

“FROM WHITE AUSTRALIA TO TODAY”

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Australia has changed enormously through its brief history of a little more than 100 years. Some parts of the Act of Federation itself would be strongly criticised in today’s world. Aboriginals in South Australia had had the vote and were counted as people. The creation of Australia and the Constitution endorsed by the States and the British Parliament robbed them of that right.

Few Australians would be aware that 18 years later when the League of Nations was being negotiated, Prime Minister Billy Hughes was active in opposing the Japanese proposal to place a racial equality clause in the preamble of the League. The record seems to show that Britain and much of Europe would have accepted such a clause when the Australian Prime Minister and other racists marshalled significant opposition. I have seen the words proposed by Japan, they were reasonable. The words were:

“The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree that concerning the treatment and rights to be accorded to aliens in their territories, they will not discriminate, either in law or in fact, against any person or persons on account of his or her race or nationality.”

A meeting was called to try and reach a compromise agreement. Prime Minister Billy Hughes made it clear that he had no intention of attending such a meeting. To him, it was not the words that were at fault, but the underlying idea that was so repugnant and offensive.

At the foundation of Australia, the White Australia policy was opposed by the British Government but supported by all political forces within Australia. The policy at that time had particular relevance for Chinese, many of whom had come here since the days of the gold rushes, for Afghans, many of whom had helped to open up the dry parts of Australia and for Kanakas who had been brought here as indentured labour to work in the sugar industry in Queensland. White Australia remained Australia’s policy for too many years after the 2nd World War.

Sir Thomas White, at that time Minister for Trade and Customs in the Australian Government, in 1938 attended a meeting in Evian, France with 31 countries present. The purpose of the meeting was to try and work out some solution for the numbers of Jews then fleeing Nazi Germany. During the course of discussion at the conference Sir Thomas White said that:

“Under the circumstances, Australia cannot do more, for it will be appreciated that in a young country man power from the source from which most of its citizens have come is preferred, while undue privileges cannot be given to one particular class of non-British subject without injustice to others. It will no doubt be appreciated also that as we have no real racial problems, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign immigration.”

There were many Australians of course deeply ashamed of such views, but those words all too frequently represented the Australia before the 2nd World War.

After the war political leaders around the world knew that civilization as we had understood it had so nearly been destroyed. Victors and vanquished knew they had to do better or the world would not survive. Two of the world’s most destructive and damaging wars had occurred within less than a quarter of a century. Countless millions had died and perished directly in that war or as a consequence of it.

Australians knew that Australia had to change and change dramatically. We had so nearly been invaded. The Battles of the Coral Sea and the Midway could have gone either way. It was Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbour which really brought America into the war, and thus saved Australia from invasion.

The war had been a wake up call for Australia.

After the war, the Labor Party and the Liberal Party both accepted that we had to undertake a major task of nation building. We had to invest in the future of this country as never before. We needed people, more people to develop, to build, to expand Australia, to undertake a major task of nation building and, in so doing, make Australia defensible.

Arthur Calwell persuaded the ACTU to accept a major migration program. He hoped that 9 out of every 10 new citizens would come from the United Kingdom and Ireland. That hope was never fulfilled. He was a firm

supporter of the White Australia Policy, as was Menzies as Leader of the Opposition.

Thus within the compass of White Australia, firmly supported by political leaders, Australia embarked on a major immigration program. The political parties at the time probably did not realise that this program, essential to the development of Australia, would also over time undermine and ultimately end the White Australia Policy.

So people came to Australia from countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany, from Eastern Europe and from the Soviet Union itself. It was a great awakening for Australia. It was a creative period for the world. The United Nations was established. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was endorsed in 1948. Treaties and protocols were negotiated to give legal force to its high principles. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were established. The first to assist the development of the Third World, the second to try and establish stability in financial markets, especially between developed countries and to avoid any reoccurrence of the Depression of the 1930's. It was an optimistic time. Despite the onset of the Cold War there was a sense of enthusiasm and of idealism.

The first significant step in the destruction of the White Australia Policy was probably a speech by Hubert Opperman, as Minister for Immigration, setting out a new policy in 1966. Up to that point there were a number of incremental steps. One of the more important ones was the ratification of the Refugee Convention in 1954 by the Menzies government. A ratification that took place with little fanfare and virtually no publicity, but which, as the 6th ratification, brought the Convention into force. Legal remnants were abolished by the Whitlam Government in 1972. The first major test of the new policy, of the open, non-discriminatory Australia came in the late 1970's when tens of thousands of refugees came to Australia from Indo-China.

The Citation for the 2009 Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop Asialink Medal given to Professor Nancy Viviani put it this way *"the immigration stakes in the 70s and 80s were much higher than today. The Fraser Government, in response to the humanitarian disaster in Vietnam, allowed refugees on a scale and at a speed not seen before or since. More than 100,000 Indochinese immigrated in the period."* Prof Viviani said of the role of government at the time. *"For Australians, Vietnamese refugee entry was the first real test of the disestablishment of the White Australia policy and a test successfully passed."*

I have met people who either came or whose parents came during that time and said that when they were billeted in Adelaide, for example, they found there were clothes or toys for their children. There was no razor wire, there were no detention centres or jails for newly arrived migrants. We did not need them.

These great changes in Australia have taken place harmoniously and productively. Australia could not have developed as she has without the work, the ethic and the ingenuity of Australians who have come here in the post war years to make a new home and to adopt a new country.

The change is perhaps emphasised quite starkly from my own State. The present Governor, Alex Chernov, from Lithuania in 1949. The previous Governor, David de Krestor, from British Ceylon, now Sri Lanka in 1948. That would not have happened in the Australia of the 1930's. We were starting to come of age. We were starting, I had believed, to develop a sense of independence, a sense of self.

At the Inauguration of the Institute of Multicultural Affairs on 30 November 1981, I made a speech which indicated that multiculturalism was now an accepted reality. I thought the battle against racial or religious discrimination in Australia had been won. I had regarded those changes in Australia as secure and unshakable. Events in recent times have shown that that was an optimistic conclusion.

As I said at that time "One critical process has been the way Australia's ethnic communities have developed, the initiatives they have taken and the responses they have evoked. Migrants established churches, community groups, welfare associations, schools and sporting clubs through which they could preserve and develop those aspects of the inheritance they valued.

They established ethnic communities, but they did not cut themselves off from the community at large. They asserted their right to be accorded a place of respect within the Australian community, within its established constitutional framework, a place that acknowledged their linguistic and cultural needs and rights. Patiently and doggedly ethnic communities sought out and changed the attitudes of the press, educators, welfare agencies, churches, politicians, public servants and the general public. They secured acceptance of the issues which concerned them as legitimate and significant items on the nation's social and political agendas."

.....“The key elements of multiculturalism can be simply stated. They are based both on realism and idealism. The starting point is the recognition and appreciation of the fact that the Australian population is derived from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and that these backgrounds are important to the way Australians see themselves. The sheer duration and magnitude of immigration into this country, the plain facts of the composition of Australia’s population mean that even if we wished otherwise ethnic and cultural diversity can neither be ignored nor readily extinguished.

We know that the attempt to enforce conformity holds high costs both for the individual and the society. It denies people their identity and self esteem. It drives a wedge between children and their parents. Ultimately it poses a real threat of alienation and division. We cannot demand of people that they renounce the heritage they value, and yet expect them to feel welcome as full members of our society. Realism alone dictates that cultural differences must be responded to in a positive way.

But multiculturalism is concerned with far more than passive toleration of diversity. It sees diversity as a quality to be actively embraced, a source of social wealth and dynamism. It encourages groups to be open and to interact, so that all Australians may learn and benefit from each other’s heritages. Multiculturalism is about diversity, not division – it is about interaction not isolation. It is about cultural and ethnic differences set within a framework of shared fundamental values which enables them to co-exist on a complementary rather than competitive basis. It involves respect for the law and for our democratic institutions and processes. Insisting upon a core area of common values is no threat to multiculturalism but its guarantee, for it provides the minimal conditions on which the well-being of all is secured.

Not least, multiculturalism is about equality of opportunity for the members of all groups to participate in and benefit from Australia’s social, economic and political life. This concern with equality of opportunity is dictated by both morality and hard-nosed realism.”

What I noted in that speech was possible, because of the basic humanity of the overwhelming majority of Australians and because politicians of major parties refused to play politics with race or religion.

The post war Australia had done so much, achieved so much, overcome so many differences and indeed diminished differences between people who in their own countries had been rivals or even enemies. Such an achievement was a considerable one. It also provided the opportunity for

the quality of political debate to be enhanced so that our leaders could talk about serious matters concerning the future of Australia and where we should be as we moved through this century to the next.

Tragically events started to change when Immigration Minister Gerry Hand established fixed enclosed detention centres for boat people, for asylum seekers. Then along came Pauline Hanson. Neither the government nor the opposition condemned her as she should have been condemned. The toughest words went something like “I don’t agree with her, but she has the right to say it.” The right to free speech which we all possess does not involve a right to create racial tension and division. The proper exercise of free speech requires common sense and good judgement, human decency and rejection of statements that will create severe divisions between peoples. In the 1990’s those necessary restraints on our right to free speech were forgotten.

It is so easy for political leaders, who are sometimes presumed to know more than they do or are presumed to have a higher motivation than they do to arouse fears of the unknown of people who come from a different background, a different history, a different culture and also a different religion.

In 2001, the then government was facing defeat. Heavily armed troops were placed on a boat that had rescued over 200 asylum seekers at sea. The Tampa was prevented from approaching Australia. That incident resonated around the world even before 9/11 ushered a new era of distrust and fear.

Political leaders then told us that boat people were illegal, queue jumpers. They had pushed drugs, they would be evil, they would be prostitutes and maybe terrorists. The circumstances from which they were fleeing were forgotten and there was a deliberate attempt to create fear of people coming here at the time, largely from the Middle East or South Asia.

Politically, the tactic worked. The Liberal Party followed its leader and the Opposition was divided. There were those who believed in an open and multicultural society as I did and do, but there were also those who really supported what the government was doing. But whatever the balance in the Labor Party at the time, the party decided that the Liberals had ripped enough redneck votes out of the Labor Party and they weren’t going to let them rip anymore.

Political leaders used arguments against asylum seekers which were mean, petty and false. How can you join a queue when there is no queue? How can you apply to come to Australia when there is no Australian office to which you can apply? If members of your family have been imprisoned or murdered by some dictator, how can you go to that dictator and say “please give me a passport so I may leave legally and seek safety.”

In January of this year the Parliamentary Library research team put together a paper setting out the facts about asylum seekers and refugees. The paper demonstrates clearly that the words used to describe boat people are mostly inaccurate and in some cases, downright false. The terms illegal, queue jumpers are falsely and emotively used. Claims that they get higher welfare benefits than Australians are false. That Australia is being swamped by boat arrivals are false. That we are being swamped with asylum claims are false. That boat arrivals bring disease are false. That most asylum seekers arrive by boats are false. It is a factual document well worth reading.

Most asylum seekers come by air and with papers. They get here on a student or visitors visa and then they claim asylum. Historically boat arrivals make up only a small proportion of asylum applicants. For many years over 90% of asylum seekers came by air. There is no debate about them, they are not put in immigration detention centres while waiting for their applications to be processed.

The first thing Australians need to try and do, and governments ought to do, is to make a concerted and bipartisan effort to get the facts out into the Australian market place. If governments won't do it, then we must do what we can.

Only a short while ago I visited the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre in Melbourne. They are providing food, medical and legal assistance, practical assistance and English language training to asylum seekers who have come here by air and who have nothing. It also provided me with a practical lesson in the consequences of inhumane policies pursued by recent Australian governments. Many of these asylum seekers are not entitled to work, to unemployment benefits, to Centrelink, to any health or welfare benefits, they are not entitled to any English language training, they are not entitled to anything, they are in no mans land. Governments have deliberately placed them in a no mans land in the hope the barbaric treatment will persuade them to go home. Large numbers from this Resource Centre, manned overwhelmingly by volunteers, have, after legal

advice has been provided, been proven to be genuine refugees. It is not often that governments deliberately set out to try and create extreme poverty and hardship in our midst, but this is precisely the consequence of current policies in relation to asylum seekers.

The Refugee Convention, as far back as 1954, recognised that refugees often travelled without official documents, without papers. It was in the nature of being a refugee. They often travelled by unconventional means. It was often the only way they could travel. The boat people who have travelled here without papers couldn't come here by air, because to get on an aeroplane you need official papers.

I was speaking to a young man making a significant contribution to Australia some weeks ago, whose parents came from the former Soviet Union. They had to pay in Italy a bribe if you like, before they could get on a boat to Australia. So many people who came here in the late 1940's, 50's, 60's and 70's would have paid somebody for some part of their journey here. I am no admirer of people who are called "people smugglers", but if somebody is fleeing terror and wants to escape to save their lives, to save their family, to prevent their children being persecuted, if they cannot get papers, if they cannot get official transport by ship or by air, what are they going to do? They will try and find somebody who will for a fee, take them where they want to go.

It is important to understand why people get on boats. There is a false impression that "people smugglers" canvas around saying "we have got a boat, it is going to Australia, buy a ticket, you can claim asylum" as though "people smugglers" canvas for asylum seekers to fill their boats. The fact demonstrates otherwise. The fact that overwhelmingly people who come by boat are genuine refugees and are proven to be so by judgements made by Australian authorities or by UNHCR demonstrates that they are people fleeing terror, fleeing a tyrannical government, political persecution and oppression. Such people will be actively looking for a means to escape from their own country. Changing circumstances in countries of the Middle East and South Asia do cause the numbers of asylum seekers to rise or to fall. Any impact of the boat people themselves or of policies in Australia and Europe, demonstrably have minimum influence. What has been said on this issue represents one more falsehood in the rhetoric of this demeaning debate.

If Australians had been told of the circumstances of Afghan families, persecuted and denied rights under the Taliban, I am sure Australians

would have welcomed such people as warmly as refugees were welcomed from Indo-China. If you had a couple of girls as your family under the Taliban, Afghanistan what options did you have? The girls could not be educated, if you tried and were found out, they and you as parents would probably have been shot. You would do everything you could to get to some place where your girls would have a future. What would you do: stay or leave?

People who have taken such actions have been condemned by political leaders in Australia. To its credit, the current government made some beneficial changes to policy when they first came into government. But the Liberal Party had learnt how to win votes on this issue. They had learnt how to frighten Australians and they weren't going to give it up. The government was charged with having lost control of our borders. The government was turning Australia into a soft touch. The Liberal Party totally ignored the fact that it was the circumstances in the countries from which the people flee, that led to people seeking refuge on boats to Europe or Australia.

Now, because the Liberal Party has pursued the Labor government so vigorously on this issue, the government appears to have forgotten the common humanity which we all should share and its rhetoric and its policies now argue that the government is just as tough as the opposition. Does Labor realise it can never out-do the Coalition on inhumanity to asylum-seekers? It should be noted that Labor actually won the 2007 election promising to be more humane to asylum-seekers and refugees.

This is a demeaning debate. It is a miserable one. It also shows that the politicians who participate in this debate have contempt for the Australian people. They believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that if they appeal to the fearful and mean sides of our nature, they will win support. They are showing that they believe we won't know enough about the world to know that for the most part what they are saying is plainly false.

After Tampa I was at a function in Harvard which I had helped organise. The Australian students at the Kennedy School asked if they could have a private meeting with me, they said it won't take long, we just have a couple of questions. They wanted to know how long they would have to pretend they were not Australian. I have had people in Finland, people from Latvia, from Cyprus speak to me and criticise me about these policies. As a consequence of Tampa Australian policies have resonated around the

world. They have done Australia no good. People are starting to ask, has Australia really changed from the Australia of old?

In many ways, it is political leaders who give these impressions that are so out of touch, so divorced from the reality of the modern Australia. They never seem to realise that we are already a multicultural society. That too many people have come here from too many different places.

Politicians can contribute greatly to the cohesiveness, the added strength that comes from diversity, or if they want to, as too many have in recent years, they can hinder it. The nature of the political debate over immigration and asylum seekers has done more than anything in 100 years to diminish politicians in public estimation. These debates have also done Australia significant harm to our overseas reputation.

In a moment I would like to make some recommendations about future policy, but before doing so I would like to say something about the most recent discussions with Malaysia over a people swap.

We should not seek to avoid our obligations, accepted originally by Menzies in 1954 by shifting asylum seekers to another country. There are many questions and many problems relating to the so called agreement with Malaysia. The whole idea of swapping asylum seekers including children in this way, as if they are commodities, is odious. It is trading in people and bears no relationship whatsoever to the cooperation that was achieved during the exodus from Indo-China. It does not represent an appropriate or a just solution.

Against this background what should we now do?

Our approach to asylum seekers and refugees should be multi-faceted.

- 1 Part of our approach should indeed be truly international. We should work through the United Nations to do much more to assist those countries in grievous trouble. We should try new and better ways of helping them resolve their internal difficulties. It is only when such countries are living in peace and have put aside internal conflict and civil war that the flow of refugees will cease. We should also make sure that western policy which we support, as we did in Iraq, as we are in Afghanistan, does not compound the problem and add greatly to the number of refugees and asylum seekers as indeed those two conflicts have. While trying to marshal a greater international effort

in the countries from which people flee, we should at the same time persuade those countries that accept refugees under UNHCR auspices, including ourselves of course, to greatly lift the number they are prepared to take each year.

- 2 For our part we need a solution that involves countries of our own region, but also countries who accept migrants and refugees in significant numbers such as Canada and the United States. We need a truly international solution.
- 3 Mandatory immigration detention centres should be abolished. Detention for the purpose of health, identity and security checks alone should be permissible. We should be prepared to meet our obligations originally accepted by Menzies in 1954 and accept onshore processing. We should not be frightened of its consequence.
- 4 There needs also to be an independent judicial examination of adverse reports by ASIO concerning would be immigrants to Australia. The nature of the decision and the grounds for the decision should be available to the review. The review should report to parliament and ASIO should have no capacity to censor any part of that review. The secrecy surrounding these matters, the inability of people to learn why they have been denied access or residence in Australia is shameful.
- 5 We should be especially concerned about children in detention. The last government made a commitment to get children out of detention. In February there were over 1000 children in detention. I am advised that was a record high but the government is working on changing this. They need to work faster.
- 6 The High Court decision that a failed asylum seeker can be kept in jail for the term of his natural life if he cannot be returned to his country of origin should be overturned by statute.
- 7 The punitive approach adopted to asylum seekers who seek to come to Australia by boat – who are detained often for years - and to asylum seekers who have come to Australia by air – who are living in the community but are denied any form of government support - should be replaced by a humane and compassionate policy where support is given to those in distress. I believe Australians would

accept this approach if they knew the consequences and the hardship caused by current government policy.

- 8 Australia should not involve itself in trading in people, in swapping asylum seekers whose status has not been proven for refugees waiting in some third country.
- 9 We need to recapture our humanity and also our bipartisanship. We won't achieve that until the political parties embrace a practical, humane and compassionate approach to this particular problem. The change will need to come from people making it clear that they want a change of attitude and a change of purpose from political parties. .
- 10 We need an independent report into post arrival services and into the responsibilities of governments and of community organisations for migrants and asylum seekers. Such a report would on the historical evidence be a useful guide to future policy but would also help to expose some of the unhappy myths that have grown up around these issues.

As our numbers increase our capacity to influence our own region and indeed the wider world will grow. With the contributions Australians are capable of making we can play a constructive role in the world. It is an unhappy fact that Australia has been at war in different parts of the world for far too many years since the 2nd World War. While some conflicts were concurrent, separate conflicts have endured for more than 41 years. For a country and a world that yearns for peace, it is a tragic record. We all need to contribute much more to establishing a more peaceful world.

A strong multicultural Australia that draws strength from its diversity, that debates real issues of importance to ourselves and to common humanity, has contributed so much in the past. It must do so again. The pettiness and meanness of the current debates about asylum seekers and indeed on other issues that are dealt with in a totally partisan basis must be put aside.

There is a special obligation on our political leaders to lift themselves off the bottom and take the debate in a different direction, based on fact not hyperbole; based on humanitarian rather than punitive considerations; to rejoin the bipartisanship that will be needed to make meaningful contributions to such complex global challenges.

We should also ask ourselves what we as Australians need to do so that politicians will learn to appeal to the best of our natures and cease playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people. I believe there is a special obligation of Australians who have come or whose parents have come here in the post war years, to work for and maintain that Australia because that is the Australia they came to, that is the Australia that has received them so warmly and that is the Australia to which they have already contributed so much in so many different ways.

That is what I ask you all to work for.

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