

Embassy

Years from now, Canadians will apologize

By Mary Jo Leddy

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Years from now, a prime minister will stand in the House of Commons and issue a formal apology to the Tamil community. He or she will "regret" the arbitrary detention of the men, women and children who landed on our shores in search of security. The prime minister will "express sorrow" over the social fury that was whipped up as this little band of survivors arrived on our western coast.

The MV Sun Sea arrived off the British Columbia coast last August carrying nearly 500 Tamil migrants. The MV Ocean Lady came the year prior with 76.

He or she will "deeply regret" that this fury enabled the government to even think of Bill C-4, legislation that would make it possible to designate such people as "irregular arrivals," to detain them for at least a year and to prevent them from sponsoring their families to come to Canada for at least five years.

How deeply the prime minister will regret that this punishment will apply to groups (more than two people) arriving not only by boat, but also by air and land as well.

There will probably be an excellent documentary movie showing the number of children who spent months in a detention centre before being sent back to a country where they perished together with their parents.

We have done this before.

In 1914, the Conservative government of the day turned away more than 300 Sikhs who came by boat from India seeking a better and safer life. When the Komagata Maru arrived back in Calcutta, 20 people were killed in a riot. Many others were detained and brutalized.

In 1939, the Liberal government turned away a boatload of 936 Jewish refugees from Europe. After being refused by Cuba and the United States they made a final effort to land in Canada. The SS St. Louis returned to Europe where many of the people on this "voyage of the damned" died in Adolf Hitler's murder camps.

Once again we have demonized the people on the Ocean Lady and the Sun Sea.

They are Tamil Tigers, violent, terrorists who pose an extreme danger to the country, say government officials.

I have talked to some of the people who were on the Ocean Lady and I see different faces: orphans, women who had been raped, people filled with shrapnel, two priests, a respected

journalist. They worked together to prevent the spread of disease and held together during the terrible storms on their journey here. Together they prayed and together they survived.

When they arrived off Vancouver Island they were immediately placed in detention and repeatedly interrogated.

In Canada, they have been treated as criminals. One of the passengers on the Ocean Lady asked me, "Is it a crime to want to live?" He had tried coming to Canada in the more acceptable way; he had gone to the Canadian Embassy in Thailand but was told by other Sri Lankans that they had been waiting 14 years for an appointment.

In desperation, he placed his life and life savings in the hands of some "smugglers." Now Bill C-4 will indeed make it a crime for wanting to live. Bill C-4 is not an anti-smuggling bill, it is an anti-refugee bill that turns desperate people away now as surely as we have done in the past.

Bill C-4 is another attempt by stealth to prevent refugees from coming to Canada. A series of pieces of legislation have effectively divided refugees into two groups: the "bad" refugees who have the audacity to come to Canada on their own, and the "good" refugees who are in camps overseas and who will stay there until they are among those chosen to come to Canada.

The "good" refugees are the ones who have been able to find their way to a refugee camp and are willing to wait for more than 14 years.

The difference between "bad" refugees and "good" refugees seems to be a function of the degree to which Canadian officials are in control of those seeking access to the country. The passengers on the Komagata Maru, the St. Louis and the Ocean Lady were "bad" refugees.

It is indeed legitimate for a nation state to have control over its borders. However, Canada began to lose control of its borders quite some time ago and this loss of control had nothing to do with refugees.

Free trade, the power of communications technology to slip through all boundaries, the so called "security perimeter" with the United States and the unfettered flow of global capital have all posed immense threats to Canadian sovereignty.

It seems as if controlling the small flow of refugees to Canada is a last desperate effort to prove that we still have a country with borders.

The climate of fear surrounding the loss of control over our borders has numbed our ability to see that Bill C-4 has made it a crime for some people to want to live.

In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an informal apology for what happened with the Komagata Maru.

As far as I know there has never been an official apology for the rejection of the St. Louis although a memorial for the Jewish refugees was unveiled on January 20, 2011 in Halifax at Pier 21.

Regrets are not enough.

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