

9 December 2014

Mr Tony Abbott
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT, 2600

Mr Bill Shorten
Leader of the Opposition
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT, 2600

Dear Mr Abbott and Mr Shorten,

I am a child psychiatrist who recently returned from spending a week seeing asylum seekers on Nauru at our 'Offshore Processing Centre' (NOPC). This experience has prompted me to write this letter to you both.

I am also a migrant, a refugee whose parents brought him to Australia almost 65 years ago to flee war torn Europe in general and communist Hungary in particular. My parents' aim was to give us a better life, free from persecution. Unfortunately my visit to Nauru has made me feel ashamed to be an Australian for the first time in my life.

While I am neither a lawyer nor an ethicist, I do not understand the legal, moral or ethical justification for holding approximately 2000 people to ransom in order to "*Stop the boats.*" I accept that there was and continues to be a need to discourage people from getting on leaky boats with a significant risk of drowning at sea but "*Stopping the boats*" this way feels like moral relativism of indecent proportions. There must be a better way than detaining men, women and children in places like Manus Island and Nauru.

I wonder if either of you has ever visited Nauru, a desperately poor nation with minimal infrastructure. During my week in Nauru I sat with several parents who wept as they spoke of their sense of failure at fleeing their country of origin in the hope of providing a better life for their children, just as my parents did 65 years ago. Instead they have found themselves on Nauru in a detention centre with no hope of ever coming to Australia.

I admire the wonderful work being done by many dedicated health professionals, teachers, interpreters and others in caring for those in detention on Nauru. However, all this seems like window dressing, a salve to our collective Australian conscience for leaving men, women and children in detention or releasing them into those communities.

I intend to return to NOPC while there is a need and I can be of some use however, I feel it would be wrong of me to remain silent about what I have seen and what it says about us as a nation. It was Edmund Burke who said "*It is only necessary for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph.*" As someone with a passionate belief in our system of democracy and free speech, I can no longer stand by and do nothing.

This letter, expressing my concern about the plight of offshore asylum seekers is my first step in advocating on behalf of those in offshore detention. Secondly, I will not vote for either of the major parties in a federal election until one of you develops a more humane way of dealing with those

seeking asylum in Australia, including those currently detained offshore, even if they arrive by boat. Thirdly, I will do everything in my power to encourage others to speak out against the policies that keep people in detention in places like Manus Island and Nauru.

A co-operative regional approach with the more affluent nations in our region, as proposed in the *August 2012, Report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers*, would be a good start. That report emphasised the benefits of incentives designed to encourage asylum seekers to seek asylum through regular channels instead of choosing the hazardous journey by boat. It seems that the only aspects of the 2012 report that this or the previous government embraced has been the offshore processing of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island.

A courageous Australian government, one that I could again admire and support, would reverse our current utilitarian, immoral policy, a policy that is attracting condemnation throughout the world, in favour of a policy that is, to quote the 2012 report, *'hard headed but not hard hearted.'*

Yours sincerely,

Dr Robert G Adler

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Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist

cc. Ms Julie Bishop
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ms Tanya Plibersek
Deputy Leader of the Opposition