

FAITH LEADERS PRESENTATION: ANNE LANE PBVM

Parliament House 15th October 2015

I too wish to acknowledge the Ngunawal people, the traditional owners of the land where we meet.

Honourable Members, Sisters and Brothers in Faith

The body of a little boy washed up on a beach changed the world a month ago. It was a stark reminder to us all that Refugees are people just like us – children, women and men, families. The fact is that few Australians have met a refugee face to face to listen to his/her story. This image was confronting and seems to have called on the best in people. There was such energy caused in our own country to challenge politicians to change their minds on accepting more refugees but, unfortunately, not those on Manus Island and Nauru.

We, the religious leaders of Australia are desperately concerned for our sisters and brothers on Nauru and Manus Island. We join our voices with those of thousands of other individuals and groups who are concerned about the injustices being perpetrated in our names.

It is understandable when we see the effect of the picture of the body of three year old Aylan Kurdi why successive Governments do not want media on Nauru or Manus Island. We Australians are holding Refugees there. Some of these people have been determined to be genuine Refugees and still we keep them there. Women have given birth, women have been raped and still we hold them there – never to be allowed to settle in Australia should they have arrived by boat. Is the plight of these people any less de-humanising if the gates of the Detention Centre are opened? We know there are already instances of rape, sexual and physical assault perpetrated on those who have been released in to the community.

And this is in stark contrast to the way the people of Europe rescued and welcomed tens and hundreds of thousands of people who arrived by boat on their shores.

There have been many reputable reports and a significant body of research that has emerged over the past decade demonstrating or confirming that immigration detention causes significant psychological harm to asylum seekers, with particular impact on children. Immigration detention causes ongoing damage to children beyond the period of detention. Some experts suggest that the negative impacts of immigration detention are ongoing for years after their release and in some cases, risk having a lifelong impact on children. This can include educational and social difficulties, psychological trauma and a need for ongoing counselling. These findings have been reiterated by the Doctors and Staff at Melbourne's Children's Hospital last week.

The current process of transferring children to Nauru appears to breach Australia's human rights obligations with respect to those children, including the obligation to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration in any decision.

We cannot allow such a cruel policy to continue.

Economically too, the current policy is destructive. Insofar as we can estimate, the taxes of the Australian people are presently being squandered to the tune of more than \$1.2 billion dollars each year in this exercise, money that could be spent supporting refugees to make a meaningful contribution to society, supporting UNHCR, and working with other countries in this region to develop a humane and effective regional solution. And now we are suggesting sending some of these people deemed Refugees to the Philippines – another poor country in our region.

Most critically however, we believe that the current policy is destructive, ethically and morally. Every one of us knows that scapegoating a group of people is morally indefensible. Every one of us knows that the mantra of stopping the boats, is just a mantra, that it simply means stopping the boats in Australian waters, so that in this country, we can hold our heads high as vulnerable people die in other countries and situations to which we've returned them – to other known places of torture and death. The fact is, due to the lack of transparency, we don't know if/what boats have been turned back and what has resulted from those actions.

As people of Faith we believe the starting point is the value and dignity of every human person. Given this essential dignity it is never right to use people as objects – a means to an end. It is morally wrong to punish one group of human beings, including children, by locking them up on off-shore islands in order to deter another group of people from coming to Australia.

At the Annual Conference of the Catholic Religious of Australia the Leaders resolved to invite other Faith Leaders to join them in asking all political leaders to agree to a non-partisan policy, which will enable Parliament:

- to rebuild a culture of support for asylum seekers and refugees through education and truth telling
- to uphold the rights of all peoples to seek protection and justice
- to honour our commitment to the United Nations Conventions Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Rights of the Child
- to abandon the policy of offshore detention and temporary protection visas
- to collaborate with leaders of the Asia Pacific region to establish a humane regional solution
- to subject the entire asylum seeker process to the oversight of an independent body
- to increase the number of refugees accepted into Australia
- to increase foreign aid in recognition of the reality that this will lessen, in certain situations, the need for people to seek asylum

For our part, we gathered here make a commitment to the Federal Government

- to continue to support asylum seeker families who need hospitality
- to contribute to accommodation, education and employment for families
- to encourage those with whom we work to consider taking up this challenge.

Accordingly we ask the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to agree to a change of policy with regard to the offshore detention of asylum seeker children and their families. We request that all children and their families be released immediately into the community in Australia.

We urge all political leaders to abandon offshore detention and temporary protection visas. Additionally, we request that representatives of all political parties and independents work jointly to develop an alternative to offshore processing and detention, and to commit to a humane, well-funded regional solution for the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers under the auspices of the United Nations. We have witnessed before the good that happens when strong leadership and a non-partisan approach have been taken towards Refugees by members of Parliament.

Here, today, we ask that representatives of the different political parties join in a task force with representatives of different faiths to work together to change the political and public narrative regarding asylum seekers and refugees.