

Labor for Refugees Speech 21.2.15 by Verity Firth, NSW Labor Candidate for Balmain

We are on the land of the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation

I would like to acknowledge our parliamentary representatives here today, Penny Sharpe and Helen Westwood. I would also like to acknowledge local Councillors, Cllr Linda Kelly who was herself a founding member of Labor for Refugees and Cllr Frank Breen.

Welcome

Thank you so much for coming to listen to Julian Burnside launch 'The Drownings' Argument' edited by Robin Rothfield for Labor for Refugees.

Labor for Refugees is an active group of Labor Party members and trade unionists who are seeking a just and fair Labor Party policy on refugees and asylum seekers. This is a big year for us as the Party's national conference is in July and forums such as this are part of our push to see the Labor Party adopt fair and just refugee policy at this year's conference.

Until recently I worked as the CEO of the Public Education Foundation.

One of the scholarships run by the Foundation is the 'Friends of Zainab' scholarship. This scholarship helps support kids from refugee backgrounds through years 11 and 12 and on into further study and training.

One of the winners of this scholarship was a young Afghani woman called Nahid Karimi.

Nahid arrived in Australia in September 2001. She and her family were in Port Hedland for 8 months before moving to Sydney on temporary protection visas.

She was 13 years old when she enrolled at Holroyd High School Intensive English Centre. She had never been to school before in her life. Can you imagine what it would be like to have never gone to school, and to walk into a large south western Sydney high school for the first time aged 13?

She had been home schooled by her mum in Afghanistan, so knew how to read and write, but she had no English.

In 2006, with the help of the scholarship fund, she finished her HSC and is now close to completing a Bachelor of Medical Sciences at the University of Western Sydney.

I met so many other students and their families through the work of this scholarship and its founder Dorothy Hoddinott. I heard the stories of Zainab Kaabi whom the scholarship was named after and Baria Mahdy who when he got into UWS was told that he was going to have to pay full fees as an international student as he wasn't yet a citizen, despite his refugee background. I should point out UWS ended up providing a scholarship for Baria so he could go to university.

All these students were helped by many Australians who donated in huge amounts to support them. But these were the lucky ones, the ones who actually made it through detention, through the TPV process and on to permanent residency and citizenship. There are so many more that didn't.

When Italy experienced massive deaths of asylum seekers at sea in 2013 (368 Eritreans and 232 Syrians drowned in two separate incidents) there was a massive public outcry.

The Italian government responded with a new rescue policy, and a flotilla of five navy vessels crewed by more than 850 sailors and has since saved over 10,000 people including over 600 women and more than 1000 children.

When Australia witnessed the awful tragedy off the shores of Christmas Island, our response was very different. No grand rescue strategy, and in fact a renewed commitment to even tougher punitive measures against refugees.

What is it about the Australian psyche? Why is our collective capacity for empathy so bruised? Pope Francis says "in a world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference...making us insensitive to the cries of others."

But there was public outcry about Christmas Island, people were appalled and upset by the images. What was different was our political response to the crisis.

Rather than our politicians speaking to people's better angels and using this crisis as an opportunity to garner popular support for more humane refugee practices, they once again fell into the tried and tested formula of blaming the victims of the tragedy – these were 'bad' refugees who were trying to 'skip the queue' and callously risk the lives of their children.

I was on the far north coast of NSW in 2001. I was running Labor's election campaign and Labor was going well, looking like we could well win the November election. Then two things occurred, in late August the Tampa sailed into Australian waters, and on 11 September the World Trade Centre was bombed.

In an instant our world changed fundamentally. I will never forget the flood of phone calls coming in to the campaign office, particularly after the World Trade Centre was attacked. The mix of both the World Trade Centre attacks and the Tampa had most of Tweed Heads convinced the Arabs were coming and they were coming soon.

We all know that Howard exploited the Tampa incident mercilessly. On the day of the election the queues were oddly quiet as people lined up alongside giant posters of Howard declaring 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances under which they come.'

I will always blame John Howard for this immoral playing of the race card in such a callous and harmful manner. John Howard's decision around the Tampa spelt the end of the bipartisan political consensus that had existed in Australian politics ever since the Vietnam War.

When 80,000 Vietnamese immigrated to Australia immediately following the Vietnam War, the Fraser government welcomed them and the Labor Opposition did the same. There was no baiting, no playing of the general fear of the new.

John Howard ended this consensus, but to our eternal shame, Labor decided to follow him. The kindest interpretation I can give our leaders for this is a sense that we were so close to victory and that we could fix it once we got in. But we didn't get in, our moral authority evaporated and Australian politics around refugees and asylum seekers entered over a decade of tit for tat, who can best stop the boats politics.

So what do we do now? What can Labor politicians and Labor Party people do?

I believe always that we must be a party of conviction and base our decisions on the evidence. The evidence is clear we do not have a refugee crisis on our borders. As James Hathaway says in this book 'Australia hosts about one-tenth of 1 percent of the world's refugees – not much for a country with one of the lowest population densities and the world's 13th largest economy.'

We should simply follow the law and take pride in the fact that the Australian Labor Party played a very significant role in the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through our own Doc Evatt. We must own our history and always seek to uphold and promote the law of international human rights.

Labor must return to the moral fray and ensure our policy regarding refugees is in accordance with our country's obligations.

But what then, how do we restore bi-partisan consensus? How do we stop the Scott Morrisons and Tony Abbotts of the world from running around the country's marginal seats telling people the refugee hordes are coming?

That's where you come in.

Labor as the alternative government must lead, but to restore consensus, the community's voice must be stronger than ever.

We need to demand humane refugee policies and build broad alliances with the churches, with civil society, with the traditional and social media, in the schools, in the pubs, in the workplaces, in the unions, in the universities, and in the Coalition Party. The aim must be to restore consensus on the issue of human rights for asylum seekers.

There is so much political capital and will to do this. Labor for Refugees is just one part of a much larger movement of people who want change in this country.

Thank you again for coming today – and I would now like to introduce our keynote speaker to launch 'The Drownings Argument' – Julian Burnside, QC.

Julian Burnside AO QC is an Australian barrister who practises principally in commercial litigation, trade practices and administrative law. He is also a human rights and refugee advocate, and author. Please welcome Julian Burnside QC.