BILL'S BOAT

BILL Shorten has been mugged by reality.

Faced with a barrage of security warnings, the prime ministerial hopeful had no choice but to blink in his stand-off in pursuit of the Left vote.

But it is an indictment on Labor’s grasp of the precariousness of Australia’s border policy that the debate got this far.

We know 1200 asylum seekers died at sea on Labor’s watch when they were last in power.

The party’s immigration management was a policy failing for the books.

And so what does it say for the judgment of those who were around in the days of Rudd/Gillard/Rudd that they would flit with the idea of making it easier for anyone to get to the mainland?

What were Chris Bowen or Tony Burke — men who oversaw the immigration portfolio under the old Labor government and dealt first-hand with the horrors of deaths at sea — or simply in a bid to humiliate the government — would lead to political pain.

Contemplating a lunch to the Left on borders has also raised fears of old wounds and divisions in the party over the treatment of asylum seekers.

Mr Shorten and his office were always privately sensitive over the perception they were soft on borders.

When The Daily Telegraph broke the story late last year that the government had legal advice the Bill would allow criminals into the country, Labor furiously claimed it was wrong.

And yet yesterday Mr Shorten said he wanted the Bill toughened so that the definition of national security also covered serious crime.

These are the actions of a party that had its head in the sand over the impact of a Bill it was supporting.

The writing was on the wall for this backdown all along.

SHERADYN HORDERHEAD

BILL Shorten was last night scrambling to back away from supporting Keryn Phelps’ plan to overhaul medical transfers after Labor capitulated to government pressure on three key measures.

After an hour long briefing from Home Affairs boss Mike Pezzullo, the Opposition Leader met with his shadow cabinet where they did an about-turn, thrashing out amendments that significantly water down the impact of the plan despite warnings from doctors and the Greens.

But Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday declared there was no “middle ground” in the protection of Australia’s borders and that any version of the Dr Phelps’ plan to band the decision on boat people medical transfers to two doctors would weaken security.

Senior sources confirmed that Mr Shorten last night asked the Labor caucus to support amendments including handing the Immigration Minister much broader powers to veto transfers.

The change would be a massive backtrack after Labor MPs had fiercely argued the current version of the Bill, which the Opposition voted for 22 times in the Senate, handed the minister enough powers to intervene.

The Daily Telegraph first revealed last year that legal advice handed to the government on the plan meant the minister would have no power to refuse murderers, rapists or other with questionable backgrounds on character grounds.

Mr Shorten was also believed to want the proposal limited to asylum seekers and refugees currently on Manus and Nauru in a bid to neutralise the government’s attacks that people smugglers would use the new scheme to sell seats on leaky boats. The 24 hour deadline for the Immigration Minister to intervene was also taken off the table.

The substantial changes are expected to inflame factional tensions after left wing frontbencher Terri Butler yesterday spoke out against walking away from Dr Phelps’ proposal. However, Ms Butler said there could be room to negotiate over ministerial powers to get some version of the plan through parliament.