

POLITICAL 'WHITE ANTS' ERODE HUMAN RIGHTS

Joseph Wakim
Harold Zwier
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What is it about human rights that so irks our major political parties?

Over the last 15 years, human rights in Australia have taken a battering. They have been incarcerated, controlled, thrown overboard, warred against, Naru'd, ridiculed, deported and even Guantanamo'd in two instances.

Human rights are so 'on-the-nose' that our politicians seem to relish the opportunity to show how dismissive they are about them and actively denigrate those who support them. In the poll- driven competition to be 'tough on terrorists', trampling on basic rights has been as incidental as wiping your feet on the door mat.

Try a simple test. When you read the items below, is your first thought about the people suffering human rights abuse, or about the agenda of the people raising the issue?

- * Mandatory detention of asylum seekers
- * The US military commissions at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba
- * Tampa
- * Children overboard
- * Opposition to the death penalty for convicted terrorists

If your first thought is about which of the usual suspects is blowing their trumpet this time, then you have been the successful target of successive Australian governments that have paid lip service to the principles of human rights but have actually undermined the issue for political gain.

Our national rhetoric is the romantic view that human rights are fundamental and inseparable from the liberal democratic and civil society in which we live. This view starts to fracture when juxtaposed against the reality that some of the beneficiaries of a strong commitment to human rights are insidious criminals who deny those rights to others.

Human rights is a difficult issue. Its realistic support means confronting the moral and ethical dilemmas of trampling on the rights of some individuals for the greater benefit of the majority. It means defending the powerless against the powerful in a just cause, but it also means supporting the human rights of people whose repugnant actions and behaviour we don't support.

To run for cover the moment we discover there might be a need to speak out against the bad treatment of bad people is to undermine the foundations of human rights; like a white ant slowly, silently and steadily gnawing at the pillars.

But our federal government has gone one step further. The political wisdom that said there are 'no votes in human rights' has had business principles mis-applied and like junk bond traders who make money whichever way the market goes, the government has found votes by junking human rights when poll-driven politics required it. Human rights principles have been sacrificed for electoral capital.

And on the other side, the reward for defending human rights is that populist politicians seeking fame and glory will denigrate you, and the position you defend, by arguing: that they have a wider duty to Australia to abuse the human rights of asylum seekers as a deterrent to others; that refugee conventions need to be re-interpreted; that those suspected of terrorist activity have forfeited their human rights and that those who defend human rights are supporters of terrorism; that military commissions held out of sight of the US system of justice are fair and reasonable and that those who argue against them are 'naïve'; and that our judicial system can't be trusted to administer anti-terrorism laws without the help of politicians seeking fame and glory.

If our government is not strongly committed to supporting human rights, and believes there are circumstances in which we have no obligation to be strongly supportive of them, who is left to defend the excesses of the state against those it deems to be undeserving?

Ask yourself how likely it is that there will be any politicians from the two major parties, willing to engage in a serious and genuine discussion about human rights, in the current election campaign?

There was one. On 8 October, Robert McLelland, Labor's foreign affairs spokesman reiterated Labor's longstanding opposition to capital punishment and argued that Australia must be consistent in its stance, regardless of the nature of the condemned. He was rebuked by both the government and his own party. His leader, Kevin Rudd, demonstrated that human rights are all very well as long as they don't get in the way of politics.

The irony is that the more our human rights are allowed to be eroded, the more we slide down the continuum towards the very regimes we condemn. When the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948 - sixty years next year - they did so in the full knowledge of the horrors and atrocities of World War Two.

On a different scale, in 2007 we are confronted with threats of terrorism and the displacement and relocation of people. With the impending election, now is good time for all politicians to firmly pledge that the incoming government will be guided by the principles of human rights in all the departments it administers.

Joseph Wakim, OAM, is founder of the Australian Arabic Council.

Harold Zwier is an executive member of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society.