A bipartisan failure of policy and morality

Perhaps the most stupefying aspect of our asylum seeker debate is that we call it a debate in the first place. It's not. It's a complete political consensus. Our current policies are a bipartisan concoction; the result of years of mutual posturing, outflanking and then outbidding. You're banning asylum seekers to detention centres in the Australian desert? Fine, we'll send them to Nauru for processing! "You're still resettling them here? We'll banish them forever!" "Oh yeah? We'll get an army general to do it!" And so on.

It's hugely disingenuous. The Coalition claims sole credit for stopping the boats, never acknowledging that the most important part of its policy is the mandatory shutting of people to Nauru and Papua New Guinea, never to return to Australia - was Kevin Rudd's. The Coalition added some turn-backs and maybe some other things they've decided are top secret, but the truth is that boat arrivals slowed significantly before Tony Abbott was even elected.

Labor, meanwhile, is happy to blame the Coalition for whatever aspect of the policy disintegrates, never acknowledging its role in the catastrophe.

That's what is particularly nauseating about watching Labor trying to make political mileage out of asylum seeker policy. And on that score, what a nauseating week it has been. "They have botched this from day one,"uffed Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles when Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court ruled our detention centre there to be illegal.

But here's the problem: that centre was always illegal. It didn't suddenly become illegal when Abbott took power. Marles is right; it was botched from day one, but that was Labor's day. It takes some special level of gall to establish an illegal detention centre, then insist it's the Coalition's mess.

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There's no great surprise here. This was such an obvious violation of the PNG constitution that the PNG government tried frantically in 2014 to change the constitution to make it legal. When the moment of truth arrived, neither the PNG nor Australian governments mounted a meaningful defence. This die was long cast.

Marles' only real defence is to say this whole centre should be emptied by now; that they might have got away with it if only the getaway car had turned up on time. Hence: "PNG never imagined people would be on Manus for so long - we didn't either."

Well, that's a monstrous failure of imagination, then. Because while it's true Labor said its Manus centre would be empty in a year, it's also true there was never any chance that would happen. It was an entirely unaccountable dream; a declaration utterly devoid of meaning.

Labor never knew where these people would be resettled, once found to be refugees. It never handed the Coalition a stack of agreements with other countries guaranteeing these people would have a home. It passed on a detention regime made of matchsticks. Now it stands ready to cut, the moment things collapse.

No, the real feat of imagination here would have been to pretend this could end any other way. Because the PNG Supreme Court this week did nothing more than reveal the obvious: that our policy was only ever to sweep asylum seekers under someone else's rug. It was designed to stop boats coming to us, but solve no greater problem than that. We've brokered no agreement with our regional neighbours to share the load, because we've preferred instead to bribe the poorest nations into removing the problem from our sight.

Occasionally, as in Cambodia's case, we've paid them dozens of millions of dollars for almost exactly nothing.

Pursue that kind of non-policy and eventually it catches up with you. Manus is full of people already found to be refugees, stuck in a country that says it simply cannot afford to take them, and right next to one that very easily could.

They're there because "stop the boats" - in truth a bipartisan slogan - only ever masked a question we could never answer: what happens to these people? What happens to the ones who don't die at sea, or the ones we convince to return home? Do they die elsewhere? We don't really know because the minute they aren't on boats headed for us, we cease to exist. And as far as we're concerned, their misery doesn't exist either.

That's why all the stories simply wash over us. Reza Berati is killed, under our care. The ABC's Four Corners program reveals that Hamid Khazaei died because the Immigration Department pointlessly delayed vital medical treatment. This week we learnt an Iranian man set himself on fire in Nauru. None of this fundamentally moves us because we've constructed an elaborate world that makes this simply the cost of doing business, rather than anything that registers as a series of tragedies we've helped create. Nothing gets in the way, except when a court uses brute force.

That's when you'll find Richard Marles, not questioning how his own party's scheme could be so hopelessly conceived, but demanding Peter Dutton fly to PNG to keep this thing alive. Somehow, Anyhow.

It's also when you'll find Peter Dutton responding by saying refugees from Manus "will not be settled in Australia". That's not even remotely an answer...