

Peter Dutton: a menace to multicultural Australia

Written by The Conversation USA

If Malcolm Turnbull is returned he should tip Peter Dutton out of the immigration portfolio when he chooses his new ministry.

Dutton's Tuesday comments, when targeting the Greens' proposal for a big increase in the refugee intake, were crude and inflammatory.

He said on Sky that many of these people wouldn't be literate or numerate even in their own language; they'd take Australian jobs or "languish in unemployment queues and on Medicare" (never mind the contradiction), and there would be a huge cost. "There's no sense in sugar-coating that, that's the scenario," he said.

The first point to remember is that we are talking about people judged to be refugees, not unprocessed asylum seekers. We aren't talking about people coming in boats but through the proper entrance channels. Dutton, however, tried to conflate increasing refugee numbers and boats restarting.

In some quarters Dutton's outburst, which was quickly challenged on points of fact, will resonate politically. In others, it will flow on to sully the reputation of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Turnbull did not slap down Dutton. That's what surely his instinct would have tempted him to do. But in the election "whatever it takes" prevails. Border control is being relentlessly pushed by the Coalition against Labor, although government sources reject suggestions Dutton was put up to what he said.

Turnbull adopted the barrister's approach. He praised Dutton extravagantly, as an "outstanding immigration minister", on both border security and resettlement.

He then extensively reworked and redirected the thrust of Dutton's argument into more palatable, less provocative terms, essentially saying that we can't take more refugees than we can properly look after and integrate.

Turnbull stressed that illiteracy and innumeracy were not the fault of the people concerned; he dwelt on Australia's success as a multicultural society; he slid away from the claim the extra people would be taking Australian jobs.

But, notably, he strongly tied the success of the refugee intake back to the hard line on border control. "We should never forget this – our success as a multicultural nation ... depends upon secure borders. Australians accept this high level of refugee intake, this large humanitarian program, because they know that their government keeps their borders secure", which he claimed Bill Shorten would not.

Turnbull's celebration of Dutton as an "outstanding" immigration minister is a combination of shocking and ridiculous. Turnbull himself has not chosen to have him on cabinet's national security committee. Dutton is a divisive figure, most at home with political head-kicking and policies of enforcement. The toughness required of a minister overseeing border control does not preclude having some compassion, which Dutton does not show.

We hear little from Dutton about the nation-building that used to be proudly at the heart of the immigration portfolio in earlier days.

Dutton is rarely put under much pressure. For example he faced very limited questioning after a Federal Court judge recently found against him over the transfer of a woman in need of an abortion from Nauru to Papua New Guinea, where abortion is very difficult to obtain. One would have thought an adverse court judgement against a minister would have been a much bigger deal in the media than it was.

At present Australia's humanitarian intake is 13,750, set to be 18,750 by 2018-19. This is apart from the 12,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict Australia has agreed to accept. The Greens want the humanitarian program boosted to 40,000, and 10,000 of the existing places in the skilled intake set aside for refugees – a total of 50,000 refugees annually. Labor's policy is to increase Australia's annual humanitarian intake to 27,000 by 2025.

As a wealthy country, we should be able to do better than we are, but how much better is a matter over which people will differ. We ought to take as many as we can resettle properly – it would be counterproductive for the refugees and the community to accept more than that.

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What number of refugees Australia should take, and could absorb, is a perfectly reasonable debate. What's vital is that the debate is conducted in a measured manner.

Comments delivered in an incendiary way are downright dangerous. Our multiculturalism works very well but it is delicate too. Negative reflections on refugees risk undermining it. To say nothing of what they do to the morale of those in the refugee community.

Many of these people struggle, caught between the traumas of their past lives and the tests posed by their new ones.

But there are a lot of success stories too. Labor on Wednesday delved back to remind people of examples such as Frank Lowy, who has spoken movingly of the [dreadful memories from his early life experience](#).

Plenty of recent refugees have made good and their experiences should be an inspiration to those following them here and to the general community.

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