

Former Home Affairs officer calls for all refugees to be brought to Australia

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

A former Home Affairs officer who worked in the refugee area has called for the resettlement of all refugees and asylum seekers from Nauru and Manus in Australia, arguing this could be done without putting at risk our borders.

In a paper being sent to all federal parliamentarians, Shaun Hanns argues that current policy is based on an unfounded belief that resettlement in Australia would lead to an out-of-control influx of boat arrivals. This is a legacy of past experience but is now an irrational fear, he says.

Hanns, who was based in Melbourne, quit the department last week. He said on Wednesday that he had not been willing to go along with the present policy any longer.

In his paper, Hanns says he spent the past five and a half years working as a “protection obligations decision-maker”, interviewing asylum seekers to assess the risk they faced and decide whether they were entitled to refugee status. He stresses he would never advocate a policy that would see a return of the people smuggling industry.

Hanns writes that the current system “relies entirely on boat turn-backs. This makes the continuing detention of those on Manus and Nauru not just tragic, but meaningless. I have struggled for some time with what to do about this belief. The events of the past few months led me, like many others, to genuinely fear we will see a child dying on Nauru and this has spurred me into action.

“I do believe that the focus must be wider though ... any further deaths, of either children or adults, on the islands is completely unnecessary and preventable. Further deaths are also likely”.

Hanns’ paper comes as the government is transferring an increasing number of children from Nauru to Australia. It is under greater pressure to find a solution for the people offshore after the loss of the Wentworth byelection, in which the refugee issue was prominent. The loss has also led to a hung parliament and crossbenchers are pressing the issue.

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Hanns' arguments challenge the strong warnings from Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton about the danger of reviving the people smuggling trade if there is any relaxation of policy.

Hanns details five reasons why resettlement in Australia would not spur a flood of arrivals:

...The naval cordon has been effective in preventing successful journeys from Indonesia, the main pathway to Australia.

...Turn-backs have had significantly more impact on the decisions asylum seekers make than the lack of resettlement options in Australia.

... Past concessions in policy since 2013 have not led to increased attempts to come here.

... A restart to the people smuggling industry would require a number of successful journeys - but the current policy of turn-backs and enhanced screening could thwart these.

... "Out-of-control asylum-seeking behaviour" in the past happened when people could get access to the Australian community before assessment of their refugee claims, in the period 2011-13.

Hans writes that "whilst there is some ambiguity over the impact that the refusal to resettle in Australia is having on asylum seeker behaviour, the experience of agreeing to resettle some 2000+ people in Australia and the US goes some way resolving this and suggests that it is insignificant.

"Past experience shows that the build up of capacity to move large numbers of people from Indonesia to Australia is slow. It appears that the risk of making small changes to policy in order to resolve the situation of those who have already arrived continues to be significantly overestimated", he says.

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"My concern is that current policy settings appear to be based on a belief that removing those currently on the islands will somehow lead to the kind of numbers only previously seen under an open system policy. The fear being that such numbers will be sufficient to overwhelm the turn-back regime.

"I cannot see any rational basis for this belief. In five years working in the refugee section of the department I have never come across any evidence that supports it.

"All of the evidence I have found appears to directly contradict this belief.

"In no given year with offshore processing has there been more attempted arrivals than in 2014. All of these boats were intercepted. Air Marshal Hupfeld [Chief of Joint Operations] has recently stated that our capability has significantly improved since then.

"Previous pragmatic concessions have not led to any increase in activity at all. Past experience suggests that responses to policy changes build slowly, meaning they are unlikely to be able to quickly overwhelm the current system. All of this points to the refusal to resettle in Australia being meaningless", he writes.

"If the architecture of the current system was sufficient to more or less stop the industry at its peak why would it not be able to deal with any small, short term increase in the number of attempts when the industry is at its weakest?"

The US deal is inadequate to empty the islands, even if fully implemented, Hann writes, and the possible deal with New Zealand would do "little to resolve this issue".

Under his suggested policy change, it would be essential to continue boat turn-backs and enhanced screening, he says. "They are the most humane and effective tactic for dealing with attempts, in a way that dissuades others from trying whilst doing the least harm, that we have".

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Hanns argues that in its present policy Australia is “engaging in activities that are legally questionable and morally compromising.

"Public support for these measures is entirely contingent on the belief that they are necessary to restore and maintain order on Australia's borders.

"This is a dangerous thing as people will accept actions they would not otherwise if they truly believe they are necessary".

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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