



Australia's asylum seeker policy Stockholm Syndrome

Aloysious Mowe,

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The names Birgitta Lundblad, Elisabeth Oldgren, Kristin Ehnmark and Sven Safstrom probably mean nothing to most of us, but these were the employees of the Swedish Kreditbanken whose six-day captivity by two bank robbers in 1973 gave rise to the term 'Stockholm Syndrome'. At the end of the siege the hostages were found to have formed a positive relationship with their captors, Jan-Erik Olsson and Clark Olofsson.

Typically, victims of the syndrome experience an intense positive feeling towards their captor. Instead of realising that this is the person who has put them in a dangerous and life-threatening situation, they begin to think that their captor is the person who is going to help them survive the crisis. Safstrom said of Olsson, 'When he treated us well, we could think of him as an emergency God.'

It would be hard to find anything more poisonous than the toxic waste dump that is Australia's asylum policy, a repository for all the worst aspects of Australia today: myths masquerading as fact, and cruelty pretending to be compassion.

We are subject more and more to a *Through the Looking Glass* discourse, so that we are meant to believe, for example, that consigning people to a miserable and hopeless existence in an offshore processing centre is done to save lives, or that sending boat arrivals back to Indonesia will result in a fairer asylum system.

The raft of policies designed to stop the boats coming, which has bipartisan political support, has created untold misery and suffering, and even resulted in the deaths of people seeking asylum, such as Hamid Khazei, Omid Masoumali, and Reza Barati.

What, however, is even more insidious is how this bipartisan consensus is now taken to be the new normal: it is all right to lament the human consequences of the policy, but border security and stopping the boats are regarded, even by some refugee advocates, as indisputable imperatives.

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We begin to empathise with the politicians because of the apparent dilemmas they allegedly struggle with; we accept the harsh policies 'forced' on to policy makers because the boat arrivals are, in a usage now frequently cited, a 'wicked problem'. In short, we are in danger of acquiring Stockholm Syndrome.

'Camp refugee' myths persist

Ignorance, culpable or otherwise, continues to stalk our debates and attitudes about people seeking asylum. A recent panel discussion on ABC *Lateline* featured Amanda Vanstone, a former Minister for Immigration in the Howard government, defending the current government's asylum policy by insisting over and over again that people were coming to Australia because of 'the sugar on the table' (an interesting phrase, oft-used even by refugee advocates, that makes us think of these boat arrivals as pests, such as ants and flies); that stopping the boats was necessary; and that places in the humanitarian program had to be given to refugees living in camps. There was much talk on the same ABC program of the hearts of Australians going out to the people in those 'camps', and of the necessity of an 'orderly humanitarian program' that Australians could feel comfortable with.

Advocates such as I keep being told that it is a waste of time trying to dispel the myths about people seeking asylum, that the facts do not sway opinion. Perhaps it is just a stubborn remnant of my Jesuit training that causes me to persist in believing that 'veritatem facientes in caritate', speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), will persuade minds and convert hearts.

The vast majority of the world's refugees are not living in camps. According to the UN, two thirds of all refugees live in towns and cities. The Syrians who have fled their country's long and vicious conflict are mostly not in refugee camps, but struggle to scrape a living in urban settings. The UN is certainly not advising governments to take people just from camps as a privileged and preferred way of providing access to resettlement. Our hearts should not be captivated by the image of poor refugees in camps who are genuine refugees with a UN stamp of approval on their brow, and who are more needy, more vulnerable, more deserving.

In fact, in some instances, refugees in camps are better served because they are easily reached by relief agencies, and their plight is therefore more visible to the media, international agencies, and governments. It is often the case that it is the urban refugees, with no structure of protection or overt humanitarian visibility around them, who are harassed and intimidated by authorities and criminals, exploited by employers and traffickers, and who are in constant fear of arrest, detention, and involuntary return to the places from whence they fled.

Morality can't be quarantined

The 'camp refugee' discourse is just one way for governments to frame policy in terms of 'good' refugees (those poor

and deserving people living in camps to whom our hearts go out) and 'bad' refugees (those witting stooges of evil people smugglers who come for the sugar on the table).

What causes me grief is that even refugee advocates have so despaired of finding any way forward that they end up swallowing the government's line. We hear advocates saying that we accept the political imperative of stopping the boats, and that we should quarantine the question of the morality of those stop the boats. The comfort that Australians will get from knowing that the boats have been stopped will then apparently result in a 'dividend', namely an increase in Australia's humanitarian intake from the 'camps', and we will then have an orderly system that we can all be happy with.

I for one do not buy this. The question of the morality of stopping the boats should not be quarantined, for one simple reason. The entire rotten edifice of Australia's offshore processing regime, the misery and suffering inflicted on the people sent to Nauru and Manus Island, the harsh conditions endured by those already in Australia, and the refusal of permanent protection even to those found to have a genuine refugee claim: all this is constructed on the imperative of stopping the boats.

Australia cannot act unilaterally simply because it wants a good old Anglo-Saxon queue, an orderly migration system that will appease the atavistic fears of invasion, yellow perils, Islamic terror, and all the other constructed nightmares that are the stuff of unprincipled politicians and opportunistic tabloids.

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Imagine for a moment if every country were to adopt a similar policy: no unauthorised entry of people seeking asylum, close the borders to people who flee for safety without visas, and only ever resettle refugees according to an orderly and quota-dictated intake. If every country were to adopt a policy analogous or similar to Australia's 'stop the boats' policy the entire international refugee system would come to a grinding halt. No one would be able to flee his country to another for safety, unless he had first acquired permission or authority to do so, in the form of a visa — not exactly an option for those fleeing civil conflict, violent state persecution, or all-out war.

Current resettlement patterns would also mean that perhaps one new refugee in ten would find safety each year; all the others would have to remain in the place where they face persecution, conflict, or worse. It's all fine and dandy for Australians to long for an orderly migration system, except for the inconvenient fact that the world's 59.5 million forcibly displaced people do not flee persecution and disaster the way one files out of the Melbourne Cricket Ground after a Grand Final.

A crime against humanity

Stopping the boats is not an acceptable precondition for a just asylum policy in Australia. You do not build the house of justice on a foundation of dead bones, on a foundation of lies and ignorance. Do not for a moment imagine that the Australian public's hysteria over the arrival of boats was a natural phenomenon, born out of a combination of hearts going out to people who drowned at sea and a perfectly normal desire for secure borders. Political expediency, media manipulation, and deliberate fear-mongering, all played their part. To excuse this all, and accept the cynically-orchestrated outcome — we must stop the boats — is not an ethical option.

In 1998 Natascha Kampusch was kidnapped in Austria at the age of ten by Wolfgang Priklopil, and kept in a basement for eight years. She wept when she was told of his suicide, and rejected the idea that she was a victim of Stockholm Syndrome, insisting instead that perhaps hostages make a perfectly rational choice in their particular situation. 'I find it very natural that you would adapt yourself to identify with your kidnapper,' she said in a 2010 interview. 'Especially if you spend a great deal of time with that person. It's about empathy, communication. Looking for normality within the framework of a crime is not a syndrome. It is a survival strategy.'

Kampusch was right in her insistence on not being perpetually viewed as a victim, and in her belief that her kidnapper was not a monster but a human being. She did however also still insist that what was done to her was a crime. It is time we acknowledge that stopping the boats, with all the attendant appalling consequences for people seeking safety in Australia, is a crime against humanity.

Volunteers required for Court Support

Father Peter Carroll, Chaplain at Long Bay Correctional Centre, is looking for volunteers to deliver meals to the inmates at the Downing Centre Sydney. Training and support will be provided for volunteers. If you would like to learn more about this ministry please come to our information