

'Warfare and the Global Problem of Refugees'

Address to Refugee Rally, Belmore Park, Sydney, Sunday April 19, 2015

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It's an honour to be here to join other Australians in urging humane and responsible responses to the problem of refugees, and I congratulate the organisers of this rally. I also recognise the traditional owners of this land and pay respects to their elders past and present.

I've been asked to say a little about the issue of warfare, which I am pleased to do, partly because the global problem of refugees is closely related to the problem of armed conflict. War destroys just about everything that communities need to survive, creates fertile conditions for human rights abuses and their cover-up, and forces millions of people to flee their homes seeking safety. It is not the only "push" factor that so often gives people little choice in the most terrible decision to uproot themselves and family but it is one of the key factors.

At the end of 2013, UNHCR reported that at that time 51.2 million people had been forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, generalised violence or human rights violations, the highest figure since the 2nd WW. Half of them were children. Australia's contribution to addressing this enormous global problem is tiny, and yet we have contributed to the destabilising of the Middle East region where many of the world's refugees live.

I'm going to quickly recap on some of the features of Australia's refugee policies, because there are similarities with our policies on going to war. Our refugee policy is characterised by

- callous indifference towards those who seek our help,
- indifference towards international law,
- hostility towards the UN system and its values,
- wasteful squandering of resources by using the most expensive possible manner of dealing with refugees,
- shameful attempts to silence critics,
- there is a high degree of government secrecy, and total contempt for government honesty and integrity in relation to refugee policy.

Australia's reputation internationally over our refugee policies has become a matter of shame and embarrassment.

Let's look at our policies for going to war:

- As with refugees, dishonest scare tactics are used, the magical words "national security" are uttered in an attempt to silence critics, and the military are called in to provide the solution. In other words, the problem and the solution are created almost in the same breath; just as it was with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The notion that ISIS fighters are a threat to Australia would be laughable if we did not send our troops to Iraq quite so often.
- As with refugee policy, the human costs of wars are hidden. In Afghanistan, official collection of data about civilian casualties there did not even begin until 2007, 6 years after the current war began. A new report from IPPNW, called "Body Count", estimates that the so-called "war on terror" has killed, either directly or indirectly, approximately 1.3 million people in the 3 countries studied – Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Parliament is marginalised, as there is no requirement for parliamentary debate or approval on ADF troop deployments. Australia is one of very few democracies where this is still the case. This decision can be taken by one person, and that one person might happen to be the most incompetent PM in living memory making one of his famous "captain's calls".

Democracy is non-existent, secrecy is paramount, and tough questions about military strategy and purpose, duration, exit strategy and costs are all ignored.

- Mission creep is racing ahead. PM Abbott previously ruled out Australia bombing targets in Syria, but now indicates that Australia could bomb targets in Syria, and opposition leader Shorten who previously ruled out opposition support for any ADF activity against targets in Syria is now silent as his own criteria for bipartisan support of Iraq War no 3 are breached.
- Accountability is zero. Former PM John Howard helped initiate an act of aggression against Iraq in 2003, the repercussions of which are playing out now with hideous clarity. Twelve years on, he still hasn't faced trial in the ICC.

So where does this leave us? On both issues, refugees and going to war, we have government policies grounded in fear that defy all sense of reason. We have innocent people, including children, incarcerated like criminals in detention centres. We have wars that make us less secure, fought to appease our great Pacific ally.

And we have an opposition that stands by, paralysed by the fear of appearing concerned or not brutal enough.

But that is not all we have. Australia is not defined solely by its official policies. We also have a vibrant civil society that cares very much how our country treats people who have no safe place to call home, and we have parliamentarians who passionately share these concerns and who need our support. We have strong arguments for change. Our task is to keep up and intensify the pressure so that the lies, the secrecy and the scare tactics are increasingly exposed.

I've been asked to mention a specific campaign, targeting the HESTA super fund, to urge them to divest from Transfield Services who run the detention centres at Nauru and Manus Island. I believe there is some information circulating about that campaign, and I urge you to support it if you are in a position to.

In 2012, the Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry was formed, with the goal of achieving a high level inquiry to draw out lessons from the catastrophic 2003 invasion of Iraq, similar to the UK's Chilcot inquiry which will be reporting soon. Out of that campaign has grown Australians for War Powers Reform, who believe that parliament, and not the executive, should make any decisions on ADF troop deployments. That process would at least subject the decision to a far more rigorous scrutiny than currently occurs. I invite you to visit the website and support the war powers reform campaign.

And I want to acknowledge previous attempts to legislate for a change of war powers, most recently by Greens Senator Scott Ludlam last year. I want to acknowledge also the outstanding work of former PM the late Malcolm Fraser, who was of course a strong supporter of humane refugee policies and also one of the strongest supporters of the need for war powers reform. Fraser recognised the dangers of the US alliance in drawing Australia into wars that undermine our security.

One final point:

Australia is currently spending more than any other nation on earth, including the UK and France, on WW1 commemorative activities; nearly \$325 million of public money by some estimates, plus private expenditures. The barely concealed message is that going to war is part of our culture, it's what Australia does. It would be hard to imagine a less fitting remembrance of all those who endured the horrors of the trenches a century ago in the "war to end all wars".

A far more meaningful commemoration would include:

- Recognition that the costs of warfare nearly always far outweigh any gains it might bring;
- A serious examination of the roots causes of conflicts, including in the Middle East right now;

- An independent and peaceful foreign policy for Australia; and
- Genuine caring for the victims of warfare, including its millions of refugees, especially those heading for Australia.

Thank you.