

It is hard to credit that two asylum seekers in Nauru could set themselves alight on Australia's watch and the stories receive, compared to much else, so little attention in our hyper media cycle.

One would think the death of an Iranian man last week and the self-immolation of a Somali woman would be huge news, putting a great deal of pressure on the government as we move towards the election to outline an exit plan for Nauru.

But in the campaign the future of those on Nauru will be something neither side will be anxious to talk about.

Manus Island hit the headlines recently when the Papua New Guinea government announced, following a judgment of its Supreme Court, that the centre there will close.

Australian and PNG officials are now in negotiations that Australia hopes will find a way to keep the centre going. In a Tuesday statement the two governments said they'd continue "to work together on a road map", meeting "regularly in the coming weeks", which suggests the matter is being pushed safely beyond the election.

The government and the opposition are bipartisan on offshore processing. When it arises, the issue plays in favour of the Coalition, but it is not one Malcolm Turnbull seems naturally comfortably with. For political reasons Labor obviously tries to avoid it. That means the government isn't being held to serious account – despite efforts by the Greens – in the way it is on much more minor matters.

In her valedictory speech on Wednesday, Labor MP Melissa Parke described the present system as "a festering wound that is killing off people and eroding our national character and respect". Some in Labor are deeply unhappy and a few have been recently vocal about the ALP's approach, but most don't want the boat rocked.

## Nothing seems able to make Nauru asylum seekers an issue

Written by The Conversation USA

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As for the Liberals, those who used to speak up for asylum seekers have either left the parliament or gone quiet.

Amid his Wednesday media round of budget questions Turnbull was asked whether he ever thought he'd be defending keeping people in a position where they were so desperate they were killing themselves.

Turnbull sympathised with "the mental anguish that many of them are in ... we grieve for them", before swinging into the mantra that to keep our borders secure, people who sought to come to Australia by boat couldn't be allowed to settle here.

Pressed on their future, Turnbull said the people on Nauru could move around there (it is an open centre); those on Manus judged to be refugees could settle there. There were also third-country options, while non-refugees were being encouraged to go home.

There was a hint of blame, when he suggested many had been led to believe they could end up being admitted to Australia.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has taken up a shovel to lay blame, bluntly heaping it on the activity of advocates. In a Tuesday statement on the Somali woman, Dutton said it was "of grave concern" she would "resort to such an extreme act of self-harm".

"I have previously expressed my frustration and anger at advocates and others who are in contact with those in regional processing centres and who are encouraging them to engage in behaviours they believe will pressure the government to bring them to Australia. These behaviours have intensified in recent times, and as we see, have now turned to extreme acts with terrible consequences.

"Advocates and others who proclaim to represent and support the interests of refugees and asylum seekers must hear a clear message that their activities and these behaviours must end."

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In parliament on Wednesday, the Greens' Adam Bandt challenged Dutton with a highly provocative question. "Aren't you just showing pure cowardice by blaming the advocates helping the vulnerable, instead of accepting responsibility for your actions?" Bandt asked, then added: "Can't we do better than this Labor-Liberal policy of not drowning, but burning?"

It was Manager of Opposition Business Tony Burke who jumped up to declare this was deeply offensive to all MPs. Bandt had to withdraw his "burning" line.

Dutton's allegation must be deeply offensive to many advocates. More to the point, it is a cop out – responsibility for what has become, in academic jargon, one of those "wicked problems" has to lie with the government.

Desperation and apparently extensive mental health problems mean the situation on Nauru is only likely to get worse. Having people there indefinitely is not a viable proposition. A workable strategy is needed, which also keeps the Australian border secure.

One of the debates of the coming campaign should be the search for practical answers. But it is a debate the government and opposition are not prepared to have, and nor are the media willing or able to give them a hard enough time to force them into it.

It's a case study in how interests and circumstances conspire to push some issues off-stage in an election.

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/nothing-seems-able-to-make-nauru-asylum-seekers-an-issue-58895>