

Appearances Matter

So far this week ten migrants have chosen to jump into the sea rather than stay aboard one of the much-vaunted quarantine ships chartered to hold migrants (whether they test positive or negative for Covid 19) who arrive in Italy. One of them remains missing, presumed dead.

These gleaming white ships, normally in use as high-end ferries or for mini-cruises, belie the reality that, for those aboard, this is no picnic. A majority of passengers will already have undergone the horror of crossing the Mediterranean Sea in vessels wholly unsuited to the task. Some will have witnessed their travelling companions drown. Some will have been raped, tortured and beaten; many held in appalling conditions and many more exploited as they headed for the North African coast. For some, the traumas already suffered will have been compounded by the refusal of any European country to permit disembarkation following rescue.



Such was the case of Abou, who died on 5th October 2020 in Palermo after being tortured in Libya, rescued from a sinking boat in the Mediterranean Sea by Spanish NGO *Proactiva Open Arms*, held aboard the rescue vessel for eight days whilst governments fought over who should take responsibility, and then transferred directly to a quarantine ship where he was obliged to spend the entire fifteen day quarantine period. Only then was he transferred to hospital, where he fell into a coma and drew his last breath.

Floating detention, whether justification is premised on medical, political or other grounds, is agonising for those who are subjected to it. All of us, at least to some extent, have now experienced what it feels like to have our movement restricted. How much additional distress would we suffer if our confinement were aboard a ship?

There is no question that, in these days of pandemic, governments face tough choices about how to keep people safe. Question 1: if those boarding quarantine ships are routinely tested beforehand, why are the groups testing positive boarding the same ships as those who test negative? Question 2: if those arriving in Italy by boat from North Africa require to be subjected to a Covid test as well as a quarantine of at least fourteen days, why is the same not true for those arriving from the same countries by 'plane? Question 3: if Italy's reception centres are half-empty following the implementation of the soon-to-be-reformed Salvini

decree, why are significant sums currently being spent on holding migrants on disused cruise-ships instead of sending the same people to be quarantined in properly adapted accommodation?

Equal treatment for everyone who comes to Italy – and a smooth transition into a reception centre for those seeking asylum - would not, of course, send quite the same message to the voting public. This is, it seems to me, the politics of deterrence.

Whilst Italy may be one of only a handful of countries to “off-shore” those who seek asylum – albeit on a temporary basis – holding asylum seekers on ships is, we are told, one of a suite of options currently being considered by the UK government. There is much that governments considering this option could learn from the tragic case of Abou. One can only hope that one of the lessons is to abandon this path altogether.