

A deal to be welcomed but detail is missing

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

At long last – a serious deal is in place for the resettlement of refugees from Nauru and Manus.

But the details are very sketchy, and the implementation and monitoring will be vital.

There is no timeline for having the people moved. The emphasis is on gradualism.

And it is not entirely clear whether the United States has agreed to take all – subject to its own health and (no doubt very rigorous) security checks – or a more limited number that it will determine. The word from the government is that all are eligible, but we'll have to see the practice.

Women, children and families will be given priority. The Americans have been very clear with Australia that their focus is on the most vulnerable people. If you are among the young men on Manus, well, good luck. You are at the back of the queue.

The government gives the impression that now the deal is done it may not be greatly worried about aspects such as the speed of delivery.

On the other hand, it may not wish to push its luck too far with the US on what might have been a hard-to-win arrangement. It would be concerning if the agreement were so loose that the Australian government was unsure about America's broad intentions on how many people it is expecting to accept.

Where the government is shouting very loudly is about beefing up border security.

The Prime Minister's Office says the deal was agreed when Turnbull met Barack Obama in Washington in January, and since then the government has been getting into place its planning and extra defences.

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While reinforcing the border with more naval and air capability is a sensible warning to send to opportunistic people smugglers, there was something a touch ludicrous in the parade of men in uniforms at Malcolm Turnbull's news conference.

After all, we are deterring asylum seeker boats, not seeking to repulse the Chinese navy.

Obviously the government believes a very big megaphone is needed to send the message to the smuggling trade.

And to Australian voters. It is no doubt genuinely afraid of a boat or two slipping through – it doesn't want to have to dispatch anyone else offshore and it certainly is anxious to keep pristine its political boast of having stopped arrivals.

In contrast to the earlier settlement deal with Cambodia, which turned into a fiasco, the US is as good a third country destination as the refugees could have hoped for, given Australia and New Zealand were out. This is notwithstanding the deep irony of sending Muslims to Donald Trump's America.

There was speculation on Sunday about whether the deal would survive the arrival of the new administration in power in January.

One would assume that's tied down. These people will be going to the US under the Americans' humanitarian intake. They are not additional to its refugee program. Anyway, given everything else that is on his mind, it's unlikely that Trump will be noticing.

Bill Shorten wasn't nitpicking in his reaction on Sunday, but rather hoping that the deal will work out well. "I'll give the government the benefit of the doubt and hear the facts about what they're putting forward," he told reporters.

From Shorten's point of view, with the left of his party increasingly edgy about the ALP's

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hardline policy, the last thing he wants is for refugees still to be on Nauru and Manus as the next election approaches.

The US-Australia deal isn't dependent on parliament passing the government's proposed lifetime ban on anyone sent to these places later visiting Australia.

If it had been that would have put Shorten, who is opposing the legislation, in a diabolical position.

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