

When the People Shift

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"When the people shift, the politicians will shift"

Russell Broadbent, Liberal MP

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-12/backbencher-says-government-has-to-act-on-immigration-detention/6845492>

In the last week, we have heard the sounds of people shifting, and politicians signaling in palpable ways that they hear the sounds of that slow but unstoppable shift.

Counter-intuitive though it might seem, Immigration Minister Dutton's ham-fisted move to remove a young woman, Abyan, brought to Australia after becoming pregnant as a result of rape on Nauru, is a sign that he, too, knows his brutal game is almost up.

DIBP decided to interpret a request by the 23 year-old for standard counseling and treatment before she underwent an abortion as a refusal to participate in the termination and hastily removed her from the country to Solomon Islands in order to prevent legal action. Apart from the pitiless treatment of a young woman for whose terrible plight -- pregnancy as a result of rape while in custody -- the Australian government is responsible, the move speaks of a clumsy and panicked reaction rather than a considered response. As in the ill-judged Border Force operation planned for Melbourne in September which had to be ignominiously cancelled because of public outrage, the DIBP has proved itself again incapable of acting in concert with public sentiment.

The midnight removal to Solomon Islands, the refusal to consult with legal counsel, even as her developing pregnancy places Abyan's health (mental and physical) at increased risk, all indicate a last ditch effort to thwart the chorus of public refusal and revulsion at what our policies perpetrate in the name of 'deterrence'.

The evidence is now irrefutable that the 'No Advantage' policy that initiated the current offshore detention program is one that breeds mental illness breakdown and generates the conditions for sexual violence against and the cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment of detainees.

Last week Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites (RAPBS) sent a letter to members of Liberal, Labor, Greens and independent parliamentarians detailing the breakdown induced in a family following the rape of 23 year-old Nazanin. Nazanin, her mother and her brother have all made multiple attempts at suicide due to unbearable suffering. Her brother, Omid, whose cruel and degrading treatment at the hands of

detention centre guards and Nauru Police was previously reported, has recently made another attempt. The 20 year-old last week suffered a breakdown and in an act of desperation that reflects his agonized state, began to eat stones and small rocks.

In the preceding days, doctors and other medical workers at the Royal Melbourne Hospital made a public stance against returning children to conditions that actively damaged their health. As Russell Broadbent, long a dissenting voice in Liberal Party ranks, lost no time in pointing out, the RMH is a highly respected national institution, among whose donors, volunteers and clients are many Liberal Party voters.

The stance by the RMH is only the most recent in a sequence of national figures and institutions to openly stand against the punitive detention regime of Sovereign Borders. In early October key social organizations, including ACOSS, AWAVA, the Federation of Community Legal Councils, signed a letter initiated by RAPBS, that called for an end to offshore detention. The letter, which included strong remarks by Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty, drew international attention, being reported by the *New York Times*, China's Xinhua news agency and the BBC. During the same period, a petition initiated in the name of the Women of Australia drew over 20,000 signatures, including those of national figures ranging from Janet Holmes a Court to Judy Davis.

An editorial in Women's Agenda, was clear-eyed about what was at stake:

Those of us who care about the wellbeing of women and children cannot act only for the women and children we see around us, if we care about women, we care about all women, if we stand up against sexual violence, we stand up against all sexual violence, whether it is enacted against women, children or men.

<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/editor-s-agenda/nauru-and-manus-how-we-became-the-monsters-we-claimed-to-fight-against/201510056342#.ViMscNbZXdk>

These voices, as Broadbent understands, can by no means be dismissed as from the radical left. They are the voices of an informed, thoughtful and articulate electorate who are increasingly horrified as the violent practices of offshore detention can no longer be kept out of their sight.

In a move that shows that politicians are listening, a cross-party, cross-faith parliamentary group was initiated last week, with Labor figures such as Fremantle MP Melissa Parkes leading the way. Former speaker Anna Burke is another Labor MP who is responsive to rising popular sentiment.

Last week Parkes, who has been a lone courageous voice in her party, read extracts from a letter signed by around eight hundred Nauru detainees into the parliamentary record: *These words are coming from hell. There are many broken hearts screaming with heartache because we have been kept for such a long time, with nothing except*

failing lives.... Wondering why our lives were saved in the ocean. [...] You took our joy, you took our hope, dreams and locked us up inside the fence

Then she ended with her own words:

What terrible shame this has brought on our nation. Many many voices in the Australian community are saying it is time to stop the madness of Manus and Nauru. I welcome the establishment today of a cross-party, cross-faith national taskforce to help us move in a different, infinitely more hopeful direction.

Yes, despite the last gasp reactivity of Dutton and his DIBP shock troops, that is the sound of politicians shifting as the people shift in an infinitely more hopeful direction.

Please note: This article was written October 2015