

People willing to endure what the Tamils did are just the kind we want

COYNE: Call it the 'bottom of the boat' test

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For all the breathless coverage it has attracted, it's still unclear just what the issue is in the matter of the boatload of Tamils that arrived off the coast of B.C. last week.

For starters, there is very little that anyone can do about it, or would, beyond what is being done already. No one is suggesting we should have turned the boat back on the high seas, or expelled the Tamils without hearing their refugee claims; both options are in any case illegal. Neither is anyone proposing that they should be admitted to our soil without a proper vetting, to ensure at a minimum that no terrorists lurk amongst them.

For all its tough talk about "sending a message" to any "criminals" out there who might be thinking of organizing other such excursions, the Harper government has in fact been handling the situation with admirable humanity, winning praise from, among others, the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

The Tamils have been well looked after, their ailments treated, their claims heard promptly. The system, in other words, is working.

So why all the fuss? There's a suspicion that the organizers may be Tamil Tigers, the notorious terrorist group. The Tigers themselves are a despicable bunch, but helping hundreds of desperate people to reach freedom would seem the least of their crimes. Sometimes this is called "human smuggling" or "trafficking," to give it an unseemly taint. But smuggling implies an attempt to evade detection: this ship, by contrast, went about its business openly. And while trafficking in human beings is obviously horrific when the "cargo" is destined for slavery, in this case the destination is Canada. However unpleasant their conditions may have been aboard ship, the

\$50,000 each of the Tamils reportedly paid for their passage is surely a bargain, if it means a chance to live in Canada.

Is that the problem, then: are the Tamils, as it is said, "jumping the queue"? But there is no queue for refugee claimants. Of the 40,000-odd refugee claims Canada receives every year, about a quarter are made from Canada (as opposed to being made at embassies or refugee camps overseas). You show up with a valid claim, you're in: doesn't matter how many people arrive ahead of or behind you. The Prime Minister complains that the Tamils did not go through "normal channels," but in fact it's a completely normal channel: the only difference is they arrived by boat, rather than by plane.

Some are concerned that this might be the first (well, the second: the first arrived last October) of many similar deliveries. The same dire warning was issued when a boatload of Sikhs arrived off the coast of Nova Scotia in 1987. Never happened. Apart from a few Chinese boats the following decade, that's been about it for amphibian invasions.

Doesn't mean it won't happen this time. And this would be a problem because?..?..?why? If their claims are genuine, we should be happy to admit them. A few thousand more refugees is not going to overwhelm us.

Of course, I have no way of knowing if the Tamils' claims are genuine: post-civil war Sri Lanka is by all accounts an unpleasant place for them, but not perhaps lethal. And admittedly, the current process for detecting and expelling false refugee claimants is a tortuous one. So I propose a simpler, streamlined test.

Instead of holding lengthy hearings at great cost to detect whether a claimant is seeking entry by virtue of a "well-founded fear of persecution," and not for some other reason, I suggest the question should be: have you just spent four months in the bottom of a boat to get here?

Perhaps it will be decided that the Tamils are mere economic migrants. Many people are very exercised about this, preferring that economic class immigrants go through the battery of tests the Immigration Department has devised to predict which of them will flourish most in Canada's economy. Very well. I have a simple test

for this, too. Here it is: have you just spent four months in the bottom of a boat to get here?

Whatever it is the Tamils are trying to get away from, whether persecution or privation, it's got to be horrible enough to make the prospect of four months in steerage with a litre of water a week to drink worth bearing. And while Immigration-style points tests may be good at assessing certain types of skills (or not: for all the alleged sophistication of the tests, the "quality" of immigrants has apparently been declining in recent years), economic success is as much about character and determination as anything else—the kind of determination that would move a person to sit in a darkened hold eating spiders for four months, just for a chance to better their lot. If that's queue-jumping, fine: these are the sort of people we want.

Remember the Vietnamese boat people of the 1970s? We let in 60,000 of them in the space of a couple of years. Most were farmers, fishermen and labourers, with little in the way of conventional skills. A decade later they were outperforming the native-born population on any number of indicators, with an unemployment rate a third lower than the norm.

I don't think anybody can really say why a given person might have chosen to leave the country of his birth. Countries that repress their populations also tend to be economic backwaters, and it stands to reason people's motives might be mixed. Perhaps we needn't bother trying to separate them: the bottom-of-a-boat test works either way.