

Abbott's policy has little to do with border control – Canberra Times

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With the release of the Opposition's new policy statement on border control, both Malcolm Fraser and Pauline Hanson must feel pleased.

For Mr Fraser, it vindicates his decision to walk away from a party that now bears very little resemblance to the one which he led for nearly eight years.

For Ms Hanson, it points to the revival of her nasty ideas about how to deal with Asian refugees who dare to think that we have boundless plains to share.

Whether it is in Australia's wider political and diplomatic interests is another question entirely.

No one can seriously believe that any such policy would have been advanced if those recently arriving by boat had been white Anglo-Saxons, and Tony Abbott's 'Fortress Australia' approach risks reviving memories of earlier Australian policies of exclusion that might better be left dormant.

The most obnoxious element of the new policy is undoubtedly the proposed return of the notorious Temporary Protection Visa regime. There is nothing of the Good Samaritan in the hearts of those who would bring this monster back to life.

TPVs were introduced first in 1999, and did nothing to stem the flow of boats, for then as now, 'push' factors played the dominant role in driving refugee outflows. All the TPV regime did was psychologically scar people fleeing persecution, by enforcing their separation from close family members, and leaving them in an agonising limbo.

Oddly enough, this was something that senior Coalition politicians recognised when Pauline Hanson first proposed it.

The Commonwealth Minister for Health and Family Services, Dr Michael Wooldridge, denounced the "spurious claim" that Australia "should only be a temporary haven for refugees before they are sent back again when things get better", and described these views as "deeply flawed and dangerous".

He went on that "creating insecurity and uncertainty as these views undoubtedly do is one of the most dangerous ways to add to the harm that torturers do".

I concluded that we "must not and will not turn our backs on those who come here for refuge. To do so would be to betray our moral obligation as a community and to betray that great Australian tradition of helping out those in need".

His arguments were compelling then and they are just as compelling now. What has driven the Liberal Party down this dark alley?

The answer is to be found in a little-noted story in a biography of John Howard published in 2007 by Peter Van Onselen and Wayne Errington.

The authors tape a fascinating interview with a former Howard minister, Jackie Kelly, who discussed the day on which Mr Howard announced that the MV Tampa would not be allowed to land on Australian territory: "One Nation is just chewing it's tip," Kelly told Howard.

"I've lost two branches to them; one of them is my best fundraising branch. We need to do something or I'm a goner." Howard waved his speaking notes at her. "Don't worry, Jackie," he responded.

"That's all about to change."

To put it bluntly, Coalition border control policy has very little to do with border control, and everything to do with securing the votes of those who supported Pauline Hanson at the end of the 1990s.

It is hardly surprising that the policy is barely distinguishable from what she was saying at that time.

There is nonetheless one element of Opposition policy that makes sense, and that is to abandon the freeze on processing of asylum claims from Afghans and Sri Lankans that the Rudd Government, seemingly spooked by Opposition rhetoric, introduced in April.

Others can comment on the Sri Lankan situation, but to anyone familiar with Afghanistan, the Government's claim that "The Taliban's fall, durable security in parts of the country, and constitutional and legal reform to protect minorities' rights have improved the circumstances of Afghanistan's minorities, including Afghan Hazaras" is frankly bizarre.

The rule of law is so weak in Afghanistan that "constitutional and legal reform to protect minorities' rights" is virtually meaningless, and the Taliban, of course, are back with a vengeance, emboldened by the fraud that marred the August 2009 presidential election.

Indeed, very recent reports in the Dari-language press in Kabul and from the respected Afghan Analysts Network raise credible suspicions of Taliban involvement in vicious attacks on Hazaras in Wardak province.

Most seriously of all, the reference to "durable security in parts of the country" is flatly contradicted by the travel warning for Afghanistan issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra, which states that "The security situation throughout Afghanistan ... retracts extremely dangerous."

The comparable warning from the US State Department states that "No part of Afghanistan should be considered immune from violence... The security environment retracts volatile and unpredictable".

Furthermore, the UN Secretary- General in March 2010 reported to the Security Council that the "deterioration of Afghanistan's security situation has continued, with 2009 being the most volatile year since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, averaging 960 security incidents per month, as compared with 741 in 2008.

The situation worsened in January 2010, with the number of security incidents 40 per cent higher than in January 2009.. .

Overall, the intensification of the armed conflict in the south, and its expansion into areas previously considered stable, made 2009 the worst year for civilian fatalities since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001".

It is time for the competitive trashing of refugees to cease.

Australia simply does not have a boat problem. At the current rate of boat arrivals, it would take more than 25 years before we had enough applicants to fill a decent-sized football stadium. Can we for once stop using vulnerable people as the football?