

Taking Refuge from Our Rhetoric: A Language Analysis on Behalf of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

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Introduction

We all want to believe ourselves creatures of reason, swayed chiefly by the facts before us. But much of the mechanism used to process information, the means by which we formulate judgments, lies beyond our conscious awareness and thus outside our deliberate control. We know only what we *think* that we think; experimental evidence shows that a turn of phrase, ordering of an argument, particular messenger shifts what we deem “true” and desire as social policy.¹

Australian discourse on asylum seekers has devolved into heated rhetoric about *illegals*, *boat people* and public disdain of outsized proportions. Those who discredit the contributions and deny the needs of would be residents employ scare tactics to great effect: convincing the public that asylum seekers and refugees pose threats to security and well-being.

Advocates for protecting the rights of all are often on defense. Reminders that Australia is a “fair go” nation of immigrants have largely fallen flat — insufficient rebuttal to the caricature opponents paint.

There’s also a generally unspoken element here: racism. Today’s immigrants are largely Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian, and often Muslim. Their presence is touted as a threat to Australian identity. It’s not just safety and resources on the line, but language and way of life.

How do we put forth a compelling narrative about who asylum seekers are, why they come, and what should be done about, to and with them? How do we establish a popular agenda for shared compassion that includes those who’ve arrived only recently?

Here, I examine people’s underlying reasoning about asylum, findings from nearly 1000 data points from language about immigrants and immigration. The data included consist of (1) your and allies’ collateral materials (2) popular discussion of this topic (blogs, social media) (3) media coverage and (4) opposition materials of the same types.

This language scan is a “you are here” marker, indicating the ways people currently understand, come to conclusions about and make judgments on this issue. As the first of multiple steps, it’s admittedly heavy on diagnosis and light on cure.

¹ The most comprehensive, among many sources, on this is Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)

Methodology

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, I've examined how people reason and come to conclusions about social issues.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging common non-literal phrases in discourse. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people unconsciously make sense of complexity. Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as "true" about a concept.² Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter the ways they decide, unconsciously, what "ought" to be done about a given topic. We judge a metaphor's efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what advocates wish the public got about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford University in the U.S. showed that individuals primed with a metaphor of crime as disease (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool. Conversely, subjects exposed to crime as opponent (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) thought harsher punishments were the answer.³ These results suggest it best for us to liken crime to a disease and avoid opponent evocations. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

Even single words can make a detectable difference in audience responses. In another study, investigators asked participants whether they'd *vote* in an upcoming election and others whether they'd *be a voter*.

In the U.S. where voting is voluntary, just over half of those asked about voting intended to do so, 87.5% of those asked about being a voter desired to get to the polls. Voting records showed 96% of those surveyed about being a voter actually pulled the lever.⁴

A simple word difference, from "will you vote" to "will you be a voter" is also a conceptual shift from action to identity, from *what you do* to *who you are*. The words we use shape what's true for our audiences.

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³ Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning", *PloS One*, February 23, 2011.

⁴ Christopher Bryan, Greg Walton, Todd Rodgers and Carol Dweck, "Motivating Voter Turnout by Invoking the Self," *Proceeding in the National Academy of Sciences*, June 22, 2011.

Underpinning for Belief about Asylum Seeking

As with any complex concept, ASYLUM SEEKING⁵ both as an action taken and as a social concern is understood through multiple simplifying models. These models are noticeable by paying attention to linguistic structures such as semantic frames and conceptual metaphors. And paying attention matters because not all simplifying models are created equal. Some imply, for example, that asylum seekers are needy invaders. Others can help audiences focus on their humanity and contributions.

Who does what to whom?

Altering descriptions of events influence how audiences assess blame and determine desired remuneration. In one experiment, using the infamous “wardrobe malfunction” during the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2004, among other situations, researchers found that respondents who read that a named agent “tore” another’s clothing (“bodice”) attributed blame and sought to levy at least 53% more in indecency fines than those who read about the incident described as “the bodice was torn.” This is especially telling because all the participants first watched video footage that clearly showed the performer ripping his colleague’s clothing.⁶

This research and its antecedents bring into focus a major challenge any social justice-seeking organization faces in communication: defining the problem it seeks to solve. Here is an indicative sample of you trying to do just that:

The **harm being inflicted** on children detained there is a direct result of Australia’s actions.

A man **has been killed** while in the care of the Australian government.

The findings of the report also bolster concerns by Amnesty International that refugees transferred by Australia to Cambodia **may not be protected** from human rights abuses.

Current government policy **is shaped by** border protection concerns.

⁵ Throughout this document, SMALL CAPS are used to signify the simplifying models used to understand a concept, rather than this word’s usual meaning in speech.

⁶ Caitlin Fausey and Lera Boroditsky, “Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 2010, 17 (5), 644-650.

While asylum seeker **arrivals have increased** in recent years, the numbers are still very small in global terms and well under one-tenth of Australia's annual migration intake.

Children who came to Australia seeking our help **have been needlessly placed** in an environment that is inherently detrimental to their health and wellbeing.

They have developed serious mental health disorders, engaged in self harm, experienced developmental delays and been subjected to physical and sexual assault.

These **conditions drive** some refugees to move on to Australia in the hope that it may offer them the protection that other **countries have failed or refused** to provide.

Time went by, charges weren't laid, **conditions didn't improve** and **innocent people still sat** in limbo on Manus.

In 2011, 7 million refugees **were found to be waiting** for resettlement, with an average wait of 20 years.

Australians no longer want to **see these injustices being perpetrated** in our name.

One thing is clear: bad things happen. What all of these constructions suggest is that the terrible concerns you raise have no clear origin.

In fact, consider what's implied when we hear, "we need Australians to be aware of the **flaws** in the offshore processing policy and take action against it." *Flaws* are generally minor, naturally occurring imperfections. Not glaring, human-made disasters.

Studies of cognition indicate that people seek conceptual consistency. This means that, in order for them to conceive of an issue as fixable through structured human action, they must see this issue as created by human action. In passivizing the origin of our asylum seeker policy problems, we not only let bad actors off the hook, we weaken our arguments about good actors needing to do something differently. Further, we need to be more precise in naming good guys and bad ones or risk making government overall seem villainous and ineffectual and thus not equipped to improve the situation.

Right now, *conditions drive, health disorders develop, and harm is inflicted*. Things just happen. Impeding real discussion about what ought to be done, these constructions obscure recognition of what is happening and why. We must restructure our sentences to convey — **people do things** and **things happen to people**. It seems simple, but the lack of constructions in this form attests to how hard writing this way is.

There are a few examples in the data that have people acting deliberately either toward their own salvation or inflicting harms on others:

In the Asia-Pacific region, few countries provide effective protection to refugees and conditions for **people fleeing persecution** are very difficult.

The idea that there is, or can be, an entirely orderly process for seeking asylum ignores the reality that **forced displacement** is anything but orderly.

Scott Morrison has created a situation of uncertainty and limbo for thousands of people in our community who deserve protection, not punishment.

When **people are running for their lives**, the only way to stop them taking a dangerous boat journey is to give them a safer option.

Even when you get close to making external causation front and center, there's a tendency to skirt "naming names." In the above example, only the one about Scott Morrison illustrates who is behind bad outcomes. And notice that he's accused of something rather bland.

Defining the problem

When we move from examining descriptors of the conditions to defining the problems with ASYLUM as it stands, we find that attempts to describe what's wrong with the current "system" are convoluted. For illustration, take this statement: "Only a tiny minority of the world's refugees are **resettled** and the system works more like a lottery than a queue." *Resettlement* implies some initial settlement occurred previously. This is both untrue and plays straight into the opposition's narrative that refugees are "country shopping." Further, a lottery is generally a fun distraction one elects to play. This hardly seems an apt analogy for seeking asylum or refuge.

In the complex discourse about harms, procedures, people smuggling, stopping boats, TPV and so on, one thing comes through clearly from all sides -- ASYLUM is a problem. And while you may mean **policy** is the problem, that's not coming across.

For example, one advocacy group among many asks, "How big is the problem?" Others imply the same in saying, "the **question** of how Australia ought to **respond** to refugees had been hotly debated" and "Australia **has experienced** boat arrivals from asylum seekers." In English, we typically *respond* to and *experience* issues that concern or even frighten us. We don't, conversely, *respond* to a visit from a friend or unexpected good news.

The discourse on all sides centers around the notion of problem. Opponents cast different elements into the roles of problem source, effects and solutions. But the prevailing message is this is a big, messy, difficult issue.

And it is. But by sticking exclusively to the framework of problem, we miss our chance to highlight ASYLUM as an opportunity to do something good. Talk of doing something big and fixing what's broken goes toward this. But this is still eliminating a liability — not creating a positive. Of course, we must also speak about the problems of and caused by current policy. But that's not enough.

Further, as you know, the numbers of asylum seekers coming to, detained by and settled in Australia is miniscule. In seeking to expose and excoriate current practices, we must take care not to double down on the perceived magnitude of this issue. It is little wonder that frequent attempts to use comparative international figures to illustrate just how small a population at issue fall flat. The bulk of advocacy discourse hammers home the idea of very large, intractable problem.

What is detention?

Arguably, the most horrifying aspect of asylum practices is prolonged detention. And yet, DETENTION is often referenced via abstraction, with little or no explanation of what it feels, looks and smells like:

We are now **holding** more than 2000 children in some form of immigration detention.

The Government's policy of **detaining** unauthorised asylum seekers is not evidence of criminality: **detention is justified on administrative and not punitive grounds.**

Amnesty is calling on the Australian Government to: End **offshore processing** and instead process all refugee claims made in Australia on the Australian mainland.

This kind of language falls short of having potential supporters grasp what DETENTION means and does. Terminology like “offshore processing” and “detaining” are important shorthands for a set of realities we need to name. However, they're comfortably devoid of horror.

Similarly, very common phrases like “detention of minors” are distancing. Regular people don't refer to their children as “minors.” And “detaining” sounds like a

temporary hassle. More straightforward language like *children's prison* is likely to aid in having people understand how morally repugnant these practices are.

Making the case for solutions

Turning now to examine how you're characterizing what you seek to accomplish, there's arguably little said. It's hard to tell what you are striving for here:

Advocate for asylum seekers without fear or favour, and works at both an individual and structural level in trying to create the most just refugee determination system possible.

In the short term, Australia must get its domestic refugee policies in order.

We do not get a sense of what an effective, let alone desirable, refugee and asylum policy would look and feel like — what it would accomplish.

The *what* you want to see done is unclear; the *why it matters* is as well. In this case, it's less due to a lack of ambition but rather because of a tendency to weave together dissimilar arguments.

Right now, you're often veering from one approach to the other. Take this example, "this situation is unacceptable and **a damming blight** on Australia's reputation as a responsible and caring nation. We know if we give these children 'a fair go' there is so much **potential and opportunity**." Too often, current messaging is a mishmash of both and while we can't yet say which is better, decades of research say that toggling between frames doesn't work.

To enable us to pick a lane and stay in it to drive our message home, we turn now to the two possible approaches to why Australia ought to change its policies and actions.

Stop creating harm

In the negative version of admonishments to alter ASYLUM policy, the focus tends to be on Australia violating international laws and human rights conventions:

This entire operation further enhances Australia's growing global reputation as a **selfish country that couldn't care less about its international obligations**, as defined by its signature on the Refugee Convention.

Independent of this alleged incident, the way Australia treats asylum seekers already **falls far short of its international obligations**, and exposes people to grave danger.

Amnesty International continues to call on the Australian government to **honour its responsibilities under international law** and cease the transfer of asylum seekers and refugees to third countries where they are not adequately protected from human rights abuses.

International human rights law requires that detention should only be used as a last resort and that all detainees should be treated with dignity and respect for their human rights.

The UN is urging countries to respect international law and share responsibility, yet **Australia is breaching international law** in order to shift it.

Attempting to change this reputation by treating asylum seekers inhumanely would **make us little better** than the countries from which they are fleeing.

For this frame to work effectively, it requires that audiences buy into certain ideas. One of these could be a belief that international law is — inherently — a good thing and thus following it is imperative. Alternatively, one could endorse the INTERNATIONAL LAW frame through a belief in keeping your word. Here, the proposition centers around Australia having pledged a commitment. Finally, a third way to make meaning of this framework is by highlighting the actual value of these international laws and conventions, remarking upon the values or objectives they uphold and enable.

Currently, the discourse is rather ambiguous as to which approach to bolstering the INTERNATIONAL LAW frame is in operation. Often times, you're assuming people place value in international law for its own sake — an empirical question we must examine. Even if this proves true, we've seen in previous work that linking an objective to a deeply held value or belief is far more effective than to a codified standard. International law exists to uphold certain norms and reach toward ideals — we're likely better off naming these than the intermediary policy or legislation.

Finally, this *obey the law* approach may prove problematic in an issue in which there's a perceived breach of law by individuals. While completely incorrect, opponents have stoked anger at asylum seekers purportedly breaking migration laws. Calling to mind the notion of law for its own sake, as opposed to for the sake of accomplishing what we want in the world, may not help. After all, we change our laws to comport with our values; we do not change our values to comport with our laws.

Your own attempts to correct misperception of attempted entry without papers reveal just how challenging it is to get this concept across. Consider, for example, “like a speeding ambulance, asylum seekers are **exempt from the usual application of the law** because they are in an emergency situation.” This suggests there is something outside the strictest parameters of usual law happening. In fact, there are separate laws that state that asylum seekers can enter Australia without documentation just as ambulances can speed. These are not situations exempt from law; these are applications of lesser known laws.

To be sure, the notion of diminishing or eliminating bad acts is not always voiced in the frame of following international law. It can be evoked on its own, without reference to codified norms, for example, “our underlying goal has to be preventing harm, not just shifting its location.”

Start doing good

The exhortation to stop harm and/or heed international law is only one of the dominant narratives. Another framing of your work puts Australian values front and center in an attempt to create something positive.

These appeals, at their best, posit [Australian] nationality as more than geographic but rather as an achievement. Taking people in and treating them well is an opportunity to do good:

Australia is multicultural society and it is a safe and beautiful home to people from diverse cultural background.

Existence of fair, smart and strong social, cultural and political system has created **fair environment for different cultures** to participate in to mainstream society without any fear of discrimination.

Australians should be **proud that Australia has enjoyed an international reputation** for respecting human rights.

Rather than looking to shirk its responsibilities, Australia needs to once more **show leadership**, contributing to a global response that prioritises not only protection, but **human life and human dignity**.

The High Commissioner emphasised that ‘there is a better way’, urging states to respond in a way that is ‘grounded in our values and commitments – not in prejudice and fear.’

This bill not only seeks to tear up the rule of law, it serves to undermine our **proud history as a multicultural nation, inspiring the world** with our diversity and harmony.

The efficacy of this may be greatly enhanced by tapping into uniquely Australian mythology and self perception. Which among the following concepts will work best, or in some combination, is something we'll take up in testing. Possibilities we should consider include the following:

1. Rather than refute the “country shopping” nonsense, embrace the idea that asylum seekers *are* deliberately hoping to reach Australia because it is **a unique haven**. Geographic isolation and sound gun policy has meant Australia is a relatively safe place. Emphasizing this, can help to underscore that the issue from which asylum seekers flee is danger. It also unconsciously undermines the ugly opposition rhetoric about terrorism and national security. People seeking safety aren't looking to commit violence.
2. As we continue to hear about Europe's abysmal treatment of migrants from Africa, you may be able to capitalize on Australia's purported international inferiority complex. Here's Australia's chance to demonstrate you are better than Europe and the United States. This would be a show the world how it's done kind of message.
3. Play up known Australian tropes and engage in exploration of what it means to be Australian.
 - 3.1. We're not all born in the “lucky country”, some of us must make our own luck.
 - 3.2. The notion of the *battler* — one who struggles continually and persistently against heavy odds
 - 3.3. Being a *larrikin* — someone who refuses to follow protocol and makes his or her own way.
 - 3.4. Australia as a pioneer society or “real man's country”
 - 3.5. Australia as deliberately eschewing hierarchical and authoritarian old world ideas of class and rank, where what you do, not your surname, proves who you are.
 - 3.6. Australians as courageous, fearless, ready to face unknown and tame the outback.
 - 3.7. Australians as outcasts who found a new home by casting others out. Altering treatment of asylum seekers could be a “never again” moment. Obviously, it would not atone for treatment of Aboriginals. But, it could at least demonstrate growth and learning.

Who are asylum seekers?

Moving from the complex and less concrete story line about ASYLUM, we turn to what's conveyed about the people who ought to be your protagonists — asylum seekers. There's an understandable tendency to profile the atrocities suffered:

They **damaged people** mentally, forcing them to live in anxious limbo and denying them the chance to reunite with their family.

In fact the more **vulnerable or marginalised** a person is the more important it is that we support them.

We know from past experience that they may **lose** not only their lives en route, but also **their mental and physical health** while in detention on Nauru.

Some people have **literally been driven crazy**, developing very serious **mental health issues**.

Wanting to draw attention to the egregious harms done to asylum seekers makes sense. But doing it this way makes them seem helpless. And it weakens your claims of all they have given and could contribute. Neither *driven crazy* nor *losing mental health* convey these are vital, vibrant people who embody what's great about Australia.

Instead of characterizing someone as “damaged”, we're likely better off referencing thwarted or diminished potential. Thus, rewriting the first example above, we'd say *they pushed strong people to cruel extremes, forcing them to live in anxious limbo never knowing when or if they would see their children, parents or siblings*.

Beyond this specific case of characterizing harms, the question of how to describe people who are seeking or have sought asylum looms large in the data.

This challenge emerges from a prevailing and noxious tendency to equate the doer with the deed. For example, instead of saying someone committed a crime, many call them a criminal. This is the dynamic also at play with “illegal”, used by immigration opponents in Australia and around the world.

Turning an action into an implied inherent — and even inescapable — characteristic is an effective tactic for supporting continuation of destructive policies. This phenomenon arises from what we call the metaphor of essences summarized by cognitive linguist George Lakoff as follows:

Just as physical objects are made of substances, which determines how they will behave (e.g., wood burns, stone doesn't), so people are seen as have an essence — a 'character' — which determines how they will behave morally. Good essential properties are called virtues; bad essential properties are called vices. When we speak of someone as having a 'heart of gold' or as 'not having a mean bone in his body' or as 'being rotten to the core,' we are using the metaphor of Moral Essence. The word 'character' often refers to Moral Strength seen as an essential moral property. To 'see what someone is made of' is to test his character, to determine his Moral Essence. The logic of Moral Essence is this: Your behavior reveals your essence, which in turn predicts your future behavior.⁷

Nearly fifty years ago, the Disability Rights movement taught us never to reference someone as "disabled" or even a "disabled person." They are, instead, a "person with a disability." Similarly, we don't call someone "a gay" or "a transgender." Rather, we say "a gay man" or "a trans woman."

An insistence on affirming someone's personhood powerfully reinforces that some aspect of who they are (body function, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc) is not the sum total of their being. Every one of us is foremost a *person* with multiple dimensions and identities.

Yet, in this debate, we see people seeking asylum or refuge referenced nearly without exception as asylum seekers and refugees. Consider this indicative example: "He is trying to sledgehammer the bedrock of our current strong statutory refugee determination framework – which, for many years, has successfully identified who is and isn't a refugee." Is a person a refugee or does a person seek refuge? Is being a "refugee" a permanent condition like being tall or blue eyed?

Note this example, "refugees have been coming to Australia for decades and the first big wave of boat people, from Vietnam in the 1970s, **have proven to be successful migrants who have assimilated** and added much to Australian society. Even after decades firmly rooted to their Australian home, they're "migrants." If this is the case, what does that term even mean?

When you say, "the majority of **asylum seekers** who have reached Australia by boat have been found to be **refugees**" you're turning an action into a fundamental characteristic. With this, you likely impede the basic building block of compassion for another — empathy, or being able to see yourself in another's situation.

⁷ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

The vast majority of your audience has never and will never be an “asylum seeker” nor a “refugee.” They may, however, in circumstances far less dire, move away from harm or seek safety. It’s highly unlikely we can create empathetic connection when we eclipse shared humanity from view by affixing labels that foreground what separates — not what’s held in common.

Although it’s admittedly clunkier, saying “people seeking asylum” or “people needing refuge/safety/freedom from harm” may be key. Aside from avoiding the essences problem we’ve named, it also helps shift a very calcified debate by injecting some new terms.

Apart from renaming the people, we can also try avoiding labels all together. Thus, for example, instead of saying “the majority of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat are found to be genuine refugees fleeing persecution, torture and violence” we could say *the majority of people who arrive in Australia [by boat] seeking asylum are proven to be fleeing persecution, torture and violence.*

Alongside this likely problematic tendency to label, we have an over-reliance on external designations:

The Bill undermines our robust, fair **refugee determination** system and denies people arriving by boat a fair hearing.

People shouldn't have to **re-prove their refugee status** every three years just because they arrived by boat.

The idea that you can properly test a person’s claim for **refugee status** at sea has been condemned by well-respected legal and human rights groups many times, yet this government cares nothing for its legal, moral or ethical obligations.

The new laws also significantly change the legal definition of a refugee making it much harder for a person to be **recognised as a refugee.**

Recognition of official refugee status is a means to an end. That end, being able to live free, out of harm and with family, is a universally understood good. Most Australians have no experience of seeking an official government designation that defines and curtails their lives. It’s likely not useful to speak of whether someone deserves status but rather whether they can be settled in Australia. In short, name what the policy accomplishes — not the policy.

This lesson holds when speaking about those not deemed refugees as well. Thus, it doesn’t serve us to say “others **will be found not to be refugees**, nor to be in need of

any other form of international protection, and as such are expected to return to their country of origin.” Instead of “not refugees”, it’s better to say what they are, “in no present danger” or “able to safely return to home.”

Because “asylum seeker” and “refugee” have become such loaded political words, we cannot be assured their true meaning comes through. They may have lost any attachment to danger, hardship, courage, sacrifice and will to live — let alone human rights. We can work to restore this necessary connection by no longer allowing “refugee status” or “refugee claims” to stand in for what these actually designate. Thus, a demand like this one — “end offshore processing and instead process **all refugee claims** made in Australia on the Australian mainland” would become *claims of persecution or human rights abuses or clear and present danger*.

In light of how politicized this debate is today, a critical demand such as “Australia must not introduce policies that **aim to deter refugees**” holds insufficient weight. Instead, we must describe these policies as aiming to *violate human rights or block people from saving their own lives*.

Beyond the numbing effect of politicizing speech, as mentioned before, the tendency to label here is having a further distancing effect. It’s clear from examples like the following that a sense of shared humanity is at peril: “When **these people** are eventually released into the community, they will need time and help to regain the spark that long-term detention inevitably destroys.”

“These people” is just one example, of course. But there’s a broader tendency in the discourse to reference people seeking asylum as OBJECTS:

Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has tried to bring in a range of laws and policies that make it easier for him **to send people** back to harm and places him above the law.

Australia must increase its annual humanitarian **intake** to at least 25,000 over the next five years.

Increase the **number** of refugees **we take** from this UN resettlement pool.

It may seem impossible to craft alternatives to the above statements. They’re describing real world events. But, they do so by confining asylum seekers to the object position. Consider, for illustration, a rewrite of the first example above as follows:

*Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has tried to bring in a range of laws and policies that allow him to **obstruct people seeking to live free, safe and in dignity.***

To be sure, there are numerous examples in the data where you profile the actions and bravery of people seeking asylum:

Dharshini had the courage to leave her country...She is a remarkable person of strength and resilience."

Australia would greatly benefit from refugees' hard work and their thirst for education.

After surviving perilous journeys by their courage and strength, these people epitomise the qualities admired and rewarded in Australian society.

They're just chasing that elusive dream of freedom and a better life. We take all these things for granted.

These refugees have managed to overcome significant obstacles, to forge a new life for themselves and their families in Australia. Obstacles that most of us in Australia would find it difficult to even contemplate. Refugees risk their lives to escape conflict and persecution. This requires incredible physical, mental and emotional strength.

In describing the lived experiences of asylum seekers, we must take care to have their voices rise. They speak for themselves; they don't need us to speak for them. Thus, saying, "Refugee Week highlights the importance of refugee-related issues, **recognises the indomitable spirit of refugees and celebrates their achievements** and stories" is close but not quite. Similarly, in describing your intent to "empower asylum seekers and foster their independence and self-determination" you place Australians, not people seeking asylum, in the driver's seat. People seeking asylum *are* empowered — we need not do for them but rather get out of their way.

Questioning motives

Another fraught dimension of characterizing people seeking asylum is the question of what brings them to Australia. Opponents promote the idea that people arriving are seeking better economic conditions, not fleeing existential threats. You've very much played into this question and participate in this debate:

[It's a **myth that**] **they just want a better life.** People who apply for asylum have been forced to flee their homelands.

Australia's refugee determination test is a rigorous one and to pass means a person faces a genuine threat of persecution **not simply looking for a new country to live in cause the unemployment rate is lower.**

Asylum Seekers are not immigrants. **Immigrants leave by choice** and are able to return home at any time.

We will see in testing if this is a debate you could win. In public opinion polling, we find that “many Australians have negative responses when asked what first comes to mind when they hear or read the word ‘refugee’, almost 50 per cent said ‘desperate’ was the first word that came to mind, 43 per cent said ‘need help’ and 42 per cent said “in need of protection.”” Thus, perhaps your insistence that it’s life or death is getting through.

But, don’t celebrate yet. It’s not clear this benefits your cause. Bolstering the bravery, tenacity and desire to contribute of people seeking asylum is at odds with claiming they’re not seeking a better life. So too is the cause of building shared recognition — of having the persuadable Australian recognize themselves in an asylum seeker’s story. What kind of person doesn’t want a better life? At best someone very strange and certainly not like the average person you seek to persuade or move to action.

Further, if it proves useful to stoke national pride to turn the tide on this issue, we must claim Australia is a pull factor. It’s not just desire to survive driving them out to anywhere — it’s a specific dream rooted in admiration for Australia.

Finally, as is always the case, when you negate a frame you evoke it. Thus, in saying that people are not drawn to Australia for economic reasons, you call to mind the idea that they are. This cognitive phenomenon, known popularly as *Don’t Think of an Elephant* is the final language issue I’ll address here.

What you fight you feed

Many of the language issues raised till now are hard. For example, treading the line between enumerating hardships but then not portraying people seeking asylum as broken or needy. Other common constructions in the discourse, happily, are easier to fix immediately.

What follows are some of the many negating constructions in this data set — wherein you “prove” your point by overtly denying your opponents’ claims:

The Government's policy of detaining unauthorised asylum seekers is **not evidence of criminality**.

There is **no such thing** as a genuine or non genuine refugee.

There is **nothing wrong** in doing whatever you can to secure freedom and there is **nothing illegal** about seeking asylum.

NO Human being is illegal.

It is **not a crime** to enter Australia without authorisation for the purpose of seeking asylum.

There is **no need to fear** their arrival.

Asylum seekers **do not break** any Australian laws simply by arriving on boats or without authorisation.

It is time we recognised, that this is a global issue and **not an Australian national security threat or invasion** of this country.

It is also **improbable that a criminal or terrorist would choose** such a dangerous and difficult method to enter Australia, or subject themselves to such scrutiny.

These are **not 'soft' policies** but responses built on basic standards of human decency.

Every one of these can be rewritten to avoid repeating your opponents' claims. Your opponents get way too much airtime as it is, there's no reason to cede the precious little you're afforded to engaging in their lies.

For folks who have heard these false claims, your overt denials are unlikely to prove persuasive. If people believed you, they'd already believe you. And, for folks who've not heard these claims or at least didn't have them top of mind, you've now made a neural connection between asylum and security threat, criminals, terrorist, invasion, illegal and so forth.

Note that this caution applies to the whole construct of "myth busting." The only myth worth busting in public discourse is the efficacy of that rhetorical device. Decades of study prove it's not useful, at best, and may in fact reinforce the information you seek to discredit.

In order, I've rewritten each of these statements in affirming language:

The government's policy of seizing and incarcerating people fleeing unsafe conditions is absolutely evidence of criminality — that of our government.

People who genuinely fear for their lives or liberty have the right to seek refuge in Australia.

The instinct to survive, hunger for freedom and ensure the safety of those you love is basic to all humans and integral to the preservation and sanctity of life.

All people have rights [no matter what you look like or where you come from].

It is legally permissible to enter Australia without documentation in cases of danger to life or abrogation of human rights.

There is reason to celebrate their arrival as it marks victory for an indomitable will to live.

People seeking asylum are acting out their legal rights by arriving on boats without previous documentation.

It is time we recognized that the presence of people who must abandon all they know and love to save their very lives is a global issue that Australia has the great fortune to be able to help solve.

One kind of person would sacrifice everything and willingly pass through every gauntlet thrown to gain the right to settle in Australia: an upright person of strength and tenacity who wants only to live, and live free.

These are commonsense approaches built on basic standards of human decency.

Conclusions

As with any complex and controversial issue, obvious communication fixes are few. But, one thing is clear — we can't have a coherent message without more consensus on what we'd like to convey. Messaging works in service of policy; what we say flows from what we want to accomplish -- not the other way around.

Understanding what we want government to do is a necessary first step. Determining how to characterize this vision while also criticizing current failings another.

In the meantime, some communication issues do lend themselves to relatively simple improvements. Eliminating the passive voice, avoiding negating constructions, referring to asylum seekers and refugees as people and in the singular would go a long way toward proving our points about newer arrivals as valuable neighbors and policy-

makers as the source of existing problems and potential solutions. Making these immediate changes and exploring how to articulate the harder elements is the surest path to bringing the public along with us.

From here, aided by the insights of the elicitation interviews, we will move shortly into qualitative and quantitative testing to find the words that work on asylum.