

Public Statement by Humanities Scholars on Australia's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Crisis

"We will not be held over a moral barrel," the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, declared, in the face of cries of outrage from the public over the mid-sea interception and handover of asylum seekers to a regime whose human rights record is profoundly flawed. As academics working in the Humanities, we are dismayed to hear our Prime Minister deny the ethical responsibility of this nation to adhere to the tenets and conventions on asylum seekers that are founded on moral bases, and which we as a nation have signed. The government's mandate to 'stop the boats', if it is such, does not exempt the nation from its moral obligations.

We find the political show of contempt for *the moral* profoundly disturbing in the context of increasing self-harm by refugees, including children, in Australia's detention centres, attempts at suicide by refugee mothers in despair at the plight of their children and other traumatic incidents. In these crisis situations, in which lives are stake, the moral is not something that is expendable.

The international Refugee Convention of 1951 emerged out of an historical crisis following which the international community acted in concert to stop the subjection of refugees to political opportunism and xenophobia. These historical lessons must not be forgotten. Rather, they should impel us to adhere to very principles and ethics on which the convention was based.

As Humanities scholars who teach and research practices of ethics, values and justice as constitutive of a civic and just society, we have to question a leadership whose vision for the nation is not founded on a moral base. We call on the polity to affirm a vision of the nation that is committed to non-negotiable ethical principles that override the mere fulfillment of election slogans such as "stop the boats." Such political sloganeering amounts to nothing more than a betrayal of the responsibility for ethical leadership.