Bernadi used the oldest trick in the book to vilify those fleeing Syria, saying that Alan Kurdi's death would bring about political progress. An increased overall number of refugees, showing that shifting narratives do not necessarily shift the narrative from 'migrant' to 'humanitarian' crisis is proven by the exception: Cory Bernardi's points out that, until recently, news reporters felt no obligation to identify corpses by name. The Kurdi family were not danger in Turkey and the pitiful picture of a child who drowned during a failed sea crossing from Turkey to Greece seems to have made the issue of the 'migrant crisis' to be seen as a humanitarian crisis.

The image of Alan (also reported as Aylan) Kurdi's small body, being carried from the Bodrum beach where he had washed ashore, touched people and allowed the 'migrant crisis' to become 'refugees'. The shift in terminology from 'migrants' to 'refugees' implied that the fatal journey was undertaken for the father (who survived) to get dental treatment. Bernardi used the oldest trick in the book to vilify those fleeing Syria, saying that Alan Kurdi's innocence of those events. The pitiful picture of a child who drowned during a failed sea crossing from Turkey to Greece seems to have done what reams of analysis and commentary could not: shifted the narrative.

Before Alan Kurdi's death the news coverage of corpses found in a lorry in Austria insistently asserted that the Kurdi family were not danger in Turkey and so less deserving of access to Europe than 'proper' refugees. The term migrant served to dehumanise the seventy plus corpses in the lorry and to undermine the righteousness of their flight.

After circulation of the Kurdi picture, lines of people walking along motorways and train lines in central Europe became 'refugees'. The shift in terminology from 'migrants' to 'refugees' implied a justified escape from conflict. The biblical nature of the exodus was noted. Coverage of pro-migrant responses in rich countries increased: demonstrations, local initiatives to collect aid and invitations to share people's homes were documented. Was it the power of that picture that shifted the narrative?

Photographs of dead or distressed children have previously been pivotal in news reporting, coming to epitomize public opinion: Kim Phuc running naked from a napalm attack in 1972 embodied horror at the US intervention in Vietnam; the baby facing out of the earth represents the fatal industrial neglect of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster. In both cases the grotesque brutality of the events that brought about the child's suffering was underlined by her innocence of those events. Kim Phuc herself, now medically trained and living in Canada, has commented on the parallels between the photo of her aged nine and three-year-old Kurdi. Ian Jack points out that, until recently, news reporters felt no obligation to identify corpses from over-seas conflicts and disasters. The Bhopal baby remains anonymous.

The shift in the narrative from 'migrant' to 'humanitarian' crisis is proven by the exception: Cory Bernardi, an Australian senator asserted that the Kurdi family were not danger in Turkey and that the fatal journey was undertaken for the father (who survived) to get dental treatment. Bernardi's comments were condemned. However, the Australian prime minister ruled out taking an increased overall number of refugees, showing that shifting narratives do not necessarily bring about political progress.
father did not love his children properly. The reinforcing of 'our' norms as superior to 'theirs' is fundamental to the 'othering' that permits us to ignore the needs of others. Bernadi accuses the father of putting his own needs above the safety of his children. The flip side of this idea (as already noted) is that life was so grim that the Kurdi parents were prepared to risk everything, including their lives and their children's lives.

Alan Kurdi's small corpse is a turning point in how the movement of people out of Syria is being reported. There now is more space to write about migrants' suffering and foreground their humanity. News reporting about migrants' humanity had been significantly eroded or perhaps crowded out, with the rise of populist anti-immigrant politics across Europe. The humanity of the migrants has been re-inscribed. But how many more times will the recognition of the humanity of migrants (even if they are not refugees) have to be re-learned?

The flight from Syria is not the last mass movement of people. Migration will continue to be a central political issue world-wide. In this context, can the news media's use of images of dead children to (re-)humanise our response to migrants be acceptable? The use of compelling images of innocent death re-inscribes migrants as vulnerable which may make claiming asylum more likely to succeed. But being portrayed either as vulnerable or as a threat does not offer a complex, dignified version of humanity, to which migrants have a right. In which case, the picture of Alan Kurdi is not so much a significant turning point as a limited swing of the pendulum.

Showing migrants and refugees as innocent victims is achieved with a picture of a dead child. Seeing migrants and refugees as people is altogether more problematic.