

Answering to Jakarta



Illustration: John Spooner

Scott Burchill
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THE Howard Government's decision to subcontract the processing of asylum seekers to Australia's poorest neighbours is more than simply a dereliction of its sovereign responsibilities.

The resumption of offshore processing confirms that Canberra intends to solve its diplomatic problems by altering the nation's immigration and refugee policies. This strategy is unwise, unpopular and guaranteed to fail.

Its primary flaw is that it only addresses the symptoms rather than the cause of the problem. By granting temporary protection visas to 42 Papuan asylum seekers in March, the Immigration Department determined that if they were to be forcibly returned home they would face a "well-founded fear of persecution".

Terminate the human rights abuses and the problem goes away. This is the message Prime Minister John Howard should have delivered to visiting Indonesian MPs this week. Instead, Jakarta continues to insist that the problem is of Australia's making, asking for the visas to be revoked while demanding Australia "prove" its commitment to Indonesia's territorial integrity with "action".

Presumably these are the same individuals who object to Canberra's insistence that Indonesia comply with international law after the release of Abu Bakar Bashir, on the grounds that it is interference in Indonesia's domestic affairs. The United Nations obliges Indonesia to freeze the radical cleric's assets and prevent him from travelling overseas and obtaining weapons.

The Howard Government's desire to pass even tougher laws on asylum seekers suggests it is fully aware of Jakarta's crimes in Papua, that it expects them to continue, and that as a consequence more Papuans are likely to risk their lives by trying to escape the territory.

Its response is to ignore the cause of the problem — which would be called state terrorism if it were occurring elsewhere — and make it more difficult for future asylum seekers to establish their claims. The Government refuses even to talk about what it discovered is going on in the province or explain why the persecution continues under what Liberal senator George Brandis described as "the most liberal ruler that Indonesia has had and is likely to have". Canberra's expectations of the newly democratic society seem extraordinarily low.

There is no place for torture, political persecution, grand larceny or cultural genocide in an authentic democracy. By trying to assuage Jakarta's irrational fears, Canberra only avoids the issue and ensures that both the abuses and the paranoia will continue. Has it learnt nothing from Indonesia's 24-year occupation of East Timor? A stable and productive bilateral relationship is important but it will never be built as long as both governments conspire to play down the crimes of one side.

Contriving a moral panic about border protection might have worked once for the Howard Government. However, it may not work again, despite the absence of principled opposition from the ALP. A recently commissioned poll showed that 74 per cent of those who were asked did not want the Government to alter its immigration policies to improve ties with Jakarta. This view is shared by an all-party Senate committee that regards the new laws as unworkable and an "inappropriate response" to pressure from Jakarta. Even the few remaining liberals in the Liberal Party are prepared to break ranks with their conservative colleagues unless they are granted concessions by Amanda Vanstone and Howard.

John Howard and Alexander Downer are as committed to Papua's retention inside the republic as their counterparts in Jakarta. Their preference, however, is not shared by the indigenous people of

the province, who want to leave the republic politically and, now, physically. The Government's problem is it cannot resolve the contradiction within its own policy. One arm of its bureaucracy (Immigration) has publicly highlighted a running sore that another arm (Foreign Affairs) has been doing its best to conceal and ignore, rather than treat.

The Government is stuck in a dilemma of its own making, but its response in effect is to tell the Immigration Department "you got us into this mess so you can get us out of it". The department won't succeed because the problem is not its to solve. Canberra's clumsy efforts to make the lives of desperate asylum seekers even worse by incarcerating them in legal black holes such as Nauru only panders to those responsible for their misery.

These efforts may well be "appreciated" in Jakarta because it diverts public attention from what has been going on in Papua since a sham plebiscite on integration there four decades ago. They may not be seen in the same light, however, by a domestic population that is increasingly concerned by a government that so easily trades its legal processes for diplomatic expediency.

Scott Burchill is senior lecturer in international relations at Deakin University.