



PM'S FIG LEAF OF REGIONAL WORK ON REFUGEES HAS ZERO CHANCE

Politics and the government's diplomatic incompetence doom it to failure

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JULIA Gillard has said she will not cherry pick the recommendations of the expert committee on asylum-seekers chaired by Angus Houston.

Instead she will implement all of its recommendations as an integrated package.

But let me tell you, the region, Southeast Asia, is going to cherry pick the package for her.

After 30 years of intense involvement with Southeast Asia, I can tell you one thing for sure, there is absolutely no chance of the region implementing the kind of regional co-operation envisaged in the Houston report.

Houston's committee offered two types of policies: deterrence and accommodation.

The deterrence measures are essentially offshore processing, the "no advantage" rule so that anyone who arrives illegally by boat gets no advantage in achieving permanent residency in Australia, and the removal of generous family reunion provisions for boat arrivals.

These are tough measures that go part of the way to reproducing the successful policies used by the Howard government to drive the people-smugglers out of business as far as Australia was concerned.

We know these policies will be implemented because they fall within the discretion of an Australian government's power.

But as a fig leaf to cover this toughness, the committee also offered accommodation measures. The government can implement one of these, increasing our refugee intake by 6000 or so. But most of the accommodation measures involve a new vision of regional co-operation, such that there are common standards across Southeast Asia, and indeed some other countries, in assessing refugee claims and how such claimants are treated.

This vision, I promise, has absolutely zero chance of being achieved. One of the committee, committed refugee advocate Paris Aristotle, seems to believe it might come about. His post-report interviews have constantly stressed this. But Houston, and the other member, Michael L'Estrange, a former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and indeed the relevant government ministers, stress deterrence.

Houston and L'Estrange certainly know enough of the way the region works to know this vision of a new regional accord is meaningless. In their distinguished governmental careers, each has often had to proclaim policies (victory in Afghanistan, rapid completion of the Doha round of trade talks) that they have well understood have two aspects. One is declaratory only and can never be implemented but has a political purpose. The other is the substance.

I am not accusing Houston or L'Estrange, for both of whom I have the utmost respect, of bad faith. The government will surely make an effort to secure the vision of regional co-operation in their report. It has no chance of success, but the inclusion of this wholly unrealistic agenda gives

the government cover with its own Left, allows it to pretend it is doing something different from John Howard and disconcerts the refugee lobby.

Why am I so convinced the regional co-operation vision has no chance? Well, just look at the record, the region's politics, the structure of the problem and the Gillard government's standing and diplomatic competence.

First, the record. The East Timor solution, which surely ranks with the no-carbon-tax promise as one of the great pre-election misleading statements ever made by a prime minister, fell apart because we could not convince the poorest nation in Southeast Asia — the nation most heavily dependent on us for aid and security, and with a bucket-load of money as an incentive, and the in-principle agreement of their president — to go along with our ideas.

I've had a lot of conversations with Gough Whitlam about Indonesia and I'll never forget a trenchant insight he offered me: "Comrade, we can't even bend Vanuatu to our will. How do they think I could have made Indonesia do as it was told?"

But back to the record. Following the East Timor fiasco, the



Malaysia Solution also collapsed because we could not convince Kuala Lumpur, with which we have excellent relations, to sign the refugee convention or to import Australian standards into its legislation.

The Bali process of regional co-operation has been going for fully 10 years. In that time, the region has shown significant but quite limited co-operation on deterrence. This involves criminalising people-smuggling, sharing intelligence, introducing biodata recognition and the like.

It has shown no co-operation on accommodation because the region has no desire for accommodation of illegal immigration. None at all.

The Houston committee itself

recognises this in one of those exquisite bureaucratic sentences: "The importance of developing greater regional co-operation on protection and asylum-seeking enjoys broad in-principle support across the Asia-Pacific region . . . Going beyond principle, however, to addressing how greater regional co-operation would work in practice is less travelled territory." Don't you love that phrase "less travelled territory"? It's going to remain completely untravelled.

Countries in the region have huge illegal immigration problems. This is partly because of people fleeing political persecution but it's mainly because people in poor countries prefer to live in rich countries. It is better

to live poor in Thailand than poor in Burma. It is better to live poor in Malaysia than poor in Pakistan. It is infinitely better to live in Australia.

We have never suffered any reputational damage in Asia by being tough on unauthorised boat arrivals. We may have suffered tiny, marginal damage in Europe, where the extremely modest media coverage of Australia merely replays our own media. But every nation in Southeast Asia asserts its own sovereignty absolutely.

The Thais reserve the right to send Burmese back over the river. The Malaysians find that a large illegal workforce can suit them in times of economic boom, providing cheap labour on build-

ing sites and the like. But they reserve the right to throw out as many such people as they like if the economy turns down.

The idea that the Indonesians would give up their discretionary power to police their borders and their internal irregular or illegal populations as they see fit, to solve a political problem for the Gillard government, is preposterous.

The Gillard government has little influence in Southeast Asia and no track record of diplomatic achievement there. The regional co-operation vision is a complete pipedream, which is not to say it may not serve a useful political purpose within Australia.

