Refugees

Refugee furore Turnbull backs Dutton

Immigration minister is ‘outstanding’

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has labelled Peter Dutton “outstanding” after his Immigration Minister drew fire for claiming an expanded humanitarian intake of refugees would see many “illiterate and innumerate” refugees living on welfare, and benefiting from Medicare while also taking Australian jobs.

The comments touched off a storm with both Labor and the Greens condemning the government in the strongest terms.

“These people would be taking Australian jobs, there’s no question about that,” Mr Dutton had said.

Refugee groups pointed to Treasury evidence that migrants, including refugees, added more to the economy than they cost it, even if there were initial costs associated with resettlement.

Paul Power from the Refugee Council of Australia said the suggestion of refugees simultaneously taking jobs while also being “illiterate and innumerate” was nonsense.

“Mr Dutton’s comments are not only incoherent, they contravene the evidence substantiated by the contributions of hundreds of thousands of refugees who have contributed to our country,” he said, while describing humanitarian migrants as “a politically defenceless section of Australian society”.

“The fact that this political attack is coming from the minister responsible for Australia’s refugee program makes it even more offensive.”

Dubbing Mr Dutton “an outstanding Immigration Minister”, the Prime Minister said Australia was one of the most generous countries in the world when it came to refugee resettlement and took its responsibilities seriously.

But he sought to put Mr Dutton’s comments into context by explaining that large numbers of refugees came from war-torn countries, and that this was to be met with compassion, not intolerance.

“Large percentages of them have no English skills at all, many of them are illiterate in their own language, many of them have not completed high school,” Mr Turnbull said.

“That’s no fault of theirs. That’s why we’re reaching out to help them with compassion. That is not a basis for criticising them.”

“What it is, as Peter has identified, is a basis for us taking our responsibility seriously and ensuring that we take into Australia the number of refugees that we can effectively settle.”

Unlike many other countries, Australia invested hundreds of millions of dollars in refugee settlement and support services, the Prime Minister said. “Many countries in the world accept many refugees into their countries and effectively forget them. We don’t.”

Mr Turnbull said Labor’s intention to double the annual humanitarian intake of refugees would come with a price tag, likely in the billions of dollars, that the opposition had not costed. “Labor’s approach to immigration is one of gesture politics,” he said.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said One Nation leader Pauline Hanson “would be proud to make” comments such as those by Mr Dutton, but Foreign Minister Julie Bishop endorsed his comments on Wednesday, saying it was “self-evident” that resettling refugees was expensive.

Asked whether he would want a divisive border protection debate run through the election campaign, Mr Turnbull repeated Tuesday’s comments that “border protection and immigration are and always have been key political issues”.

However, when asked directly, he would not repeat or echo Mr Dutton’s suggestion that refugees “would be taking Australian jobs”.

The cynicism and dishonesty with which the Coalition government is seeking to create and fan irrational fears about people seeking asylum is as shameful as it is absurd.

On the day Malcolm Turnbull’s disapproval rating eclipsed his approval rate for the first time since he snatched the prime ministership and declared he would lead by treating citizens as intelligent and mature, he and some of his most senior colleagues resorted to the opposite.

Their attempt on Wednesday to demonise some of the world’s most vulnerable people as a simultaneously threat to Australian jobs and a potentially dreadful drain on the welfare system suggests electoral panic. Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, Mr Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop not only insulted the integrity and dignity of people fleeing persecution, war, and worse, but their intelligence and decency of Australians.

Consider these words from Mr Dutton, in response to a suggestion from the Greens that, at a time when there are more displaced people in the world – 60 million – than at any time since the Second World War, Australia should boost its humanitarian intake.

“These people would be taking Australian jobs... for the many who would be unemployed, they would languish in unemployment queues and on Medicare so there would be huge cost and there’s no sense in sugar-coating that.”

Ms Bishop backed him, reiterating the financial argument, while Mr Turnbull lauded his minister and in effect claimed that Australia’s treatment of people seeking asylum was beyond reproach.

The Age has long and consistently argued the treatment of such people by recent Coalition and Labor governments has been a disgrace. We understand the issues are complex, and that there were a ready solution, it would have been evident long ago. But cruelly plucking people in grim offshore detention centres where they suffer awful health problems, both physical and mental, is wrong, and lower the standing of our nation. We believe our government should process people onshore, in the community, and lead in the creation of an enhanced regional and international solution with sufficient resources to process refugees so they do not take the dire risk of getting on people-smuggler boats. The repelling status quo is clearly unsustainable, as Mr Turnbull and his team must surely be aware, as should Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and his treasury spokesman Chris Bowen, a former immigration minister, who in running to denigrate Mr Dutton men ‘looked hypocritical.’

Labor governments have been deplorable as the Coalition. It was Kevin Rudd who led a team including Mr Shorten and Mr Bowen to the 2013 election with the draconian policy that not only would any one who arrived by boat seeking asylum – a legal act despite disdaining the contrary – be kept in mandatory offshore detention, they would never be allowed to settle in Australia, even if found to be genuine refugees. As many as 90 per cent of people who arrive boat seeking safety are genuine refugees.

The Coalition’s cost argument risible. It costs taxpayers $400/hour to keep someone in offshore detention. That’s a total of about $3.5 billion a year, four times what is spent on Indigenous health at one of the fastest-growing items in recent fiscal history. Processing asylum seekers in the community costs $12,000 a year. That would free up ample money to not only assimilate, employ and tax arrive and establish a regional queue.

Australia should be dismayed by the waste and inhumanity and the continuing in their name, and demand honesty and honour from candidates. Enough is enough.