

"I don't want to live on this planet any more!"

By Brian Hilliard



Recently, one of my son's facebook updates read, 'I don't want to live on this planet any more'. I was concerned about how he was feeling, but when I spoke to him that evening, he reassured me.

Apparently, unlike his mates, I had missed a vital cultural allusion. The line was a quote from a television show called *Futurama*. A character had been trying to explain to earthlings why the concept of evolution was obvious and supported by all the available evidence. The earthlings listened politely, but continued on with their blind assertions of creationism.

I think I know the feeling. I have sometimes thought that I don't want to live in this country any more because of the views of my fellow Australians in relation to issues that I find completely unarguable.

Take the attitudes, often reported in our controversy-crazy press, about the treatment of asylum-seekers in Australia. Recent debates around the proposed detention centre for asylum-seekers in Northam in WA spurred me on to yet another round of looking for heavy objects to throw at my radio.

I was listening to a recording of a packed town hall meeting to discuss the issue on *PM* on the ABC. You could hear members of the audience calling out inflammatory phrases and shouting down speakers who were making comments such as, "these people are not criminals, they are fleeing persecution".

"You don't know that!", was the response from the crowd. One of the members of the audience apparently

had the words 'Bomb the Boats' emblazoned across his T-shirt.

History has shown that almost everyone who arrives in Australia by boat seeking asylum is ultimately found to deserve refugee status, and therefore the right to stay in our country to pursue their lives free from persecution and wars in the countries from which they fled.

Indeed, a much higher proportion of so-called 'boat people' are held to be genuine refugees than those who arrive in Australia by more conventional and acceptable means. However, we persist in locking up boat arrivals, and usually in pretty inhospitable places. This sends the message that incarceration is what they deserve.

While not wanting to appear overtly political, I blame John Howard.

When researching Malcolm Fraser's claims to our most recent Civil Justice Award, I was interested to see how such matters were handled in his day. His government revitalised Australia's immigration program, bringing migrants from Asian countries, including nearly 56,000 Vietnamese refugees.

Over 2,000 'boat people' were granted entry, and no arbitrary detention was viewed as necessary. The Labor opposition did not politicise the issue and, while there was some concern, the policy was generally well-accepted.

In 1992, Labor introduced arbitrary detention, but Howard really threw the xenophobia switch in 2001 when, in the run-up to an election, he introduced a policy of military repulsion of refugees and mandatory

offshore detention.

The clear message was that people on the boats were both criminals and invaders. I still hear the disturbing echoes on the talkback radio shows of references to 'illegal aliens'.

Anyone who attempts to reach our shores seeking asylum, by whatever means, has committed no crime. In my opinion, the only crime is sending them to some fly-ridden, remote spot for years while their claims are checked.

In many ways, the fears of Northam residents – that the equivalent of Camp X-ray, Guantanamo Bay, is about to be erected in their midst – are understandable. But the lack of rigour and candour in the public debate on this issue makes me want to cringe.

Frankly, sometimes I don't want to live on Planet Australia. But if, like me, you believe that we must do whatever we can both to revise public opinion about such matters and help those who are at the sharp end of harsh government policies, then join us in taking action. You can encourage people to join the Alliance...and, if they are already members, you can encourage them to take up a position on one of our committees. Perhaps you yourself would enjoy a more active role? Election time is coming up, so the time to consider more active participation is now! ■

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