

REFUGEES AND FORCED MIGRATION

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ASSIGNMENT 2

*REFUGEE RACISM,
THE POLITICAL MEDIA AND
COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS*

BY

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“PUBLIC OPINION, I AM SORRY TO SAY, WILL BEAR A GREAT DEAL OF NONSENSE. THERE IS SCARCELY ANY ABSURDITY SO GROSS, WHETHER IN RELIGION, POLITICS, SCIENCE OR MANNERS, WHICH IT WILL NOT BEAR”

-RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The understanding of how people shape their opinions on various issues, and how others can actively work to change those opinions, is crucial in appreciating the nature of politics in a democratic country. This paper will look at Australia's refugee politics, with a special focus on the years 2001-2005. It will look at common community misperceptions and its origins in order to understand the consequences this might pose for asylum seekers coming to Australia. Discourse and rhetoric used by the government and media will be examined to see what influence this could have on the public interpretation of the asylum seeker issue.

“WE DECIDE WHO COMES TO THIS COUNTRY ANDsoh76e 057461710.98 0 0 10.98155.5311

However, Australia did not sign that convention until 1954 or the protocol erasing the time and geographical limitations (Convention from 1951 that applied only to people fleeing harm in post-war Europe prior to 1951) until 1973 (Neumann 2004). After the creation of Federation in 1901, Australia has indeed decided who should be allowed to come here and how, but the framework surrounding immigration and refugee policy has changed. Australia's admissions peaked in the late 40s to early 50s, just before Australia signed the Refugee Convention. The 182,159 refugees resettled in Australia were processed through the International Refugee Organization (IRO), which was more than any other country at that time with the exception of the United States. That they were resettled on humanitarian grounds was a windfall for Australia, as the country at that time needed to increase its population and workforce. Suitable settlers were "young, educated and healthy, and, ideally, possessed certain racial features" (Neumann 2004, p. 32). Blond, blue-eyed Caucasians from the Baltic countries were preferred, and they also had to pass thorough health checks (Neumann 2004). A common theme in Australia's immigration policy over the last century is the presence of need for control. The White Australia Policy – although technically abandoned in 1961 (Seccombe and Clennell, 2002) – largely excluded non-Europeans from Australia until 1974. Clear racist remarks were made by Labor Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell between 1945-49: "We will not let the yellow hordes contaminate our golden shores" and "Two Wongs do not make a White" (Polya 2004). It should be noted that these statements were made in immediate post-war Australia when the fear of a Japanese invasion was substantiated.

Although Australia's White Australia policy and Anti-Asian campaigns are officially a thing of the past, it can be argued that politicians have simply found

new ways of playing the race card (Solomon 2002), without actually mentioning race. Considered politically incorrect to mention race in the 21st century, the Howard government ran an entire election campaign in which asylum seekers – ‘boat people’ – were portrayed as “fundamentally different from us, less civilized, and presented a threat to the fabric of

“THE VICTOR WILL NEVER BE ASKED IF HE TOLD THE TRUTH”

-ADOLPH HITLER

In the months leading up to the 2001 Australian election, three events became the focus of considerable media attention and governmental interference.

Firstly, the rescue of 433 asylum seekers from a drowning boat by the Norwegian vessel *Tampa* in the Indian Ocean on August 26, 2001 turned into an infamous international crisis when Prime Minister John Howard decided that he would make an example of the ‘illegal’ asylum seekers rescued by the ship, telling the world that Australia would not accept boats arriving uninvited on our shores and threatening national security (Wilkinson & Marr 2003). The general Australian public did not question how a sinking boat of unarmed refugees could threaten Australia’s national security, although the rest of the world did. Arne Rinnan, the captain of the *Tampa*, labelled a people-smuggler and a threat by the Australian Government, was honored as a hero in the rest of the world and showered with prizes from Norway, the US, the UK and Spain (Head 2001, Marr & Wilkinson 2003). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded Rinnan, his crew and the Wilhelm Wilhelmsen Line with the prestigious Nansen Refugee Award (Marr and Wilkinson 2003). What could have caused public opinion on the *Tampa* crisis to be so different from one country to another?

Secondly, the tragic events of 9/11 in New York reinforced PM John Howard’s ‘national security’ argument and further fuelled the creation of fear amongst the Australian public by linking the asylum seeker debate to a possible threat of terrorists arriving in Australia (Lygo 2004).

Thirdly, in the period October 9–12, 2015, Australia witnessed the tumultuous exchange of what was later ~~proved to be~~ misinformation and manipulation known as the “Children Overboard” (CO) affair. This period is also referred to in Marr & Wilkinsons book *Dark Victoria*

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Some comments are:

- “Australia does its fair share being only second to Canada in per capita refugees”
- “As I understand it, only about five nations in the world take in refugees at all”
- “When compared internationally Australia is per capita one of the most generous nations in accepting refugees for permanent resettlement”
- “Australia has led the world in accepting refugees from almost every part of the world for the last 60 years. We are at a position now where our security is compromised and valued parts of our culture are under threat”
- "They are "stealing" the rightful places of those who are waiting in queues and causing unnecessarily longn356NTj10.98 0 0 10.98 or 10.98 0 0 10.98 276.4738

So nobody can say we aren't generous and reasonable" (www.pm.gov.au, interview 1219). Actually, on a UN list of 71 nations, Australia ranked no. 38 on a per capita basis (Bakke 2001).

The understanding of where community perception and public opinion come from is important because it will impact on how asylum seekers, once recognised as refugees and resettled in Australia, will be treated by, and incorporated into, the Australian society. Misperceptions and prejudice will complicate this process for both the local population and the refugees.

"IF YOU CAN'T CONVINCe THEM, CONFUSE THEM"

-HARRY S. TRUMAN

Julian Burnside (2004) discusses in an article in the Australian Financial Review the

that anyone arriving on Australia's shores could apply to become a refugee

Organisations like *Australians against Racism* and *Rural Australians for Refugees*

government maintains that these policies of deterrence and detention are 'necessary for Australia's safety', but out of 5,986 unauthorized arrivals in 2002, not one single person was considered a risk to national security (Hewett 2005).

In addition to the millions of dollars spent deterring and processing asylum seekers, are the costs that do not show up on the government balance sheet. These costs are the additional human suffering and trauma caused by us

“NOTHING IN LIFE IS TO BE FEARED, IT IS ONLY TO BE UNDERSTOOD.
NOW IS THE TIME TO UNDERSTAND MORE, SO THAT WE MAY FEAR LESS”
-*MARIE CURIE*

K. M. Dunn (2004) has surveyed racist attitudes in Australia and found that 83% identified a problem of racism in Australia. Dunn identifies that racism is not merely a matter of race, but that there is a ‘new’ racism of cultural differentiation, which covers out-groups, cultural diversity and nation, and issues of normalcy and privilege. This ‘new’ racism is reproduced in the media and in political debates, a type of covert racism manifested as cultural intolerance, “repeated daily in the media, by politicians, community leaders an

"YOU MUST BE THE CHANGE YOU WISH TO SEE IN THE WORLD"

-MAHATMA GANDHI

As of late, there appears to have come about a change in community support for the government's detention policies. The public reacted with rage when Cornelia Rau, an Australian resident, was mistakenly locked up in detention, and Vivian Alvarez Solo

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that although veiled through 'doublespeak' and 'dog whistle politics', race is an issue in Australian politics, and has for centuries been communicated to the public. Myths regarding refugees have been a part of Australian public discourse for years and still present recently, evident from opinions uttered by individuals in the wake of the *Tampa* affair.

Refugee activists and community groups are consciously trying to debunk the myths and contest public misperceptions. They have to fight decades of government rhetoric and bold newspaper captions to the contrary. When discriminating behavior by authorities is considered 'common sense', it creates a

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/oct2001/refu>