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MEDIA RELEASE – ASYLUM SEEKERS

Liberty Victoria urges the media and all politicians to take a measured, fair and humane approach to the tragic events surrounding the deaths and serious injuries to asylum seekers off Ashmore Reef.

Liberty President Michael Pearce SC has condemned the return to vilification of asylum seekers, evident in their characterisation as "illegals" and "queue-jumpers". "We should be mindful of the reasons why these refugees have fled Afghanistan, and the atrocities and brutality of the Taliban," he said

Immediate Past President, Julian Burnside AO QC, said that "asylum seekers undertake the risk of death or injury at the hands of people smugglers rather than endure the certainty of death or injury at the hands of their persecutors at home".

He urged Australians to consider the desperate fear that would lead people to the decision to pack up their lives, their families and life-savings and undertake a treacherous journey to an unknown destination in the hands of an unknown people smuggler.

Liberty challenges assertions that the Federal Government's policies on asylum seekers have led to an increase in numbers of boat people arriving in Australia.

UNHCR figures show a worldwide increase in the number of asylum seekers, and highlight the comparatively low numbers of arrivals to Australia.

Most asylum seekers in Australia arrive by air. Of those arriving by sea, more than 90% have been found to be genuine refugees, fleeing serious harm or death.

Mr Pearce and Mr Burnside called for a balanced approach to asylum seekers and warned of the dangers of politicising this issue. "It was such a divisive issue in the wake of the Children Overboard affair", they said, "and did so much damage to Australia's international reputation."

They called on Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull and Shadow Minister Dr Sharman Stone to show leadership and restraint. They added that "if Sharman Stone is genuinely concerned about the suffering of refugees, she should look for ways to help people escape the Taliban, or the turmoil in Iraq, without having to hand their fates to people smugglers".

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