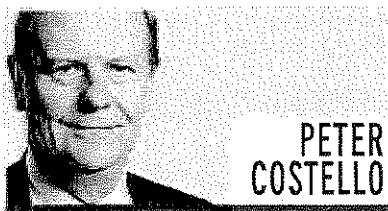


# Be firm and clear: no access by boat



**T**here is no easy solution to deal with the fleet of boats carrying asylum seekers to Australia. If they are admitted to Christmas Island and the passengers are successful in their claims to enter the country, the number of boats and the number of passengers will only increase.

There is no end of people prepared to take their chance of getting into Australia by boat. And there is an ample supply of smugglers happy to take their money and arrange the voyage.

The Rudd Government has learnt what the Howard government learnt. The volume of the traffic is in direct proportion to the chances of successful entry. There will always be more people seeking entry than places available. The only way to cut the traffic is to make it clear that the sea route is no short cut to residence in Australia.

Critics of the Howard government complained that its policy was too harsh, inhumane and brutal. If only the government were more welcoming, they suggested, the whole problem could be managed. The claims were of course nonsense – the kind of claims only people with no responsibility for the outcome could make from their comfortable vantage points.

If the government were more welcoming, more people would set out on the boat journey – and put their lives at risk in the process.

The most humane way to assist asylum seekers make claims in Australia

would be to use Qantas to airlift claimants from Sri Lanka or Iraq or Afghanistan direct to Christmas Island. That way no one would have to board a boat and everyone would get their asylum claim dealt with in an Australian territory.

But I have never heard anyone argue for this. It is almost as if the refugee advocates believe there should be a little bit of hardship in the process – the risk of a long voyage on a rickety boat – but not too much. Not as much as detention and assessment in Indonesia or Nauru.

If an airlift is out of the question, the next best thing to do is to stop the sea trade and insist all claims for refugee status be made offshore, with humanitarian visas granted to those who have observed the rules and waited for lawful entry. They can then fly into the country subject to the same rules as apply to all other lawful arrivals.

To run a system like that it is necessary to show that by destroying your papers, concealing your identity, paying a smuggler to enter Australia, you will not be any more successful – in fact less successful – than those that have turned up at an Australian embassy or a UN agency and lodged their claim for asylum outside Australia.

Closing the sea trade means closing the chances of success by boarding a boat in Indonesia, Sri Lanka or anywhere else.

Closing the sea trade will also protect many lives. A boat has now sunk somewhere off the Cocos Islands killing some of those on board. No one in Australia is to blame – not the navy, not the Government. The people to blame are the smugglers who took the money and supplied the boat which has sunk.

It is possible that many other boats have sunk in the Indian Ocean on voyages to Australia. We do not know. But the probability is that the more that set out, the more fatalities there will likely be.

We do know that in October 2001 a boat – given the name SIEV X – sank killing more than 350 people. No one knows for sure but it was probably in Indonesian waters at the time. There was an enormous effort to blame the Howard government for that event. The playwright Hannie Rayson even wrote a play designed to show how ministers in that government had connived in the tragic deaths. This unfortunate loss of life was taken as a great opportunity to vilify the Coalition.

It will be interesting to see whether the playwrights and journalists go to the same lengths to impugn the motives of the Rudd Government and blame ministers in this government for the most recent deaths off the Cocos Islands. I doubt they will – nor should they. It was a foul slur then, and it would be a foul slur now to suggest that any Australian minister would connive in such a tragedy.

No Australian minister would welcome having to deal with this issue. There is no easy or soft solution. The public has an instinctive understanding of that. The object must be to dissuade people from attempting to reach Australia by unauthorised boats. To do so the Government must be firm and clear – clear enough for those contemplating a journey to understand it and clear enough to those who would transport them to understand it. Ambiguity in policy on this issue will be very dangerous.

Peter Costello is a former Liberal federal treasurer.

Insist all claims for  
refugee status  
are made offshore.