

**JOHN MENADUE**

**AUSTRALIANS FOR JUST REFUGEE PROGRAMS**

**BUILDING THE VISION**

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**YWCA, 5-11 Wentworth Avenue, Sydney**

**Bali and Boat People**

In recent weeks we have seen an outpouring of genuine grief and outrage over the Bali deaths. But I am troubled that last year, 353 poor and desperate people literally went to their watery grave trying to come to Australia to find freedom. We scarcely blinked at this human tragedy. We turned away. Our inhumanity was compounded by our two political leaders competing with each other not to allow family reunion for a few survivors. Have we become moral simpletons.

How could our humanity be so selective and our morality so partial. I think that part of the answer is that the Bali stories described real people like ourselves, members of football clubs, local schools and people that we could identify with. It became intimate and personal for us all. But our leaders had allowed us to be persuaded that the boat people were not human at all. They were cheats, blackmailers, queue jumpers, terrorists, so devoid of humanity that they would throw their children over board – and Muslims to boot. We gated our country and gated our hearts. Our leaders, like school yard bullies, grovelled before the headmaster in Washington, but cowardly attacked some of the most vulnerable people on earth. This political tactic succeeded brilliantly, at least for the time being.

It is one of the great stains in human history to scapegoat the foreigner, the person that is different, the outsider. We have done it in this country before and I am afraid we may do it again in the future. But our history shows us that given time, decency will win through.

**Obligations to strangers and aliens**

A key value from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition that we inherit is the obligation ('mitzvah' in Hebrew) to treat 'the stranger' kindly because Jews were 'strangers in Egypt'. As Exodus 22 describes it 'You shall not molest or oppress the alien, for you were aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.' This obligation to the stranger is repeated in various forms 36 times in the Old Testament. As my adviser in these matters, Sam Lipski, reminds me, it is the key obligation of the Old Testament. It occurs more times than other obligations, such as keeping the Sabbath, observing the dietary laws and the laws of the Tabernacle and Temple. Treating the stranger with respect is a key value which our society has inherited. It is also one reason why we have international conventions to protect refugees.

Populist leaders seek to blot out our concerns for the stranger by highlighting that some people are not fully human. There is a sad but illustrative history of this in Australia. The rights of Aboriginal people could be put aside because they were members of an 'inferior race'. The unemployed could be dismissed as dole bludgers. And now the boat people are on the same long list of dehumanising and demonising with the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration wantonly and dangerously ratcheting up the rhetoric. With their dog whistle politics, they emit sounds of reasonableness at one level, but at another level promote the worst forms of prejudice.

A measure of how our values have become distorted is starkly revealed in the Australian budget. Father Mark Raper, a patron of this organization, has pointed out that in this year's federal budget \$A2.8 b was allocated for border protection, an increase of \$A1.2 b this year, while the untied Australian Government contribution to UNHCR was cut from \$A14.3 m to \$A7.3 m – a striking illustration of the things we value.

Not only have we brought great damage and sometimes death to refugees, but we have belittled our own self-worth and damaged our regional reputation. We gained confidence over community participation in the Olympics, in fighting the bush fires, in our growing role in volunteerism, and in our response to the cries of the people of East Timor. We responded not out of self-interest, but because we believed in something worthwhile and valuable beyond ourselves. We were pleased to find that we were unselfish. We felt good about ourselves, but no more after our selfish inhumanity towards vulnerable boat people.

There has also been a cost to Australia's relations with other countries, particularly those in our region. Even the United States is finding that military and economic power on their own are not sufficient. Overwhelming military power did not stop the attacks on America on September 11. Those attacks, as despicable as they were on innocent people in New York, had their genesis in American support for the crushing of the Palestinian people. A successful foreign policy requires countries to be able to persuade and not just coerce others. That ability to persuade is linked to values that command respect and attention, as Paul Kelly in *The Australian* has well described. The main asset Australia has in our region is that we have an open and strong economy, some military capability and most importantly, despite our failures, a united and tolerant multicultural society. Those values and our projection of them have been put at risk by our xenophobia. Countries that can project influence and persuade beyond their economic and military power – countries such as Canada and the Scandinavian countries – project values. So careless and ignorant is the Prime Minister on the importance of values, that he even suggests that what we should be projecting in the region is our role as the deputy sheriff for United States interests.

### **The Policies towards Asylum Seekers will not Work**

The moral bankruptcy of these policies are clear and we will continue to pay a heavy price for them, to say nothing of the price paid directly by the victims.

But in practical terms, policies will fail. The Pacific Solution cannot be repeated as regional countries now realise that they have been conned for a bag of money.

There is no queue, when there is only one resettlement place for every 200 refugees around the world. The boat people are not less deserving than those in refugee camps. 90% of the boat people processed in Australia have been found to be genuine refugees. Neither have any of the boat people been found to be terrorists, despite the screeching on talk-back radio.

Because there are 20 million refugees around the world to choose from, refugee programs have been turned into quasi migration programs with skills, English language and links to Australia being very important issues in selection. There is no hierarchy of refugee needs. The way refugees are selected was highlighted in a story which Dr William Maley, the Chairman of the Australian Council for Refugees, recently told. A senior UNHCR official was approached in Africa by an Australian bureaucrat who wished to discuss refugee resettlement. 'Over tea, the Australian looked at him and said "you and I speak the same language. What we want are English-speaking engineers". "There is a problem here" replied the UNHCR staffer. "I can give you some non-literate women who have been raped."'

National borders will always be porous as Aborigines found when Captains Cook and Phillip landed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Modern Australia was founded by unauthorised boat people who clearly had less of a moral claim than the boat arrivals of last year. But the 18<sup>th</sup> Century arrivals had guns. At the end of the line, and with no land borders, Australia is better protected than most. So our problem with boat people and asylum seekers is relatively minor in world terms.

Furthermore, refugee flows by their nature are usually intense and brief. We should maintain a sensible perspective. Refugee flows are also driven by push factors in the country of war, rape and persecution, rather than by the pull factors, or barriers to entry, in recipient countries. Desperate people will always try to escape persecution. Now that the Taliban regime has been overthrown, it is not at all surprising that the outflow from Afghanistan has stopped. What was surprising was that Australia sent troops to Afghanistan to help put down a tyrannical regime whilst punishing the same people who came to Australia to escape that tyrannical regime. Where is the morality in that?

The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs states on its website on unauthorised arrivals that 'historically the Australian example of people-smuggling, which attract most media attention, have been by boat. However the majority of smuggling into Australia and other countries occurs by air'. In 7 out of the last 10 years, more unauthorised arrivals came to Australia by air than by sea. But the frenzy was all about boat people. We had a large blip of about 4,000 coming for 2 years by sea. But what a political opportunity! As the years pass, we will see how exaggerated and perverse the Australian government reaction was in the same way that we had an exaggerated response and panic over Mabo. We wonder now what the panic about Native Title was all about. The same will happen over boat people.

As one door closes for unauthorised arrivals, another door is prised open. If there is demand from desperate people, people smugglers will turn to entry by air and the counterfeiting of travel documents. It would be happening right now. When I was Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, I saw almost daily new counterfeit documents produced by people smugglers. We know that many of our fellow Australians

forged documents and paid people smugglers to escape the Nazis. More unauthorised arrivals enter by air through Kingsford Smith Airport than by boat via Christmas Island.

In highlighting illegal boat arrivals, the Government has conveniently ignored the 60,000 illegals in the Country, mainly UK and USA visitors who have cheated by permanently overstaying.. But the Minister turns a blind eye because there isn't the political advantage.

People smugglers are not the only ones in the business of getting money for arranging entry to Australia. Migration agents legally receive fees for assisting the entry of business migrants who have \$500,000 to buy their way into the country.

Present policies will also fail because it is clear from our own history, as the Fraser Government demonstrated, that it is possible to conduct a humanitarian refugee policy whilst maintaining the integrity of our borders. At that time, over 4,000 came by boat but it was managed carefully and firmly. The major difference between Malcolm Fraser and John Howard is that Malcolm Fraser did not attempt to exploit the problem for party-political purposes, although he did come under quite severe criticism by some unscrupulous people.

The refugee numbers that Malcolm Fraser faced were vastly more than the 'threat' which John Howard faced. At the peak in the late 1970s, there were about 400,000 Indo-Chinese in the refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. In one year, we took 15,000 refugees from Indo-China alone. Instead of demonising refugees, we acknowledged their plight and heroism. Bogus refugees were quickly processed and deported. The rhetoric was coercive at times, but humanity was served. We are now proud of what we did.

## **Summary**

I am confident that with hard work, we can turn the xenophobia around. We will realise again how newcomers and particularly refugees have made such a great contribution to this country. We will learn again not to cut off our nose to spite our face.

Immigration has dramatically changed Australia, mainly for the better. I don't think any country has done it as well. If I could be more precise, I think Australia has benefited most from refugees. Whilst the first generation of refugees may often lack skills and education, they more than make up for it in enterprise, courage and risk-taking. That enterprise and high aspirations are often expressed through their children. Refugees are by definition risk-takers who will abandon all for a new life. They select themselves much better than a migration officer can ever select them.

Australians have seen the benefits of multiculturalism, but seem more hesitant about bringing new people. But this hesitancy and sometimes hostility to newcomers, in time gives way to acceptance and pride in our common achievements. This has been our experience with waves of newcomers. Irish Catholics were initially depicted as different and perhaps disloyal to the English Crown. After World War I, German migrants, particularly in the Barossa Valley, were harassed for decades. We were prejudiced against Jewish newcomers in the 1940s. We were initially sceptical about the Indo-Chinese and what damage they might cause to the Australian way of life. We invented a whole

vocabulary to describe these strange newcomers – wogs, chinks, crauts, reffos, balts. But over time, we changed and the newcomers changed. Even the early Afghans who built the transport links in Central Australia now have a train, the Ghan, named in their honour.

Whilst Australians are invariably hesitant about newcomers, what gives me confidence is our pragmatic acceptance. We are favourably impressed with the personal experience we have of the neighbour or shopkeeper who is Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese or Iraqi. Is there something in the casualness and our easy-going acceptance, that overcomes ideological and philosophical opposition? We eschew the extremes and don't get too excited by ideologies at either end of the spectrum. If November 11, 1975, couldn't even provoke a general strike, what could? Rebellion is rare. There isn't much blood on the wattle, as Phillip Adams put it. We bump into each other, but we don't cause a great deal of hurt.

In addition to time healing differences, we have also had leaders who have inspired the best in each of us or 'touched the better angels of our nature' (Abraham Lincoln). Ben Chifley overcame public opposition to Jewish refugees after World War II. Robert Menzies, on coming to office, continued the acceptance of the displaced people of Europe. Harold Holt skilfully, but in defiance of public opinion, commenced the dismantling of White Australia. John Gorton and Gough Whitlam continued the process. When Malcolm Fraser responded to the anguish of the Indo-Chinese people, he knew that he was acting contrary to public opinion. Bill Hayden and then Bob Hawke supported him. Yet no-one today would argue that these leaders got it wrong. We applaud their courage and leadership.

Border protection is clearly necessary to maintain public confidence in migration and refugee intakes. But it is possible to do that, as Malcolm Fraser showed without dividing the country and punishing the most vulnerable people on earth.

Perhaps we need a new generation of leaders who will help us manage our fear of the foreigner and the unknown, and not seek to exploit our fear. Oh for leaders who would touch the better angels in each of our natures.

John Menadue