

Tear-gassed Xenophon says we must rethink Malaysia

April 29, 2012

By Michelle Grattan

The federal government has been mute on human rights issues in Malaysia because it still wants to pursue a people swap deal, independent Senator Nick Xenophon says.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators swamped the Malaysian capital on Saturday to demand the reforms, ahead of national polls expected soon.

Senator Xenophon had teargas fired in his direction during a demonstration for electoral reforms in central Kuala Lumpur.

He is in Kuala Lumpur on an international fact-finding mission on election processes in Malaysia, and said police had fired teargas and chemical-laced water at demonstrators.

Up until then, it had been a peaceful rally that had included chanting and a speech by Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Senator Xenophon said Australia must rethink its relationship with Malaysia.

"I wonder whether the Australian government has been mute about human rights issues ... by virtue of our reliance on the refugee swap deal," he told ABC Radio.

"This is a country that the Australian government is happy to do refugee swaps with. It raises serious questions over how authoritarian it is."

Last year the High Court scuttled plans by the federal government to swap 800 asylum seekers with 4000 processed refugees from Malaysia and cast doubt on the legality of offshore processing.

The government has since failed to get the numbers in parliament to pass legislation allowing offshore processing.

Liberal frontbencher Christopher Pyne said: "the Malaysia solution is all but dead". "It hasn't even be brought into the parliament for a vote," he told Sky News today.

Mr Pyne said it was "as dead as a dodo".

"If the government has a better policy they should come out with one," he said.

Three hundred boats had arrived since the Howard government's Pacific Solution was abolished, Mr Pyne said.

"This is one of those carbuncles for the government that won't go away until they shallow their pride and return to the previous government's policies."

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