Australia’s human rights record has not improved since the Tampa

The dramatic rescue of more than 400 asylum seekers by the Norwegian vessel, the Tampa, ten years ago set in train a series of events that has since caused immense suffering to so many. It is surely now time to reverse these policies.

The main casualties of this policy trajectory have been asylum seekers in pursuit of safe haven on our shores.

The introduction of excision legislation and the establishment of detention on Nauru and Manus Island caused considerable damage.

People languished in these centres for years or returned home to danger as they lost hope, while the Tampa people welcomed by New Zealand thrived.

Some of those who returned to danger have now made it back to our shores, having had to again make the dangerous and difficult journey. And, once again, they are waiting indefinitely in our detention centres for a chance to live a life free from persecution.

Detaining asylum seekers

In 2008, we saw a momentary lull in malevolent policies. The new Rudd Labor Government spoke of its Key Detention Values that would elevate the needs of asylum seekers rather than seek to punish them.

But this was soon followed by another over-reaction to a spike in the arrival of leaky boats. Lengthening times in detention, the proliferation of detention centres and inconsistent refugee claims processing have all contributed to widespread loss of hope and alarming increases in mental illness among asylum seekers.

This burgeoning despair has understandably led to an upsurge of asylum seekers engaging in protest.

Deterrence not safety

But rather than responding to the causes of the despair, the Labor Government has introduced new legislative measures that increase the prospect of criminalisation and the likely diminishment of a pathway to a visa and a home.

Once again the focus of policy has turned towards the unachievable goal of deterring asylum seekers, which effectively punishes one group of people for a broader policy purpose.

But the impact of policies has extended beyond those seeking asylum, including to the community of Christmas Island, the site where the standoff over the Tampa was most visible.

With the Labor Government initially abolishing offshore detention but still remaining committed to mandatory detention and excision, once the boats continued to arrive it was only a matter of time until detention would expand.

The business of detention

Soon after the Island gaol opened in 2008 the growth of the detention industry spiralled out of control, despite protests from locals.

Recent fires and protests have incurred the wrath of the Islanders, while paradoxically some were finally reaping some business and employment benefits from detention.
But any such benefits were ripped from people within moments, and without consultation, as Christmas Island detention began to wind down. Anecdotally, there have been similar negative impacts in other remote communities where detention centres emerge.

The cost to the taxpayer

Another casualty is the Australian taxpayer. $800 million over the past year has been spent on maintaining an unnecessary and cruel detention regime despite the fact that most of those detained are later granted refugee status.

And this week we hear that the federal government is spending a further $12 million over the following months to charter 800 asylum seekers back to Malaysia.

A better way to spend money

As we watch the unfolding humanitarian disaster in Somalia, would not the ethical position be to divert these wasted funds towards saving the lives of starving children, women and men?

It seems politicians are continuing to compete for the worst policy position in order to gain power.

Even the head of the Immigration Department, Andrew Metcalfe, has asked the government to reconsider its policies. When the person tasked with implementing the policy of mandatory detention makes this call, it is surely time for the Federal government and the Opposition to cease acting as purveyors of fear about the need for tough policies.

Tell the truth about asylum

We need to stop duping an ill-informed public that our borders and our values are at risk from asylum seeker “invaders”.

With a parliamentary detention inquiry in full swing there is hope that changes will ensue. It’s hard to be optimistic though when we remember the already amassed reports on detention that continue to gather dust.

But as small as it seems, it could be that the tide is slowly turning in community attitudes and, if this hunch is correct, it would be foolhardy for either major political party to perpetuate their politics of fear.

The Christmas Island boat tragedy last December, the immorality of the Malaysian Solution people trading proposal and the ongoing detention of children seems to have shaken up some who have previously given little consideration to the suffering.

And at last a Labor backbencher has shown the courage to stand up to the government. Let’s hope that others follow Anna Burke’s path and say “enough is enough”.

We can end the harm. By placing human security ahead of border security we can exercise our legal and ethical obligations.

Australia’s standing on human rights has been considerably blemished through our treatment of asylum seekers in the decade since Tampa.