

## ROBERT MANNE. Oh, No Jim, No Jim, No Jim, No

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As readers of John Menadue's blog might be aware, I believe that Australia ought, on the one hand, to find homes in the next months for the 1,700 or so refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island who we are allowing to be destroyed in body and spirit and, on the other, retain the policy of naval interception and return to point of departure so as to avoid a return to the situation of 2009-2013 when 50,000 asylum seekers reached Australia by boat and 1,000 or 1,200 drowned.

Accordingly, my position on the question of how Australia should now respond to the asylum seeker issue is close to Father Frank Brennan's and, roughly speaking, equidistant between the position of two other panellists on Monday night's Q & A, the legal idealist Professor Jane McAdam, and the military realist, the architect of the Operation Sovereign Borders policy, General Jim Molan. While however I disagreed with several of Jane McAdam's ideas, I was appalled and angered by both the tone and content of several of Jim Molan's remarks.

Asked by a member of the audience about where the refugees on Nauru and Manus Island might be settled given Australia's unwillingness to bring them here, Molan replied: *"There are choices for those on Nauru and Manus, and those choices are if you're a refugee, then you settle in those, or other countries that will take you. If you're not a refugee, you go home. In the meantime, we should treat these people with the respect and the security that they deserve."* It is worth examining briefly all these claims.

Molan believes the families on Nauru can settle permanently in a country of 10,000 people without a real economy. This is strange. Just three weeks ago the President of Nauru, Baron Waqa, told the United Nations summit on refugees that Nauru was not a country *"that can offer permanent settlement for refugees or migrants."*

Molan believes that the men on Manus can be settled permanently in Papua New Guinea. For the past three years the government of Papua New Guinea has been dragging its heels regarding every aspect of the permanent settlement it once offered the Rudd government. Even more importantly, because of the violence and the crime, Papua New Guinea is one of the most dangerous societies on earth. Settlement in Papua New Guinea for Muslims or Tamils, especially those without means, would be a truly terrifying experience.

Molan spoke of the “*other countries*” where they might settle. Countries is a plural noun. Apart from the entirely unsuitable, impoverished and unstable Cambodia, which other countries, one wondered, did Molan have in mind?

Molan believes that all those who are refused refugee status could easily be sent home. Is he unaware that Iran refuses involuntary repatriation? What does he think should happen to Iranians on Nauru and Manus Island if refused refugee status?

Several international bodies have visited Nauru. All have been appalled at the psychological and spiritual state of the inmates. Recently, the *Guardian* published thousands of harrowing “*incident reports*” that revealed the epidemic of abuse, despair and self-harm that has overtaken those Australia sent to Nauru more than three years ago. Recently, three of these people have tried to end their lives by setting themselves on fire. Q & A took a question from a member of Amnesty International, Dr Anna Neistat, who had recently visited Nauru. Although she had worked in Syria, Afghanistan and Chechnya, she told us that she had never seen suffering like she witnessed on Nauru where “*suicides, attempted suicides, self-immolation, self-harms...are a daily occurrence.*” No one who has followed the successive reports can be unaware of the truth of her words. And yet Molan, who has never visited Nauru, apparently believes Australia is treating these people “*with the respect and security that they deserve*”.

One of the members of the Q & A audience, Larissa Mitchell, is a high school teacher. She was sitting between two of her female Muslim students. She asked why the lives of thousands of such young people, trapped in a “*legal limbo*”, were now being rendered miserable and insecure by the refusal of the Australian government to grant them the hope of permanent settlement in Australia even after their parents’ status as genuine refugees had been confirmed by Australia’s rigorous assessment system. Molan had already answered this question. He informed us that one of the three pillars of the policy he had designed—Operation Sovereign Borders—was temporary protection. Temporary protection was one of the key means of preventing people setting out by boat for Australia. Without temporary protection visas there would be a return to the situation of 2009-2013.

Nothing could better reveal the sheer thoughtlessness of Australia’s asylum seeker policymakers than the attitude towards temporary protection Molan revealed on Q & A. Temporary protection visas were introduced by the Howard government in 1999 when it became clear that indefinite mandatory detention was an insufficient deterrent. By 2001 it had become crystal clear that even in combination with mandatory detention, temporary protection did not deter the boats. During the Tampa ‘crisis’ the Howard introduced two new deterrent measures—offshore processing and naval turn-back. These deterrents did work. Between 2002 and 2007 virtually no asylum seeker boats set

out for Australia. From the point of view of deterrence, temporary protection was now entirely redundant.

The asylum seeker deterrent system however somehow has a life of its own. At a time when no asylum seeker boats were arriving, temporary protection visas were reintroduced by the Abbott government. While valueless as a deterrent, they have since that time proven highly effective as a means of casting a dark shadow over the lives of the 30,000 refugees and asylum seekers who reached Australia during the Rudd and Gillard years. Temporary protection without hope of permanency has been, since 2002 at the very latest, a pointless and purposeless act of cruelty. As he revealed on Q & A, Molan is incapable of seeing this.

Another member of the audience, Shukufa Tahiri, a Hazara woman who works with the Refugee Council of Australia, asked Molan to respond to the fact that even though suicide is virtually unknown among the Hazaras in Afghanistan, in recent months in Australia, because of the existential insecurity of the temporary protection regime, amongst the recent arrivals there has been a spate of suicides. Shukufa Tahiri obviously understood that something terrible was being experienced by her people. Her remarks did not however even cause Molan to pause for thought. *"I don't connect the two [temporary protection and suicide]...if you come illegally you must not benefit..."* The self-confidence was staggering.

Molan's interpretation of the history of refugee policy in the past was almost comically self-contradictory. On the one hand, he praised the processing centre created on Galang Island in Indonesia under the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Vietnamese refugees and claimed it was a precursor of Operation Sovereign Borders. On the other, he was entirely opposed to the idea of establishing new offshore processing camps in Indonesia today. *"The practicalities of doing that are absolutely appalling for the simple reason that we are guaranteeing people...if you get to Indonesia, we'll look after you..."* Looking after people, by moving them from Indonesia to Australia and other settlement countries, was precisely what the Comprehensive Plan of Action was about.

Molan's interpretation of more recent Australian asylum seeker history was no more coherent. During the Howard years, the government brought the majority of the refugees on Nauru and Manus Island while retaining, as a deterrent, naval interception and turn-back to point of departure. Asylum seeker boats did not return.

Molan revealed on Q & A that he does not see the history in this way. He argued that Howard's willingness to bring the refugees from Nauru and Manus Island to Australia was a serious policy mistake and that the refugees now on Nauru and Manus Island, more than a decade later, refused to go to Cambodia *"because of an error that was made in my humble view during the Howard years"*

*when people from Nauru and Manus were finally allowed to come to Australia. That's fine except it gives hope to each and every person who is on Nauru and Manus now..."*

Molan, then, apparently believes the Howard government ought to have left the people it sent to the offshore processing camps to rot there indefinitely, and that it was a serious mistake to bring them to Australia. The reason he gives is revealing. It was a serious mistake because it offers the present residents of these offshore camps just a glimmer of hope that they might one day be able to come to Australia to live fully human lives.

Hope is then, according to Molan, the enemy of policy. The 1700 on Nauru and Manus must be taught that they cannot hope for anything better than survival against the odds in Phnom Penh or Port Morseby. The 30,000 recent arrivals in Australia must be taught that they cannot hope that they will ever be citizens of the country to which they fled in fear.

In Molan's view, all Australians have good reason to feel "*proud*" of this policy of consciously cultivated hopelessness. And not only that. According to him, Australia's asylum seeker policies represent the international wave of the future, or what he called on Q & A "*the new normal*".

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the profound despair being experienced by the 1,700 on Nauru and Manus Island and the crippling insecurity of the 30,000 recent arrivals in Australia anxiously awaiting news of their fate, Molan is, finally, convinced that "*no Australian should feel embarrassed about what we're doing for the refugees in the world.*"

I agree with Jim Molan. I do not feel embarrassment. Like Frank Brennan, what I feel is shame.

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