

# Canadian minister slams bishops' criticism of anti-human smuggling bill

OTTAWA, Ontario - Jason Kenney, minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, has fired back at Canada's bishops who criticized his recently introduced anti-human smuggling bill.

The views expressed by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' justice and peace commission in a Nov. 25 letter reflect a "long tradition of ideological bureaucrats who work for the bishops' conference producing political letters signed by pastors who may not have specialized knowledge in certain areas of policy," Kenney said in an interview.

The bishops' intervention underscores the reason why "the church makes the detailed application of moral principles in public policy the prudential responsibility of legislators who have a technical knowledge of how to apply the principles," he said.

The bishops warned that portions of the Preventing Human Smugglers From Abusing Canada's Immigration System Act now before the House of Commons might contravene international and Canadian law concerning the rights of refugees.

The bishops reminded Kenney that national interests and security concerns should not trump human dignity.

"We believe that human smuggling undermines human dignity," Kenney said. "It's an industry of profiteers who sell people an illegal service to smuggle them to countries in the most dangerous way possible.

"My single greatest concern about this wave of human smuggling is that people will die seeking to come to Canada in this way," he added. Canada has a "real moral obligation to do everything we reasonably can to prevent rusty, leaky boats" full of migrants from crossing the Pacific Ocean, the minister said.

The bishops failed to address the ethical obligation to stop smuggling, he said.

Kenney, a devout Catholic, said the letter “falsely suggests that the bill seeks to ‘punish refugees.’”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said. “We will not deport anyone determined to be a bona fide refugee.”

The bishops said the bill would penalize refugees more than it would penalize smugglers and noted that it authorizes the detention of people for long periods, a violation of the international convention governing refugees signed by Canada.

“Even those who arrive through an illegal and dangerous human smuggling operation would be potentially eligible for permanent residency after a five-year period,” Kenney said.

The bishops also said the bill “risks creating serious obstacles to sponsorship and family reunification,” but Kenney argued the steps are necessary to deter people from paying smugglers to get into Canada.

“If you help to finance a criminal smuggling syndicate to come to Canada, there is a consequence that you won’t enjoy privilege of family sponsorship for a period of five years,” he said. “We don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

Kenney noted the bishops’ objection to the bill’s detention provisions, which he described as far more modest “for people who just show up” than those that exist in other liberal democracies. They are based on “the simple legal principle that states have the right and responsibility to protect the integrity of their borders and to ensure legal migration,” he said.

“(The bishops) say just target the smugglers with enhanced penalties,” Kenney said. “That alone would be completely ineffective.”

Most of the smugglers “live beyond the reach of our law,” he said, noting not a single charge has been filed under legal provisions already available.

“These are the kinds of prudential considerations that I have an obligation to take

into account," the minister said. "I can't just whip off a 300-word letter and wash my hands of the problem."

Kenney suggested that the bishops' conference staff members who write letters on public policy issues or the bishops themselves bring their concerns to government officials rather than "cut and paste" arguments circulating in "fake grassroots coalitions" of "special interest groups in the immigration industry."

Kenney also said the bishops' conference has not said anything on the 20 percent increase in the resettlement of refugees even though the program is "hugely unpopular politically."