

## View from The Hill: Morrison and Dutton block their ears and grit their teeth over Tamil family

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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As the federal court prepares to deal with the last ditch effort in the Sri Lankan Tamil family's fight against deportation, Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton are finding "border control" politics a lot more difficult than usual.

They may well boot out the family of four, that includes two small girls born here. But volleys of protest from some noisy and many (usually) quiet Australians mean while the PM and his minister might be on the high ground legally – multiple court decisions, including from the High Court, have found the family not to be refugees – they can't avoid looking threadbare in terms of humanity.

If you're Morrison, to have Alan Jones abusing you relentlessly, and citizens from a regional Queensland town disputing your case vociferously is, well, awkward.

Morrison and Dutton came to this argument well practiced in aggressive techniques. Dismiss and demonise your critics. Dip into history and attribute any blame you can to the Labor party. Drop to the Australian newspaper "on water" details about the latest boat arrival to suggest that allowing the family to stay would trigger an armada from Sri Lanka.

But unfortunately for Morrison and Dutton, Jones has a master's degree in head kicking (which frequently gets him into trouble) and when townspeople of Biloela, where the family lived, appear on TV to press their cause it is hard to dismiss everyone who disagrees with you as the usual suspects – advocates, lefties, greenies, Callithumpians. And that's not to mention the support the family has got from former Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce and the federal MP for the Biloela area Nationals Ken O'Dowd.

Moreover, the government has opened itself to maximum criticism by the way it has handled the family, including a dawn raid and distressing night flights, one of which took them to Christmas Island, where they are the only detainees.

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To put it bluntly, this looked like thuggish behaviour.

Jones went for the jugular in his Tuesday Daily Telegraph column, accusing the government of “heartlessness, inconsistency and hypocrisy”. His barbs couldn’t have been more pointed.

“Are Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton parents?” he asked rhetorically. and urged the family be given “ a bit of ‘au pair’ treatment” - a reference to Dutton’s controversial interventions to prevent the deportations of a couple of [au pairs](#) .

Jones said the Tamil mother had witnessed her fiancé burned alive with several other men in her village who were identified as Tamil Tigers. “If your fiancé, Prime Minister and Peter Dutton, was burnt alive, would you worry too much how you got out of the joint?”

And Jones has no compunction in marshalling religion to the cause (despite some commentators saying Morrison’s faith should be off limits). “In an ostensibly Christian society, it might be time for a bit of practical Christianity,” Jones wrote.

In notable contrast to Jones, fellow 2GB shock jock Ray Hadley is raging on the other side of the argument.

In this age of social media, issues can easily catch fire, but even taking that into account, the Tamil family has stirred an extraordinary level of emotion. Leaving aside a huge petition appealing for a favourable decision and demonstrations in various parts of the country, it is notable that people in their town of Biloela continue to speak out so strongly, even though the family was removed from there early last year. They obviously left much more than just a passing positive impression. They had become part of the town.

One local told the ABC, “at the core, they’re our sort of people ... Out here in the rural area we value workers ... who roll up their sleeves and pitch in”.

**Read more:** [\*Sri Lanka ten years after the war: the Tamil struggle for justice continues\*](#)

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Wednesday's court action is about whether the younger child needs to be assessed individually by the minister for refugee status. There are mixed views on how it will go, but even if it succeeded, it would only be the start of another round in the saga. The matter would go to Immigration Minister David Coleman. He would refuse the girl's claim. That refusal would then be appealable to the federal court (but only on the grounds of the minister erring in law, not on substance grounds). The government could be in for a lot more pain, because the appeal could take a while.

It is indisputable that the issue of the Tamil family has raised legitimate arguments on both sides – the special circumstances of a particular family who have become valued members of a community versus the implications of setting a precedent for many other asylum seekers whose claims fail but have spent years living here.

It is equally indisputable that the government's making an example of this family – because that is the bottom line of what it is doing – looks very distasteful, whether viewed from at home or abroad.

*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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