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BLOG: Refugees a 'political whipping boy'

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BLOG: Refugees a 'political whipping boy'

Abstract

Kevin Rudd has taken up where he left off, but the vexing question of asylum seekers is yet to be answered by either party, writes Anthony Ashbolt. It is almost as if Kevin Rudd never stopped being Prime Minister. Such is the surreal nature of politics I referred to in the last piece. I noted also the Hollywood-like imagery the leadership battle evoked. Yet I did not mention the most glaring instance of this. Gillard marched into the caucus room that would decide her fate surrounded by a posse of loyal colleagues, only to be followed by the lone ranger Kevin Rudd.

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BLOG: Refugees a 'political whipping boy'

By ANTHONY ASHBOLT July 18, 2013, 10 p.m.



A boat full of asylum seekers arrives off Christmas Island in March.

Picture: WOLTER PEETERS

Kevin Rudd has taken up where he left off, but the vexing question of asylum seekers is yet to be answered by either party, writes ANTHONY ASHBOLT.

It is almost as if Kevin Rudd never stopped being Prime Minister. Such is the surreal nature of politics I referred to in the last piece.

I noted also the Hollywood-like imagery the leadership battle evoked. Yet I did not mention the most glaring instance of this. Gillard marched into the caucus room that would decide her fate surrounded by a posse of loyal colleagues, only to be followed by the lone ranger Kevin Rudd.

The stuff of Hollywood westerns was being played out in a caucus room rattled by poor opinion polls. And it is still being played out on the national scene, with Rudd the revitalised sheriff throwing down challenge after challenge to a Tony Abbott who wishes he was still in that other film where his preaching of gloom and doom had such resonance.

There has been a remarkable shift in the political temperament and it does highlight the fact that people had stopped listening to Prime Minister Gillard not the Labor Party itself.

Both Nielsen and Newspoll have the two party preferred position at 50% each but Essential has the Coalition at 52 with Labor at 48. All have Rudd as much more popular than Abbott and this could be the decisive factor in an election. People's expressed voting intentions can mask their real inclinations if they trust a Rudd leadership over that of Abbott.

PREVIOUS BLOG: Spill plays out like a bad Hollywood movie
(<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1602065/blog-spill-plays-out-like-bad-hollywood-movie/>)

Nonetheless, Abbott still has his trump card – the boats. Yes, his promise to stop the boats is a slogan and perhaps an empty one but it has real traction within the community.

You do not only hear it from the proverbial taxi drivers or disgruntled white denizens of Sydney's western suburbs. You even hear critiques from some refugees themselves who resent what they see as wealthier asylum seekers displacing those without the means to access planes to Indonesia and then boats to Australia.

And there is a class analysis that should be applied to the refugee question. This is, to some extent, what Mirko Bagaric, the Dean of Deakin University's Law School and a former member of the Refugee Review Tribunal, did in Monday's Sydney Morning Herald
(<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/time-for-refugee-policy-to-take-hard-rejection-line-in-favour-of-helping-the-most-desperate-20130714-2py0x.html>).

His argument is that current policy favours those who are relatively advantaged rather than the truly desperate. A controversial position, to be sure, but one that cannot be dismissed automatically. And the Government does have to confront the question as there is a perception, whether justified or not, that Labor has let things get of hand.

The refugee advocates are dismayed that the Government has started questioning the credentials of some asylum seekers. Yet there is evidence that not all those who seek refugee status in Australia are fleeing persecution.

Just go back to Sarah Ferguson's report on Captain Emad on 4 Corners last year
(<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2012/05/31/3515475.htm>) or read overseas stories about the fake identities adopted by failed asylum seekers (<http://www.independent.ie/irish->

[news/twothirds-of-failed-asylum-seekers-had-used-false-identities-26855916.html](#)) or even local accounts of the problems with [false identities developed by some seeking residence in Australia](#) (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/facing-up-to-fraud-20120727-22zoc.html>).

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It is sad that what should be a bipartisan policy based upon principles of social justice has been turned into a political whipping boy. The Malaysian policy, while hardly ideal, might have offered a bipartisan solution but the Coalition did not want to lose its advantage. It has played the politics of refugees with hard-nosed cynical skill. Whatever Labor tries, it ends up back in the corner where the Coalition drove it many years ago.

Australia cannot, of course, solve the refugee problem on its own. Nor can it alone solve the problem of climate catastrophe (change is hardly a strong enough term).

The Government's move to an ETS one year earlier than planned is smart politics and may even be smart policy even though there are very strong arguments for a higher price on carbon than exists in the European Union today.

Nonetheless, most indications are that the price will rise in the not too distant future and the politics of combatting global warming will thus become more realistic.

Further action does need to be taken. This was made clear by the Climate Institute in a report that highlighted the fact that Australia must reduce [dramatically its burning of coal, gas and oil reserves](#) (<http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/unburnable-carbon.html/section/www.climateinstitute.org.au/articles/media-releases/australias-exposure-to-the-carbon-bubble.html>).

Given that, Tony Abbott's latest intervention in the debate is nothing less than astonishing. Claiming that the ETS is a "so-called market in the non-delivery of an invisible substance to no one", he has once again cast doubt over the whole field of climate science.

It is not a matter this time of what Hollywood film he thinks he is acting in but rather what planet he thinks he lives on.

Dr Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong. He specialises in American politics and history but has taught and written about Australian politics and media politics for many years. He will be blogging for the Mercury on the Federal election campaign.

He is the main editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013). He is also co-author (with colleague Glenn Mitchell) of a chapter in the recently published Red Strains: Music and Communism outside the Communist Bloc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong.

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