

Asylum Seeker Policy in Australia
An address at the Rally for Baby Asha
on 30th June 2015 at Sydney City Hall
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Thank you for the privilege of addressing you, and to ASRC and ChilOut, for organizing this event, and GetUp for their support

There is something dark going on in the heart of this nation, and it has to do with children.

Just when we thought we had begun to honestly face and address the injustices of the Stolen Generation...

Just when we are carefully delving into the festering abyss of institutional child sexual abuse...

Here we are again to ask why children and babies are put and kept in harm's way in our immigration detention centres.

We're here today because we know that, in spite of all attempts to keep it quiet, this abuse is not a figment of our imagination.

- Former Australian of the Year Prof Patrick McGorry called these centres "factories for producing mental illness"
- The Human Rights Commission Report "The Forgotten Children" highlighted 33 reports of sexual abuse and 207 of self-harm
- Finally, the Moss review showed us that sexual, emotional and physical assaults against both adults and children are ongoing, placing Asha and all children there at risk.

For God's sake, why are we still doing this? Do we think that it is right to treat helpless, vulnerable people in this way?

Apparently not! Just before the General Election of 2001 the Howard Government produced 'evidence', grainy as it was, that asylum seeker parents were throwing their children into the sea to force the navy to rescue them. (They were not as coy about reporting 'on water matters' as the current government!) The 'evidence' was concocted.

Their concocted outrage that anyone could do such things to children was embraced by the electorate, which gave Mr Howard an easy win in what should have been a tight election.

So what has happened to our compassion for defenseless children?

Why is it that children were sacrosanct then, and disposable now?

Why were the parents demonized for their supposed cruelty, but the current government is applauded for committing actual abuse? Don't tell us that in both cases it was for electoral advantage! Surely no Australian Government would use children in that callous way, would they...? GOD FORBID.

And they dare not tell us that the detention is to deter others from making the risky journey; because that would be illegal, and this Australian Government wouldn't do anything illegal. Would they...?

SO TELL US WHY.

Attorney General Brandis tells us that Australia does not detain anyone on Manus and Nauru. It's a matter for those Governments. He says it's not up to us how the processing centres are managed. For goodness sake man! That's just disingenuous rubbish!

Answer us this - if you have no say in it, why are you and the Opposition trying to silence doctors and teachers from reporting the abuse? Doctors and teachers- trusted guardians of wellbeing; at worst, doing no harm. Not even the Apartheid regime had the temerity to try that one on!

And if you "have no say in it", why did you and the ALP just last week ban mandatory reporting of child abuse on Nauru and why are social workers now under fire?

And Prime Minister Abbott, when you were asked if there would be some compassion for the Rohingyas your emphatic response was "Nope nope nope". Prime Minister, we have a three word slogan for you- SHAME! SHAME! SHAME! Shame on you and your government!

We're not stupid, you know. We all understand that the refugee situation is a complex and difficult problem. Like you, nobody wants to see asylum seeker lives lost at sea. What we do not understand is why this compassion suddenly dissolves into cruel punishment of those who survive the journey. The saying "Between the devil and the deep blue sea" comes to mind.

And where is the Opposition - or should I say, the Collusion? Yes Mr Shorten, we are told that you are wedged on this one. But seeing that your party introduced offshore processing in 1992, don't you think you have some responsibility here? You clearly have little faith in the capacity for compassion and intelligence in the Australian people. Or is it that you don't stand for a fair go anymore? SURELY, SURELY NOT

And where are the defenders of the children in the Christian Church? A bishop here, a priest there? The odd minister and pastor? A few lay-folk? Thank God for organisations such as Love makes a Way, that two weeks ago sang in the foyer of Parliament "Were you there when the kids were locked away?" and "Were you there when the nation turned its face?"- and were thrown out for trespassing! I also want to acknowledge the many people of faith here today.

Where is the voice of the church that nurtured politicians in the Faith where Jesus says "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them for of such is the Kingdom of heaven"? Not specific enough? Then try this:

"It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause these little ones to stumble"

Mr Morrison, Mr Dutton, Mr Abbott: did you get that?

The church's near silence on these atrocities is indefensible.

"SHAME ON US!"

There is also another group that has a lot to answer for here: the mainstream media, and one part of it in particular. Tell us - do you never get embarrassed by your role of halleluia chorus to the hard-line policies of this Government, or your silence about the cruel and unusual punishment of these children? Are you so beholden to 'God knows who' that you are prepared to put your ethics, your professionalism and independence on the back burner?

DO YOUR JOB!

And finally, the people of Australia. Opinions are all over the place on this. Come on, people. **WE ARE BETTER THAN THIS.** To you, here tonight, I want to say: **THANK YOU** for being here. Thank you for caring. If the Government, the Opposition, the Church and the Press are not going to protect the children, we have to keep trying.

So - Stay strong! Speak out! Walk the path with heart. Keep hope alive!