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TITLE: Asylum-seekers a distracting non-issue

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One of the main roles of a prime minister is to determine the priorities of their government. Should we focus on tackling climate change or on indigenous disadvantage, should we focus on making it easier for employers to sack their workers or should we focus on asylum-seekers?

Of course with the entire machinery of the Commonwealth Public Service and a budget of about \$300billion a year, prime ministers can walk and chew some gum at the same time. But no matter how capable they can't juggle, tap-dance and read a book while they are at it. Hard decisions about priorities must be made.

One of the main roles of political strategists is to advise their leader about the degree of overlap between genuine policy problems, widespread community support, and the potential for an issue to unite or divide your side of politics or your opponent's. The perfect political storm arises when you can identify a solution to an important problem that is both popular and that unites your team while dividing your opponents.

John Howard created such a storm with the Tampa in 2001 and the waves that storm created are still washing over the ALP.

Howard knew that immigration had the potential to attract blue-collar votes from the Australian Labor Party while dividing the left and right of that party.

He attempted to exploit that opportunity in the 1980s in relation to Asian migration but was slapped down by his own party. But after Pauline Hanson, a disendorsed Liberal candidate, showed how successful such a strategy could be he was determined to try again.

Howard's enduring success in politicising the issue of the small number of refugees who seek asylum each year in Australia was to reframe the issue as one of national security rather than one of xenophobia. This was an essential step as, no matter how popular an idea is in the electorate and how divisive it is for your opponents, such an idea is of no real use unless you can convince people that the idea is a solution to an actual problem.

The success of Howard's decision to reject the Fraser government's embrace of those fleeing wars in Asia in the 1980s, and instead seek to "protect our borders" from those

fleeing the wars Australia was waging in Iraq and Afghanistan, flowed directly from his ability to make Australians afraid.

Just as those who sell bathroom deodorisers must make us fear the judgement of our visitors in order to sell their product, so too did Howard have to make us fear the vulnerable in order to sell his "solution".

Compared to most developed countries Australia is not experiencing a large influx of asylum-seekers.

The American satirist Stephen Colbert refers regularly to the notion of "truthiness" to describe the phenomenon whereby people increasingly believe things that they simply wish were true.

Put simply, Australia doesn't have an asylum-seeker problem; it has a problem with asylum-seekers.

The problem for the Government, however, is that it has spent the past four years accepting the premise that one of the main problems facing Australia is the small number of people who arrive here on boats seeking asylum.

This problem was invented to divide the ALP and attract blue-collar votes away from it and, rather than try to place the issue into the broader perspective of some of the real problems facing Australia, it instead attempted to show that the party was "firm but fair". Having tried to walk both sides of the street it has made friends on neither side.

This is not to say that Julia Gillard's Government should have simply ignored the issue of people smuggling. The Coalition would not have given it that luxury. But it would have been relatively easy for the Government to take every opportunity to remind Australians that in the scheme of things the "threat" from asylum-seekers was trivial compared to the very real problems associated with the inadequate age pension, the lack of a disability insurance scheme, the absence of paid parental leave and the enormous infrastructure challenges that built up in Australia's outer suburbs as the Howard government committed itself to record high migration levels and record low investment in infrastructure.

Governments can't solve all problems, but successful ones work hard to build community support for the problems they believe they can, or must, solve.

Australia has low unemployment and low inflation, and is experiencing an enormous boom in the price the world is willing to pay for our natural resources.

But rather than ask why in the middle of the biggest mining boom in our history we still can't afford to provide Australians with subsidised dental care or speed our trip to work through investment in public transport, we are instead stuck debating whether the "Malaysian Solution" or the "Nauru Solution" is more appropriate for the relative non-problem of refugees seeking asylum in a country that is determined to rapidly increase its population.

The reason the ALP just can't seem to solve "the asylum-seeker issue" is that it was actually invented to cause Labor problems. The smart thing to do would have been to work steadily to take the heat out of the whole debate by continually reminding people that the Coalition was more interested in locking up asylum-seekers than in providing good transport to western Sydney, or in helping families who work tirelessly to care for loved ones with disabilities.

But that strategy would only have worked if Labor had started years ago. Now that the High Court has struck down its latest attempt to walk both sides of the street it will be hard to pretend that that's not what it was trying to do. Maybe Labor should spend the next two years focusing on the real problems it really cares about and hope that in two years' time, even if it doesn't win the next election, at least it will have something to be proud of.

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