

Going back

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The recent reality-TV series *Go Back To Where You Came From* was the highest-rating SBS show for the year. It takes six Australians back up the line to the stops on a refugee's journey, all the way back to where they came from.

Robert Martin is a graduate of Moore College and now the Melbourne Director of the [City Bible Forum](#). In this special 'guest authored' briefing, he reflects on some time he spent with his family on Christmas Island.

Robert's time among the detainees was another unique experience of 'going back', at least a little way, into the world of the refugee. It's a personal view that will help you to picture some of what happens.

It's a bit longer than usual, because I've included his interesting travelogue to help you picture the place. But **if you want to cut to the chase, skip pp. 2-3** on 'the island'. Go to p. 4, '**the refugees**', or p. 5, '**detention**', where Robert makes some interesting comments about **the quality of immigration detention**.

It should be read in the context of our other briefings on the issue: go to www.sie.org.au, click 'Briefings', and search on *refugees*. See also my recent opinion piece and the other items listed at the end of this briefing.

Andrew Cameron

'Christmas Island.' 'Stop the Boats.' 'Illegal immigration.' 'Queue jumper.' 'Border protection.' It fascinates me how asylum seekers stimulate such strong emotions.

I had the privilege of spending two months on Christmas Island in 2009-10. I was there with my family as a visiting pastor to the Christmas Island Christian Fellowship. But I also went into the Christmas Island detention centre and met some 'boat people' from Sri Lanka first hand. Christmas Island changed me - I learnt a lot, and came home with some very different opinions.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as 'any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality ... is unable ... or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country'. A number of the people we met on Christmas Island certainly satisfied this definition. They had fled Sri Lanka for their lives.

One guy I met shared that he'd been shot when his workplace was targeted by the majority group. The bullet miraculously avoided his kidney, and he survived. His friend died in the shooting. It was hard to know what to say to someone who'd claimed to be shot. But when he lifted his shirt and showed me the gunshot wound, it made the persecution he'd experienced very real.

The same guy also told me of how he had been tortured with knives and electric wires on his arms. Again, he lifted his shirt sleeve and I saw the scars.

Another man recounted how he'd been beaten and his boss kidnapped. He feared for his life. These people firmly believe that if they went back to Sri Lanka, they'd be killed.

As I sat listening to these horrendous stories I asked, 'but why do they want to kill you?' The answer was simple: 'because we're Tamil. In Sri Lanka, there are no human rights.'

These stories made the asylum seeker debate far less academic for me. These people had suffered, and I'd seen their scars. They had a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race. It turns out that the Australian Government agrees. Most asylum seekers on Christmas Island end up classified as refugees.

I now find it astonishing when people living thousands of kilometres away, without any first-hand knowledge of such turmoil, make sweeping claims like 'these people aren't really refugees'. If some aren't, the ones I met sure were.

Politicians, the media and the general public also seem confused by the distinction between 'illegal immigration' and 'refugee movement'. Even if people enter Australia unconventionally and unlawfully, if they are found to be refugees then they are not 'illegal immigrants'. As the UNHCR puts it:

Refugees may not be able to obtain the necessary documents when trying to escape and may have no choice but to resort to illegal means of escape. Therefore although the only means of escape for some may be illegal entry and/or the use of false documentation, if the person has a well-founded fear of persecution they should be viewed as a refugee and not labelled an 'illegal immigrant'.

Many on Christmas Island have entered Australia without proper documentation, but they aren't automatically illegal immigrants. I asked the Sri Lankan guys I met 'why didn't just buy a plane ticket and come to Australia like everyone else?' They just laughed and said they couldn't get the proper documentation. These guys were stuck. They couldn't enter Australia legally under any circumstance. There was just no 'queue' to 'jump'.

The notion of a 'queue' is ambiguous. There is no orderly line for refugees. Many asylum seekers come from countries where there is no UNHCR office and no Australian embassy, for example Iraq and Afghanistan. Even if they do find their way to a refugee camp in Indonesia, they find several thousand others waiting before them. Yet the average number of refugees repatriated from Indonesia to Australia each year for the last few years has been around 50. If that's a 'queue', then it's a very long and slow moving one. It often takes refugees six, seven, ten or twelve years to be repatriated.

Conditions in such refugee camps are often appalling. The camps are overcrowded with terrible sanitation and unsafe drinking water. The water has been described as contaminated with faeces and fungus. This long, slow wait in third world squalor is what creates the market for people smugglers.

'Queue jumping' and 'people smuggling' are a 'retrieval ethic' for these people. They do whatever they can to retrieve something good in a messy situation. If we were in a burning stadium with our family, and the door let out one person in a hundred, we would do whatever we could to get our family out over the wall. That is effectively what the people I met on Christmas Island did.

The island. Christmas Island itself is a unique place. It has an amazing, precious and fragile natural environment, and a fascinating local culture. It is part of Australia's Indian Ocean territories and located in the middle of nowhere, 1,400km off the north western coast of Australia and 2,600km north-west of Perth. The closest land mass to Christmas Island is Indonesia, some 300km north.

Captain William Mynors of the Royal Navy named the island in 1643 when they passed by on Christmas Day. The first recorded landing was in 1688 when a crew from the British buccaneer vessel, *Cygnets*, captained by William

Dampier landed searching for water and timber. The first extensive exploration was conducted in 1887 when a group of explorers found rock specimens of virtually pure phosphate. This discovery led to the creation of an extensive phosphate mining industry on the island. Indeed, phosphate mining remains the largest industry on the island today.

But the island is not small. It has around 80km of coastline and covers 135 square kilometres. The highest point is Murray Hill, 361m above sea level. Cars are almost essential. The coastline is dominated by sheer cliffs; there are few good beaches. The best one, Dolly Beach, requires a 4WD to get to the carpark and then a 45 minute walk to the beach.

The permanent population on the island is around 1,500 people. There is no indigenous population and the current population comprises Chinese, European and Malay people. This brings an interesting mix of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. There are several Buddhist temples dotted over the island, including one at the end of the street we were living in. There's also a mosque where we heard the call to prayer at various times during the day. On Christmas Island we often felt we were living in Asia.

We loved the relaxed and friendly lifestyle on the Island. There is virtually no crime. We had one of the local police officers around for dinner, and he told us that the main criminal activity on the island was traffic offences. (People still speed, even when your longest trip anywhere is 20 minutes!)

Christmas Island's ecosystem is unique. It has so many unique species of flora and fauna that some have described it as the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean'. I often felt I was living in Jurassic Park. The island has high, rocky rainforest covered cliffs with frigate birds, which resemble Pterodactyls, soaring around.

The most famous of Christmas Island fauna is the red crabs. There are an estimated 60 million of these eight legged creatures on the island and the annual red crab migration is one of the wonders of the natural world. Famed documentary maker Sir David Attenborough described the crab migration as one of his ten greatest wildlife experiences.

Our arrival coincided with the end of the red crab migration. We saw thousands of crabs scuttling around near the beach carrying their eggs. They were waiting for dawn where they would spawn, where they'd do a little dance and drop their eggs into the ocean. However with two small children we didn't have the energy to get up at 4am to get to the beach to witness the spawning. Nevertheless we did see the thousands upon thousands of crabs returning to their homes in the rainforest. This meant the closure of many roads on the island. It was a truly remarkable sight.

Our children loved the crabs, particularly our one year old, Aoife. She would chase them and squeal with delight whenever they came near. Unfortunately I have to confess myself a red crab killer. The crabs are everywhere, even on the roads. As a driver I tried my best, but sometimes they are impossible to miss. My wife Di described the sound of running over a red crab as being similar to popping a chip packet.

One personal highlight of my time on Christmas Island was crawling out of bed at 5am one morning to go fishing. Before Christmas Island, the largest fish I'd ever caught was a tiny leatherjacket in Sydney Harbour. All that changed on Christmas Island, when I caught a 9.2kg Wahoo. I'd always thought fishing was a waste of a good sit. But I've never used so many muscles of my body at once, trying to reel in this fish.

The Christians. The Christmas Island Christian Fellowship is a small Christian community who meet in a local community hall. My role was as visiting pastor at the invitation of this independent, nondenominational Christian fellowship. It was an unpaid job, but they paid our airfares and some living allowance. (Airfares from Sydney cost about the same as a return trip to Europe.)

We loved the Christian fellowship. It was a group of around thirty adults of varying backgrounds – Australians, Chinese Malaysians and even some from mainland China. Some had been Christians for a long time, and others only a very short time. It was remarkable that in this remote place with no paid pastor, people were still coming to know Jesus. It was also quite a challenge to preach via a Mandarin translator.

Some asked if we could stay longer. I already had a job lined up, so we couldn't accept. But we were touched, and would seriously have considered it.

The refugees. I initially wondered how I would make inroads into the main detention centre, but God kindly made access a lot easier. We became friends with a guard at the centre, who liked many of the asylum seekers. He introduced us to two enthusiastic Sri Lankan Christians, Ravi and Sam. Ravi had been a pastor in Sri Lanka. He gathered a number of Christians in the centre for prayer and worship every morning.

Every Sunday Ravi, Sam and about ten other refugees also joined us for church in the community hall. For some, their understanding of English was quite limited, but they all enjoyed the excursion. In fact the detention centre activities officer said it was amazing how many asylum seekers found God when there was an opportunity for an excursion! Anyway, these guys were a real sight when they arrived in their little minibus. They poured out and greeted us with real respect and enthusiasm. This was our first real encounter with refugees on Christmas Island. Di noticed that they all wore what she assumed were government issued Dunlop volleys. These guys were very committed to Jesus, and enjoyed singing their Tamil songs loudly, even though none of them could keep a tune.

We held a Christmas morning service inside the immigration detention centre. About forty were present. Again, my sermon was translated, this time into Tamil. It was a real privilege and opportunity to preach the truth of Christmas and the truth of Jesus in this environment. The service, like most things on Christmas Island, was a little strange. The piece of paper with the printed Bible readings had a Santa face as the background. There were lots of Santa faces all around the room. It was a Christmas Island Christmas Day I would never forget.

I ran twice-weekly Bible studies with the Sri Lankans in their 'prayer room', a small air-conditioned room in the activities wing of the detention centre. We read through the first nine chapters of Mark, and I was struck by how enthusiastic and hungry these guys were for reading the Bible. In all my years of leading small groups I have never encountered a group as dedicated and who applied themselves to the scriptures as much as this group. I saw them learning more and more about Jesus Christ. After a while the once-intimidating security protocols for entering the detention centre became routine. One security guard referred to me as 'the padre'.

It was Ravi who told me about being shot and tortured. He went on to share about his harrowing trip across the ocean from Malaysia to Australia. He paid an agent, better known to us as a people smuggler, \$US9,000 to get onto a

boat. The first boat he was on caught fire. After surviving being shot, Ravi said Jesus saved his life again as his trouser leg caught fire. Ravi was saved but the boat was disabled. They were stranded in the middle of the ocean for ten days, with no land in sight. Ravi said rats the size of your forearm crawled over him as he tried to sleep. They were even circled by pirates, who threatened to come back the next day and finish them off. Fortunately a new ship arrived and they were able to proceed to Christmas Island.

Ravi was safe and happy on Christmas Island. His refugee claim had been accepted and I eventually heard that he obtained his visa, and is now safely resettled in Perth.

Sam was younger than Ravi but had been on Christmas Island longer. He actually received his visa when we were there. (Sam went on to appear on an episode Jennie Brockie's SBS TV's *Insight*, 'Stopping the Boats'.) He told me how he was beaten and imprisoned for three years. When was working in a shop, the shop owner was kidnapped and Sam feared for his life. At one point he spent a month in one room, because he was too scared to go outside. Sam fled to Malaysia, where he paid an agent to take him on a boat to Australia.

Others told me about their family members, kidnapped and held to ransom for \$US250,000. They could have stayed in Sri Lanka by paying bribes to those in power, but that was hardly a sustainable way of life, so they fled.

Detention. So, how does detention on Christmas Island compare to the Indonesian camps people could have been in?

I'm one of the few people to have been inside the Christmas Island detention centre and who is not a government employee. I'm therefore free to make public comment. As I reflect on my time on Christmas Island, I find myself frustrated at all the misinformation and confusion in the debate over refugees. I've summarised some of those confusions above.

But it should also be noted that I no longer agree when refugee advocates claim the detention centre on the Island is inhumane. The detainees in Christmas Island are not mistreated. They have access to a wide range of services. They are safe, and are well looked after.

The immigration detention centre is actually an excellent facility. It's a cross between a prison and a weekend away venue. There are high fences, a centralised security system, cameras and double-barrel locks. Everywhere is steel and concrete. Yet the venue is well equipped for the comfort and leisure of the detainees. There are tennis courts, a gym, Internet facilities, a kiosk, televisions and a library. The rooms are well equipped, and they have access to TVs, fridges and microwaves.

The big issues for those detained are boredom and uncertainty. Boredom, because there is only so much time you can spend in the gym and playing cricket. (Imagine staying at a weekend away for six months!) Their anxiety is due to uncertainty over whether they will be given a visa or not. It's the single biggest issue those in detention worry about.

Furthermore, the concept of detention is ambiguous. When we imagine detention, we imagine the main Christmas Island detention facility: high barbed wire electric fences, guards, and sniffer dogs.

Yet no women or children are housed in the main detention facility. They are housed in different centres, on the other side of the island. These places have

no bars or fences. Children can play in the local playground, go swimming at the local pool and attend school where their needs are met.

We also met a Sri Lankan family in 'community detention', which I hadn't heard of before. Here a family lives and moves around the island freely. Their children played with our children, and their mother volunteered in the op-shop. This form of 'detention' seemed very humane and reasonable, and makes a blanket condemnation of 'detention' misleading.

We went to Christmas Island fully expecting to find the refugees mistreated and fully expecting to discover detention centres as evil places, yet we found this not to be the case. To be sure, there are difficulties with detention and life on Christmas Island. But simply to say that detention is wrong, is simplistic.

Of course the refugees themselves are not perfect either. The guard we mentioned finds some of them quite demanding. They will break things just to get a new one. It's frustrating for the guards, and demonstrates that needy, desperate people aren't necessarily good people. That said, I remember the constant boredom and anxiety that they experience. It wouldn't bring out the best in any of us.

They also have mixed motives in coming to Australia, seen in 'secondary movement'. A refugee may flee their country to seek the protection of one immediately bordering them. Yet some of these refugees see this flight as an opportunity to seek a more beneficial 'economic migration' to another country that affords greater protection and opportunity. Why seek asylum in another developing country when you could come to Australia? This 'opportunism' irritates many Australians – but of course we should be flattered by it. Who wouldn't want to come to Australia?

Responding as a Christian. I know that Christians don't all agree on this issue. But it looks a lot different up close. It now seems obvious to me, as a follower of Jesus, how I should respond. And although it may sound clichéd, if I am to be shaped by Jesus then I think the best place to look is the obvious place: his parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

Jesus tells this parable after explaining that the essence of the law revolves around loving God and loving our neighbour. So someone plays the lawyer game, asking 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus then talks about upstanding religious people leaving a vulnerable man on the road to die.

We're not told their motivation for not helping. I'm sure they had very reasonable justifications. The Samaritan, in contrast, provides compassionate hospitality and care to someone he wouldn't have otherwise spoken to (for Jews and Samaritans had a strained relationship at best).

Jesus is saying that love to a neighbour takes the form of costly hospitality, generosity and compassion, to people you wouldn't otherwise speak to. The Samaritan gave up time and money to set the conditions under which the other man could live.

If this story is to mean anything, I reckon Jesus would have a view about our responding to vulnerable refugees who are fleeing danger and persecution. I reckon Jesus' stance is diametrically opposed to the common selfish objections of modern Australia, a country which is rich and wealthy, but not particularly welcoming, compassionate or generous. The excuses our nation provides might sound like the excuses used to abandon the man in need. Yet Jesus was quite straightforward about how to respond, and why.

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' asked Jesus. The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him'. Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise'.

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Postscript from Andrew: Obviously, there remain several important policy discussions about how best to handle refugees. But Robert reminds me that the end of those discussions hinges on the beginning: whether or not we care very much about the people at the centre of it.

Sources/Further Reading:

UNHCR figures on Australia's low 2010 response to refugees and asylum seekers: Refugee Council of Australia, 'UN refugee figures show asylum fears unfounded,' media release 20 June 2011. Online:
http://refugeecouncil.org.au/news/releases/110620_Global_Trends.pdf

UNHCR frequently asked questions (*includes basic distinctions between 'economic migrants', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'*). Online:
[http://www.unhcr.org.my/Resources-@-Frequently_Asked_Questions\(FAQs\).aspx](http://www.unhcr.org.my/Resources-@-Frequently_Asked_Questions(FAQs).aspx)

Andrew Cameron, 'it's official: Australia is unfair,' *ABC The Drum* 9 June 2011. Online:
<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/2751386.html>.
(*A response to proposed changes to the Migration Act.*)

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<http://lists.moore.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/social-issues>.

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