

Staying engaged in the asylum seeker story

Written by The Conversation

When I first heard someone say, “today’s newspaper is tomorrow’s fish and chips paper”, my immediate reaction was to nod in enthusiastic agreement. It was so clever and cynical that it just had to be right.

We live in a head-spinningly fast world, where nothing is wafted in front of our faces long enough for us to stifle a yawn. Newspaper websites are refreshed within hours of the last world-changing update to reveal the new direction of world order. This morning’s political gaffe is this afternoon’s *mea culpa*. Morning tea’s celebrity hook-up, is afternoon tea’s amicable separation.

It’s not the fault of the newspapers. We demand it. If they didn’t do it, then with a few well-directed clicks of a mouse we’d be up to our eyeballs in another website updating us that, yes, the weather is indeed still sunny outside.

But every now and then, there’s a story that bucks the trend. A story so glacial in its progression, that we are afforded the antiquated luxury of getting sick to death of it. The moment that I settled down with my coffee and fresh newspaper and read that Schapelle Corby had cut her long locks to a ‘crisp and clean’ bob, was the moment I realised that her tale had jumped the shark.

It’s a similar feeling that many experience when we see, hear or get within 500 metres of the phrase ‘asylum seekers’. It’s a story so drawn out, so distorted from its original *raison d’etre* that many have learnt to shut down their senses to escape the surrounding hoopla.

But the report last week that up to 468 children will be released from detention on Christmas Island is news of such positivity that it demands attention. The Australian Human Rights Commission has long reported the consequences of mandatory off-shore detention, including serious mental health problems such as self-harm, and the decision to remove children from this setting is a cause for celebration.

What will become of these children is less clear. A [recent study](#) by Arial Mace and colleagues found that children enrolled in the Western Australian Refugee Health Service had a wide range

of outcomes.

Some children were found to be in relatively good physical and mental health - the kind of resilience that needs to be bottled and handed out at birth to all of us lesser beings. Others, however, were not fairing as well, showing significant signs of psychological difficulties such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Children who had been through mandatory detention were at greatest risk of these poor outcomes.

It is a peculiar situation when Australia, a country that mythologises itself as the land of the fair go, has developed policies that have such a clear, detrimental impact on the most vulnerable people.

Of course, a good case could be made that these policies stop people drowning at sea, and are a necessary means to that end. But this argument sets up a strange public narrative, in which the only opposition to tragedy is tyranny. The only way to counter one evil is by smothering it with another. This is false a dichotomy that shows a frightening lack of imagination.

But we shouldn't be too hard on the current Government. It doesn't take a great deal of mental acrobatics to conjure the thought of any major political movement keeping children in detention if it helped them attract the votes to attain office.

The same political movements that made Australia so terrifically wealthy by selling our products and people to the world, now reject the realities that come from a globalised system. Wars, droughts and famines are depressingly inevitable, and our interconnected world means that no country can turn their back on a tragedy in any other part of the globe.

So political is this whole issue, so caught up in left-right hatred, that it rubs off on refugees like the cologne of an unwanted suitor. It is too easy to think these people are the cause of the hatred we see and feel. They aren't. They are vulnerable. Often, they are children.

Scientific research over the past two decades has shown us that our experiences and environment in childhood affect the rest of our lives more than we could ever have imagined. A

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butterfly that flaps its wings in childhood can contribute to a tsunami in later life. A tsunami in childhood needs to be fended off at all costs.

The news of the release of children from mandatory detention is a terrific start for moving Australia back towards the humane society that we strive to be.

Our challenge, as readers and viewers, is to stay engaged for the distance that we still have to travel.

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Andrew Whitehouse does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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