Do As I Say, Not As I Do

One wonders if the officers responsible for preparing media statements for the Australian High Commission in Dhaka are familiar with their own website. Highlighted in red on the home page is a warning concerning the larger-than-life titled "Operation Sovereign Borders," by which people arriving in Australia by boat to claim asylum are transferred by the Australian government to "processing centres" in either Nauru or on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.

Presumably the warning is so English-reading Bangladeshis who might think to travel to Australia by boat but not before they checked the High Commission website might know to expect a frosty reception. More on that in a moment...

On 18 December, 8 death and 13 life sentences were awarded to those involved in the well-publicised killing of Biswajit Das last year. It was strange to see those sentenced to death being led away by the police, for as horrific as the Das killing was and as necessary as this justice is, not only for Biswajit's family but nationally, one cannot but wonder if those involved aren't also victims – of Bangladeshi student politics.



Biswajit Das, victim of political wrath.

It does not excuse Biswajit's killing – and overwhelmingly there was a sense of relief his killers have thus far been held accountable. Yet it remains tragic that eight young people have been sentenced to die. It is also true that nine families have been broken, not to mention the families of those receiving life sentences.

Given that the party the killers purported to represent is currently in power – a fact taken to show the independence of Bangladeshi courts, it is unlikely after a government change they would be released due to political pressure.

As such, the Das case is ripe for those advocating against the use of the death penalty. It is curious that the Australian High Commission remained silent, because they did think to issue a media statement on 11 December 2013 in relation to the then-pending execution of war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah.

The brief statement called on Bangladesh to address the United Nations' special rapporteur's concerns before proceeding with the judicial process. The Australian High Commission also took that opportunity to call on Bangladesh to establish a moratorium on the death penalty.

In a high-minded, wide-eyed westerner with no experience of Bangladesh a blanket opposition to the death penalty is easy to comprehend. Arguments that death penalties cannot be undone where injustice has occurred, that studies have shown the death penalty is not an effective added deterrent to crime and that the state should not institutionalise acts of violence sound reasonable. Indeed, rightly they may be viewed as the ideal.

Yet from the Australian government which claims a close relation with Bangladesh it is equally reasonable to expect a high degree of understanding. It would be reasonable to anticipate a more nuanced view at the least, to the nationally significant execution of Mollah, if a view is to be expressed at all.

Why Mollah's death penalty was singled out for public comment is worth considering – particularly as it is inconsistent with the response of silence concerning the death penalties in the Das and other cases. With the geopolitical ramifications of Mollah's execution, it is of concern that the Australian government might simply be trotting out a high human rights standard now and then, to pursue various realpolitik outcomes – in Mollah's case it might be as simple as not provoking an Islamist reaction.

It is simply odd they would stand up for a convicted war criminal but not for ostensibly ignorant young people who did a terrible thing – and the Das case involved a single murder.

Abroad, just how vocal has the Australian government been in publicly stating its opposition to the death penalty in say, the American media, or in China? Likewise, where is the public condemnation of drone killings in Pakistan which involve no judicial process and through which hundreds of civilians including children have been killed?