

Letters on Afghan refugees in Australia

31 January 2002

Dear Sirs,

I have just finished reading Linda Tenenbaum's exposé of the atrocities which are taking place in Australia in respect to their treatment of Afghans and other refugees dated 26 January 2002, which happened to be Australia Day. I am personally disgusted by our government's handling of this issue.

I have written this small piece which may make some sense of a senseless situation, albeit, not an excuse, but perhaps a deep-seated belief pattern based on past history and geographic location.

Whilst I am sure that is not the reason the Australian government has taken the stand it has by treating these poor people as "guilty before being proven innocent", I sense that there may be some link.

My fervent hope would be that these displaced people could be processed on arrival into our country, not jailed as criminals and kept indefinitely for no particular reason. It is a disgrace and an embarrassment to me as an Australian citizen.

But, is it possible that everyone has forgotten the "fears" of the Australian government back in the 1950s? Back in those days, the government of the day was most fearful of what they called the "yellow peril" coming down from the north in hordes. Australia was seen then, and now, as the lifeboat for the world. The leaders of the day were very protective of this country and maybe for good reason, as outlined below. It may well have not been a racist fear at all, and I'll give them the benefit of the doubt for the decisions made in the 1950s, knowing what I know about the "lie of the land".

But these current events are "beyond the pale" and a disgrace for a country which considers itself to be multicultural and democratic by nature and intent.

This country is basically uninhabitable and extremely inhospitable with the exception of the coastline. Which is why if you look at a proper demographic map of the country, you will see that we hug the shoreline for

"dear life".

Reason: there is no way we (as white man) could possibly survive in the harsh interior—which I might say is the vast proportion of the continent.

We are also the driest continent in the world. And we have no infrastructure to support vast hordes of people wanting to settle in the interior. As there is nowhere else they could settle, they would die.

So we have the dilemma. I, personally, respect, love and revere those who have the courage to flee their homelands and try to make a future somewhere else. But what is it they think they are coming to? The promised land? I can assure them that it is not that unless they are fortunate enough to pass the "tests" which are set by a government which is anti-anything which is not already here!

So there is an impasse. If I love these people and the country in which I live has not got the physical capabilities (water, etc.) to support them, what can I do?

I live in Western Australia, near the world's most isolated capital city. I can promise you that when I travelled from Sydney on the east coast (where the Olympic Games 2000 were held) to Perth on the west coast, a distance of around 4,000 kilometers, I felt as if I had travelled to another planet. The distance is unbelievable. And all but uninhabited. For the simple reason that no-one could survive there.

I am truly saddened by their plight and have great compassion for those who have come here thinking it is perhaps something it is not, but I truly don't know what the answer is. If anyone has an answer to the problem faced by the immigrants, please let the government know.

LA

Perth, Western Australia

28 January 2002

P.S. I would be really happy if you could publish this as I sense it is important that the perspective of an

Australian might be important in this instance. We don't all share the government's view of this problem. In fact, I am sure I represent a vast majority of thinking people. We are appalled at the way these desperate, homeless people are being treated. It is a national disgrace.

Dear whomever receives this,

I sit here in stunned amazement and some distress at the callousness of the government of my country in dealing with genuine issues of humanitarian refugee desperation. One wonders if any of these, mostly men, have even a conscience, let alone a heart. Government policy is one thing, callousness and indifference is another thing all together, and one again wonders why they have no urge to modify existing laws or put new ones in place to accommodate properly most of these refugee people's immediate needs. They have, according to the UN Charter, basic human rights and I do not even see them getting those. And these men who run our country have the gall to say that they have no moral obligation for what happens to these refugees and turn back to "policy rhetoric" to hide behind.

A great many Australians, and these government people included, would do well to remember that we are simply the descendants of "boat people" ourselves and we have no room to be treating others with the same arrogance and indifference that our forefathers were treated with. I am one of those descendants whose great grandfather was sent here as a convict and I feel very strongly that since that time we have had very many people groups that have arrived here, as well as our Australian Aboriginals who are a rich part of us, that have created this wonderful and diverse Australian community that we have. None of us have come here squeaky clean and the sad excuse of, well they are a bad element or the like, is a pathetic piece of rhetoric. All people groups have their good and their bad and each and every country has their fair share anyway. I for one do not want to be held accountable for the blood that our government has on their hands and I distance myself from their policies and am even ashamed right now to be called an Australian. I never thought I'd see the day when I would say that. We have lost the ability to have compassion and to create some justice to overcome gross injustice and that is a sad day indeed for this country.

The last thing I would like to say is that the gross

ignorance the average Australian has over refugee facts and rights staggers me. I hear a lot of very bigoted talk by people about refugees, and when challenged about what they actually know about the rights of refugees and the UN Charter and similar things ... most people have no clue at all. They seem to listen to the pollies and some sections of the media and don't even bother to go and check out the facts for themselves. To me that is an absolute indictment upon us as Australian people. Everyone can find facts easily if they want to. I close with this thought ... we help to create a very unstable future for ourselves if we don't get the guts to stand up and let our voices be heard in some small way over this issue ... bombard the government people with emails and letters and let them know this is not going to be tolerated by thinking Australians.

Yours sincerely,

HB

29 January 2002

Thank you for your report on the hunger strikers. Australian government (and opposition) policy on refugees must change, and this will only happen with more international pressure. Of course, this won't, however, help the refugees who are now languishing in off-shore prisons (Nauru, New Guinea...), well out of the reach of Australian and international media.

God knows what conditions are like in those, although one can only hope that the inmates at least escape some of the racism of white Australia.

CJ Flinders University

29 January 2002



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