



social policy connections

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NEWSLETTER

November 2009

Editorial by Bruce Duncan

Why do asylum seekers panic Australians?

What a shock it has been to witness the revival of hysteria about people in boats trying to reach Australia to claim our protection and asylum. Not only have some of the 'shock jocks' and media been working up their audiences, but various politicians have again played on racial or religious stereotypes to conjure up fear, all for blatantly political purposes.

The Rudd government has been caught off balance, and seemingly frightened by some opinion polls, adopted a 'tough' rhetoric. While this may attempt to avoid losing some votes, prominent church and Labor figures, along with advocates for asylum seekers, have been keenly disappointed that Prime Minister Rudd has not exorcised this phantom once and for all.



What is it about Australia that so many of us keep being panicked by a tiny percentage of immigrants so desperate to escape threats in their homelands that they take the enormous risks of coming by boat? Many of us had hoped that such fear-mongering was behind us.

This panic is all the more puzzling when we consider that more than 43 per cent of Victorians are either migrants or refugees themselves, or their children, seeking a better life here. Seven million people migrated to Australia since early 1945, more than 700,000 under humanitarian programs as displaced persons or refugees.

Australia has serious moral and legal obligations to help shelter people whose lives or wellbeing are under grave threat. Of course people who claim asylum should have their claims tested, and if they fail, then they should be returned to their country of origin if this can be done safely.

Most people who claim asylum in Australia arrive by air on visas. Of the 4700 people applying for asylum in Australia in 2008, only 25 were boat arrivals. Yet there is no public alarm about the asylum seekers who arrived by air freely walking about in the community. By October 2009 the numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat had increased to 1700, still a small number compared with total settler arrivals in Australia in 2008-2009 of just over 158,000. The total humanitarian component, including those arriving by boat, was 13,507.

The numbers of people fleeing by boat to Australia are small in relation to those claiming asylum in other developed countries. In 2008 the USA accepted nearly 50,000 and France about 35,000, closely followed by

PUBLIC FORUM

Reflections on Pope Benedict's encyclical on Human Development, *Caritas in Veritate*

with

Archbishop Philip Freier,
Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne

Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services

Rufus Black
Master of Ormond College

Thursday
19 November 7.30pm
Wyselaskie Auditorium
Centre for Theology and Ministry,
1 Morrison Close, Parkville VIC

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Canada and the United Kingdom and then Germany. The countries from which the largest numbers of asylum seekers come are Afghanistan and Iraq, but as the UNHRC reported in October, overwhelmingly the driver forcing people to seek asylum is war. And 80 per cent of the 16 million refugees worldwide are sheltering in developing countries.

As of 16 October, there were 1033 people in immigration detention centres in Australia, 857 being at Christmas Island, with some 300 others in other forms of accommodation or detention. Four out of five people in detention are boat people. Nearly 600 were from Sri Lanka, 378 from Afghanistan, and a further 115 from Iran and Iraq.

Of those arriving by boat and processed at Christmas Island, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority are granted asylum. Very few people would risk their lives and those of their family to travel to Australia by boat unless they had extreme reasons to do so. Yet they are at times condemned as suspect terrorists or as queue-jumpers (when there is often no queue for them to join). The Australian security services have so far reportedly not identified a single terrorist among these asylum seekers.

Church and community groups visiting people in detention in the recent past were shocked that many were locked up for years, including many children, resulting in extreme trauma and crippling many with mental illness. Attempted suicide and 'self-harm' became common-place. Even many of the guards were traumatised by conditions.

As Petro Georgiou wrote in the *Age* (26 June), we demonised people fleeing persecution and seeking our protection. Our government policies were 'cruel and contrary to Australia's best values'. We might add that such policies also gravely damaged Australia's international reputation and degraded our civic conversation.

The Rudd government has done much to humanise the reception of asylum seekers, speeding up processing times, abolishing debts imposed to pay for their own incarceration, and granting permanent protection visas to applicants released into the community.

Yet Australia could handle asylum seekers and refugees still better and more humanely. Other developed countries, including the United Kingdom, Sweden and Canada, offer better programs to help asylum seekers settle quickly.

It is in Australia's own self-interest to help asylum seekers and refugees settle into work, housing and education by providing sufficient support services, hence ensuring a more productive and contented population. We can do this easily if we decide to.

The Population Debate again

Reports that Australia's population is likely to grow from the current 21 million or so people to 35 million by 2050 have alarmed some people, especially in view of the threat of climate change.

There is no escaping the fact that global population will increase a further 50 per cent by 2050 before it levels off. Development economists were quietly confident that, with determined effort, the world could support such growth, with increasing standards of living for poorer peoples, as has happened already in many parts of the world.

However climate change has suddenly introduced a wild card which will make sustainable population growth much more difficult. Some are arguing for sharper restraints on population growth in developing countries, but it is hard to see how this could occur without very draconian measures and abuses of basic human rights.

Others are stressing the urgency of alleviating poverty in developing countries, which will likely reduce birth rates quickly while allowing couples to plan their family size freely as their consciences guide them. In this view, we will not meet the population challenge unless we rapidly reduce global poverty. There is an enormous amount to be done if we are to achieve this.

SPC's Annual General Meeting & Future Directions

with guest speaker
Dr Hugh Jackson
on

**"Australians and
the Personal God"**

25 November, 7.30 pm
at the YTU Study Centre,
34 Bedford St., Box Hill

Drinks will also be provided.

The SPC Board will report on events and progress made during 2009, and plans for the coming year. It is also a chance for members and supporters to contribute ideas and energies to develop SPC as a vehicle for debate and advocacy on important social issues. Financial members of SPC have been posted information about nominations for the Board for 2010. We welcome your ideas and participation.