

What the people told Rudd and Burke

“We decided who will come in to this country and the circumstances in which they arrive when we signed and ratified the Refugee Convention...”

This document lists a selection of comments to ALP Opposition leader Kevin Rudd and Labor's Immigration spokesman Tony Burke MP in the Project SafeCom online letter/petition campaign during April 2007.

Page for the letter campaign: <http://www.safecom.org.au/alp-petition1.htm>

Christmas Island Introduction page: <http://www.safecom.org.au/alcatraz-downunder.htm>

The remarks are categorized in the following sections:

1. ALP Voters and Members
2. Those who “fled” to the Greens since Tampa;
3. Those who stress the notion of Compassion,
4. A selection of other remarks and comments.

The campaign brought the attention of Rudd and Burke to three points of Labor's asylum policy that were unacceptable to the writers:

1. Labor currently endorses and plans to maintain once in government John Howard's new Christmas Island “Alcatraz or Guantanamo-style” maximum security asylum jail;
2. Labor currently endorses and plans to maintain once in government John Howard's Excision Zone where Australian refugee law is not enforceable on 4,600 islands to the west, north and east of the Australian coastline;
3. Labor maintains John Howard's “stopping the boats” policy.

In addition to the “set text” of the letter proposed by Project SafeCom, that could be “switched off” if desired, writers could add their own paragraphs to Mr Rudd as well as Mr Burke.

1. ALP members & voters

To Kevin Rudd:

- I write as someone who has been a member of the Labor Party for over 40 years. I sincerely trust that in Rudd Labor Government will show compassion and courage in this matter, so providing the moral leadership that we have sorely missed these past 10 years.

- As a member of the ALP for quite some time, I would find it extremely hard to stomach the possibility of a Labor government (which I am confident will come into power after the next election) supporting these unfair and internationally criminal procedures for 'dealing' with asylum seekers coming to Australia.

- Please enable the ALP to uphold its position as the party for the oppressed, and humanitarian rights.

- Kevin, I know from experience that you are a man of integrity and Christian values. Please make the ALP a shining example of what good government should look like. I have always voted for you, even though I am not a member of the ALP, and I believe you will do whatever is in your power to put the ALP on the right path of action.

- a. As a lawyer I am deeply concerned at the prospect of maintaining this artificial excision from Australia's migration zone. The current legislation in effect has created an area of Australian territory where particular legal obligations that apply to the rest of Australian territory, do not apply.

- b. At the least this is a dangerous precedent, at the worst it represents the handling of a complex problem with populist, simplistic, and inhumane policy. It is bad law and should not and must not be maintained. For the ALP to continue to support such a retrograde - and may I say, illogical - policy is extremely disheartening, however as a loyal ALP member I trust that the National Conference will reconsider and do what is right.

- As a paid-up member of the ALP I want to register my outrage at Howard's Pacific Solution measures. It's time to stand up to this inhumane policy. If you're afraid that a challenge to this policy will cost us votes, I hope that you will at least eliminate it after your election. Thanks.

- As a 77-year-old member of the ALP, I want my Party to welcome asylum seekers and refugees, not to put them into detention, to give them PR and work rights.

- I am one of many people who resigned from the Labor Party after decades of membership when Kim Beazley failed to oppose Howard's position on the Tampa. Australia has a moral obligation to allow asylum seekers to seek refuge here.

- Following the "Tampa" fiasco I voted Greens after a lifelong allegiance to Labor. Unless the Labor Party is prepared, prior to the next election, to announce its clear intent to end mandatory detention and to keep its borders open to asylum seekers I shall continue to withhold my vote from Labor.

To Tony Burke:

- As an ALP member, I expect that the policies of my party reflect a philosophy of equal and fair treatment of our fellow human beings that is integral to its existence.

- As a Labor supporter I was ashamed by Labor caving in to base 'values' after the "children overboard" affair. I fully expect that Labor policy reflects dignity for and compassion - and the real sense of a 'fair go'. Please give us a policy so that we can restore pride in being Australian.

2. Seeking Refuge with the Greens?

To Kevin Rudd:

- The ALP lost my vote with Tampa. I felt I had to resign from my local branch (removed) in [Removed, NSW] over this issue. I still feel the same and if you want my vote back from the Greens you will have to change your refugee and excision zone policies.

- I left the Labor Party and joined the Greens after Kim Beazley's [and the party's] views on refugees and asylum seekers shocked me to the core. I certainly feel more supportive of the Labor party under its present leadership but will not stop voting for the Greens (or rejoin the Labor party) until the ALP amends its policy towards asylum seekers and the Christmas Island Detention Centre.

- While I think your ideas are more progressive than Ruddock/Vanstone/and the current disgrace, you need to go a few steps further and abolish the Pacific Solution altogether. Every small town in Australia has space for at least 50 refugees. The lesson of the Kosovo refugees was clear where they were welcomed in Tasmania. Shame they were then sent home. Australia is a big place. Close the white elephant in Christmas Island. It will cost squillions to operate. If you want to get my preference (I will be voting Greens as Number one) then you will abolish the exclusion zones in accordance with the UN Charter. You will also process all arrivals on the Australian mainland after first checking their claims at the closest centre to their arrival (may not be Christmas Island). The maximum period of detention should be six weeks. I will vote informal if only given the option of Greens then Labor if you refuse this request.

- Like so many Australians I am excited that there is now a possibility of ending the dark times of the Howard years and getting back an Australia we can be truly proud of. One of the things I most despise about Howard is his racism and lack of compassion, the torture of the weak and powerless by bureaucracy. It diminishes us all. When Tampa happened I was one of the thousands of Australians who left the Labor Party and actually joined the Greens because they were the only ones to oppose the heinous acts of our government.

- As a swinging voter between Labor and Green parties, the issue of refugees and that of Uranium mines are important to me. I hope the Labor party can offer a strong alternative to liberal policy.

- I have seriously been considering voting for the ALP at the next election simply because of Howard's government's appalling record on Human Rights issues, including David Hicks' incarceration, continuing Temporary Protection Visas, the Excision Zone and the Christmas Island detention centre. I am concerned however, that the ALP intends to continue with these draconian policies. The Greens are looking better every day. Please do not continue down the Howard Government road of denying our responsibilities under the International Human Rights Convention with regard to refugees. I am truly ashamed to be Australian given our obscene stance in this area.

3. Voting for a Compassion policy

To Kevin Rudd:

- I realise it is a different world to WW2 Germany but the suffering of the refugees is the same and some of the regimes are not too dissimilar. Therefore, remember the compassion we showed in those years and the benefit it was to Australia in forming our identity. Please, rediscover the heart we had back then and treat refugees with humanity.

- Please give us - and the future of Australia - some hope, by remembering our humanity and basic kindness.

- You need to "fight fire with fire" in this situation, as I'm sure you realise. We "Grannies of the Left" (and remember we are many) can only give you our silent trust in the hope that you will hear, understand and act when the time is right. Further, if the ALP is to become the party of the future, concerned with Climate Change, what arrangements are you going to put in place for the millions of Climate refugees that could arrive on our shores in the near future? They can't all be put into detention centres or offshore. Real social policy needs to be made around this and the Labor Party is the best party to do it. But you have to win first.

- Please remember that we have our humanity in common with asylum seekers. We have boundless plains to share and human rights conventions to uphold - lets do the decent thing!

- What really annoys me is the spirit in which this prison was created : the twisted attitude that suggests that mistreating people when they get here will deter future arrivals. It is this abhorrent strategy which I want to be able to vote against - I want my first vote to go to a candidate representing policies that decisively sever our society from this disgusting tactic. I believe that asylum seekers who reach Australia should be treated with compassion. I can't accept that we must make suffering people suffer more in order to manage the small fraction of global refugees that makes its way to our shores.

- I want to be proud to live here again, and I'd like to under a Labor government. But first I want to know that you won't act like the Howard government, especially concerning the refugee issue. I want our country to show compassion.

- If I vote Howard out and Labor in, I want you to represent the ordinary compassionate Aussies who want Australia to play their part in accepting our fair share of displaced persons around the world. We are not afraid of refugees, and we believe they should be allowed to Land on Australian shores and processed according to Australian Migration Laws.

- We decided who will come in to this country and the circumstances in which they arrive when we signed and ratified the Refugee Convention.

To Tony Burke:

- God help us if we ever need help from a country with attitudes like those prevailing in Australia. Please let the ALP policies reflect the compassion and generosity for which Australians are renowned.

- I abhor the whole concept of an island solely for asylum seekers. God forbid the day that any Australian might be in the same need!

- Where is the compassion? Where is the understanding - the walking in someone else's shoes? We can't go on treating people this way - all for the sake of perhaps some political gain.

- Bob Hawke was gracious enough to allow Vietnamese boat people "in". Do you have the same graciousness of heart or are you just a politicised substitute replacing a curr of a Howard government.

4. A selection of other remarks

To Kevin Rudd:

As a member of your electorate, and frequent recipient of support from your office for our organisation, we would be surprised if you did not take some sort of stand at the 44th National Conference against the immoral and self-defeating practices outlined in this submission, as well as the continuing Bridging Visa

regime that disallows 3000-4000 asylum seekers the right to work while their claim is being processed. This costs the community dearly, and your own office at least one bike and a stereo for raffle prizes each year. There has to be a better way!

Now that there is hope of a better Federal Government please do not give us an excuse to keep the rotten to the core Liberals. But if you don't scrap the Christmas Island detention I may have to vote Coalition because they at least have Petro Georgiou etc who can provide balance. Labor members opposed to cruel inhumane detention policies will not be able to do a thing!

That an excised zone has a local member, a standard Australian postcode, and remains within the jurisdiction of customs officials is simply nonsensical and reflects a growing attitude of claims of authority without acceptance of responsibility.

Please don't repeat the mistakes of Kim Beazley, former leader of the Opposition who gave tacit support to Howard's policies of border security and mandatory detention, a vote-grabbing plan that backfired and cost him and Labor dearly. Please be a true LEADER of the OPPOSITION and make a stand for vulnerable members of our global community: women, men and children who flee torture, war, disaster and other crises in their home countries. Refugee Rights are indeed human rights and Australia should, uphold them as in other Western European nations such as Sweden and Norway.

Mr Rudd, I personally emailed all ALP Federal members of Parliament when your challenge for the leadership became public knowledge, urging them to support you and Julia Gillard, based primarily on my hatred of the me-too-ism of Kim Beazley's attempts to become Prime Minister, and the sure knowledge that he would never win pursuing this option, NOR WOULD HE DESERVE TO. Please stand up for human rights and oppose the racist actions and policies of the current "excuse for a Federal Government".

Of the many topics of major interest to the voters of Australia that will be debated at the ALP Conference, none is probably more symbolic than the issue of refugees, detention centres, the Pacific Solution and visas. For non-ALP members this issue will signify whether the next election is worthwhile or not. If Labor fails to set a new agenda - challenging and courageous though this may be in face of the divisive propaganda of Howard and allies - then many of us will feel there is no point in trying for a change of government.

It is time for Labor to become a true Labor government and not the "me too" echo that previous leaders have been in regards to social justice issues. Let Mr Howard be the only Prime Minister to be remembered for his politically astute decisions; please urge your leader Mr Rudd and your party that we are desperate for politicians to act with integrity and justice and not for political gain.

I have spent the last 10 years being ashamed of being an Australian for the first time in my 66 years because of our treatment of asylum seekers. No other country in the world locks up everyone, men, women and children for exercising their rights under UN conventions that we have signed.

While you may have been advised that it is politically astute to continue the restrictive, punitive immigration practices and policies of the Howard Government if you become PM, it would be as morally reprehensible under your government as it is under Howard's. By aligning yourselves with the Coalition as you appear to be doing, you are placing just one more barrier between workers' support for Labor's aspirations to govern. While it is important that Howard is removed it is not necessarily a good thing to see a virtual clone of the Coalition waiting to slip into the seat of power. People may well be satisfied with the restoration of some control over the government by either the election of additional Green's or Independents if there is no clear distinction between government and opposition policies. You have to make a stand, Mr Rudd.

Like so many Australians I am excited that there is now a possibility of ending the dark times of the Howard years and getting back an Australia we can be truly proud of. One of the things I most despise about Howard is his racism and lack of compassion, the torture of the weak and powerless by bureaucracy.

The Howard Government has shadowed us into darkness with its refugee policies and "pacific Solution". Let's start afresh with a Labor government and get rid of these gulags and detention centres.

To Tony Burke:

I do not want to see Australia meekly following the fear-mongering policies and tactics of the USA and the UK any more. It does us no good - not in the present, nor in the long run. Instead we should act independently, becoming an example of integrity in international relations, and promoting peace, respect and multiculturalism in world affairs.