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Europe, don't copy Australia

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Praise for Australia's policy of turning away asylum seekers is misguided.

The Australian practice of turning back asylum seekers has been quoted – often favourably – by political leaders in several EU states as an example to be followed in Europe. In fact, in the Australian context the issue of 'boat people' has been utilised as a political device and has featured prominently in the media for decades.

This politicisation can be dated back to 2001 and the highly publicised case in which the *MV Tampa*, a Norwegian cargo ship, rescued 438 people (mostly Afghan asylum seekers) from a distressed fishing boat and was then refused entry into Australian waters. This refusal met with widespread international condemnation but in Australia the public supported the decision and the government's emphasis on international security and 'border protection'. The asylum seekers were portrayed in national media as using cheating means to try to push their way into the country to reap its benefits. They became seen as untrustworthy and a potential security threat.

Since this time, there has been a steady and consistent asylum seeker panic that, at its core, questions the morals of the individuals themselves. In Australia, coming by boat is equated with trying to 'skip the queue' in front of encamped refugees who have been constructed as the morally superior group due to their alleged patience, queuing for resettlement in far-away lands. This kind of rhetoric has been particularly powerful in the Australian context, where 'queue jumping' can be equated to a lack of 'fairness', a value closely associated with the Australian national identity.

In response to the increasing media coverage in Australia of the European treatment of asylum seekers, Prime Minister Tony Abbott took the opportunity to praise his own government's treatment of asylum seekers through the 'turn back the boats' policy, despite its illegality under international law: "If you want to stop the deaths, if you want to stop the drownings, you've got to stop the boats."¹ It is true that asylum seekers are no longer

drowning in Australian waters, at least that we know of. But we also do not know if they are dying somewhere else, out of sight. Many who arrived before the 'turn back the boats' policy are settled on Nauru or in Papua New Guinea. Keeping these asylum seekers offshore is costing Australia billions of dollars. If the goal was to prevent irregular maritime arrivals, then the policy has perhaps succeeded. But not if the goal was to minimise the financial consequences of these asylum seekers arriving. If these people were released into the community while they awaited processing (following security clearance), they would pay taxes and contribute to society. But the government has become so hamstrung by their own anti 'boat people' policies that they cannot even investigate such humane solutions without public backlash.

The ongoing anti-asylum seeker rhetoric is sometimes understood even domestically as a generalised anti-refugee sentiment, which is in effect working to undo a lot of the social cohesion that exists in Australia following years of effective multicultural policies. The public has been convinced that turning the boats away is the best choice socially and morally. Many people believe that the government is doing the right thing by them, the country and even the refugees encamped overseas.

In September 2015 German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke of "moral obligations" and of putting in place "immigration policies worthy of what [Europe represents]".² The EU needs above all to consider asylum seekers as people with rights under international law, not as morally suspect because of their attempts to seek protection.

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1. <http://tinyurl.com/ABC-Abbott-2015-09-04>

2. <http://tinyurl.com/Guardian-Merkel-2015-09-03>