

Refugees: out of sight, out of mind

THE Abbott Government's Operation Sovereign Borders has turned what should be a humanitarian response into a military operation.

On Monday, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison made clear that as such, operational matters would not be revealed. In other words our democratically elected government won't be telling us – unless it chooses to do so – when boats loaded with people reaching out for sanctuary arrive off Australia. Nor will we know if or when or where they are transferred, turned back or whether they have perished at sea.

Out of sight out of mind, don't you worry about that.

The real tragedy is that many Australians have indicated they would prefer it that way. Not their problem, not their concern, not their desire to have consciences troubled by the realities of the world around them.

Mr Morrison has it that it's not his job to be the Shipping News for people smugglers, as if information that another boatload had been locked up ahead of indefinite detention in camp prisons on guano-covered or mosquito-infested islands would somehow inspire "queue" jumpers to take that route.

Christmas Island administrator John Stanhope, who I had the pleasure of meeting last month, warned that irrespective of how hard line the policy adopted by government, it should be delivered in a manner that treated people with compassion and did not create scapegoats, belittle or generalise.



Those things are exactly what this new approach has embraced. There are no queues in Iraq or Afghanistan, two countries from which many people seek to escape. Australia's embassies in neither place has visa function. In the case of Kabul, its location is a secret.

Iraqi visa inquiries must be sent to Amman because the embassy is unreachably located in the international zone.

More than 90% of arrivals off Australia are found to be genuine refugees but the plan we have embraced as a nation will force them on to Manus Island or Nauru within 48 hours.

Fiona Scott, the new Liberal member for Lindsay, used the election campaign to generalise, make scapegoats of and to belittle those desperate enough to risk their lives on perilous boat journeys, blaming them for everything from traffic jams to hospital queues.

Her now Prime Minister did nothing to discourage his Member for Sex Appeal.

Nor did he show the intellectual honesty to admit that those problems are the consequence of a net annual immigration of nearly 200,000 for whom there is no coherent plan to fund the necessary infrastructure or drive economic development and diversity to sustain them.