provide safe haven, but as potential citizens who can participate in the economic development of the world’s most sparsely populated continent. We have immense potential, and we should not be afraid of welcoming the people who want to help and share in our national development.