

Shorten must show his mettle on refugees

Editorial, The Age, February 18, 2019 (Emphasis Added)

The issue of asylum seekers was always expected to be a challenging one for Opposition Leader Bill Shorten in his quest to win government, and the latest Age-Ipsos opinion poll gives a strong indication just how tricky it could prove to be in the run up to May.

The phone survey was conducted last week during and after the debate over a controversial bill allowing doctors greater input when medical treatment is required for asylum seekers. Today's poll shows Labor's lead over the Coalition on a two-party preferred basis has shrunk to 51-49 from 54-46 in December.

Labor leader Bill Shorten's lead has narrowed. Credit: Paul Jeffers

The outcome of the vote on the medical evacuations bill last week was ostensibly a disaster for Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who suffered the first loss in the House of Representatives for a ruling party since 1941.

Yet voters appear to have taken a different message from the chaotic events in Canberra. Labor's support for the legislative amendment has allowed the Coalition to conjure up latent concerns about the ALP's record in 2012 and 2013 when thousands of asylum seekers were encouraged to set out on boats for Australia and 1200 were lost at sea.

The bill, which gives a panel of doctors the main voice in deciding whether asylum seekers are brought to mainland Australia for urgent medical treatment, is not a revolutionary change.

Mr Shorten has argued the government has already brought 900 asylum seekers here for medical treatment in the past five years by itself and the bill simply makes the existing process more humane. He says he is still committed to deterring people smugglers by turning back refugee boats and he only backed the law changes after adding the significant safeguard that it will not apply to anyone who boards a boat in future.

The debate over asylum seeker policy can easily degenerate into an ugly scare campaign and certain Coalition ministers have clearly over-stepped the line by making the false and racist suggestion that refugees brought here under the changes are likely to be paedophiles and rapists. **There is, however, a legitimate issue for this election about whether the ALP is the better party to manage asylum seekers. The left of the party has only accepted Mr Shorten's approach with great reluctance.**

The Age reported from Indonesia on Saturday that asylum seekers stranded there since 2013 said the bill had not made them more inclined to take the risk of boarding boats, but one source, long known to this organisation for having links to people smuggler networks, said that if the ALP won government, Mr Shorten could face a test of his nerve. **There is no reason why the ALP cannot face down the challenge from people smugglers just as resolutely as the Coalition.**

Moreover, the asylum seeker issue is only one of several explanations for the narrowing of Mr Shorten's still solid lead in the polls. **He may also be suffering from some of his tax policies. Many voters, including, surprisingly, 30 per cent of ALP voters, are worried about his plans to end cash refunds of franking credits.**

Still, it is the issue of asylum seekers that appears to be weighing most heavily on the electorate. **To maintain his lead, Mr Shorten will have to prove his mettle both to voters here and also to those waiting in Indonesia for a sign of weakness.**