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Australia's Treatment of Refugees is Unnecessarily Harsh

By Sayomi Ariyawansa

We are told that Australia is the “lucky country”. A country where our most attractive asset is our multicultural community and diverse society. In our anthem, we sing: “for those who come across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share”. Ironically, it is in the second verse which we hardly ever sing. Perhaps this reveals the true attitude Australia has towards asylum seekers. People who flee from countries which are persecuting them, escaping for their lives. Australia’s mandatory detention policy means that asylum seekers are locked in a detention centre until they are processed, which can take years. According to the Minister for Immigration, Amanda Vanstone, this is in order to deter other arrivals. Detention-centre advocates tell us that our tough attitude towards “boat people” is a deterrent for others who may consider seeking asylum here. They tell us these people are a burden that we don’t want, and the best way to stop them is to show them that Australia is not an open country and will not accept everyone. However, there is a line between tough and inhumane, a line that is blurred in terms of our refugee policy. Our current system humiliates and psychologically damages innocent people and goes against UN conventions. There must be a better way to treat this issue, and we should consider the systems in place by other countries.

The UN International Refugee Convention requires host countries to treat asylum seekers with dignity and respect while

their claims for asylum are processed. There is increasingly more and more evidence that detention centres hold asylum seekers in conditions harsher than those felt by convicted criminals. After Baxter detention centre held a mentally ill Australia citizen for nine months, an investigation showed the harsh conditions within detention centres. There are beds without mattresses, toilets without doors and showers without curtains. Is this how Australia treats asylum seekers with dignity and respect? The United Nations Human Rights Commission has said that conditions in Australia's detention centres are "offensive to human dignity".

Not only are detention centres stripping innocent people of their dignity, there are increasing claims that the harsh conditions within the centres are psychologically damaging. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention have said that Australia's detention centres are "worse than prisons" and saw "alarming levels of self-harm". Australia is not alone in using detention centres for processing refugees, but its callous treatment of refugees within the centres, their harsh conditions and the unnecessary time spent in detention have brought upon much criticism from multitudes of human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International. This criticism apparently has no effect on the Australian Government which continues its appalling treatment of people who seek refuge and acceptance here. The spirit of the survivors of the most ruthless political regimes is often destroyed by the harsh environment they are placed in. Their resilience is tested, and the psychological damage done makes it extremely difficult for them to rejoin society as healthy, productive citizens. These people can enrich our community greatly, but in order to do so they deserve a fair go.

Detention-centre advocates tell us that detention is necessary in order to determine the asylum seeker's identity. They also believe that detention centres are the best way to deter other arrivals. However, many countries need to deal with asylum seekers, and many of these countries do so with policies that are far more humane and concur with UN conventions.

Sweden is a country that has a policy that Australia should consider. If asylum seekers arrive in Sweden without

appropriate documentation, they are placed in a detention centre. Their stay in the detention centre does not exceed six months and children may not be detained longer than six days. The detention centres in Sweden do not resort to barbed-wire fences, and all detainees have full access to legal advice, counselling and have the right to appeal their being held in detention. Asylum seekers are only required to remain in detention centres for the time it takes to ascertain their identities and not the entire procedure. Once their identities are confirmed they are released into Refugee Reception Housing or move in with friends whilst they await the decision. The Swedish system allows for all proper processing, ensuring national security as well as maintaining the asylum seeker's right to being treated with dignity and respect. This is in comparison to many genuine refugees held in detentions centres for several years in Australia, regardless of their age. Asylum seekers are virtually stripped of their basic human rights, and do not have access to legal advice. Australia can learn from the Swedish policy that is tough, but ultimately and most importantly, humane.

By continuing to maintain our current refugee policy, Australia is not only going against UN conventions, but also against our long-cherished ideals of mateship and tolerance. In doing so, we are blocking out the people who have the potential to bring even more cultural diversity into the community. Our Government's stance on refugees is quietly contradicting all the principles we stand for as a society. If we truly believe that we are a generous and multicultural nation, it's time that we show it by empathising with our fellow human beings. Our system is unnecessarily harsh and we should look to other countries' policies, such as the one in Sweden, so we can have a policy that ensures our borders are secure, but is also fair to genuine refugees. In the era of globalisation, Australia is no longer a remote and isolated island on its own, but a part of the wider global community. It is time to treat our neighbours with the dignity and respect that all humans deserve.



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Sayomi Ariyawansa wrote this essay in 2005 when she was in Year 11 at Kilvington Girls' Grammar, Ormond, Victoria.