

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 AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THEY COME”

- PM JOHN HOWARD

Lam Binh and his 4 friends arrived in the Darwin harbor in 1976 on a wooden boat, asked politely in broken English if they could stay and were accepted as refugees (Mares, 2001, p. 73). They became known as Australia's first boat people. Technically, the first boat people to arrive on Australia's shores arrived after 1606 with the European explorers ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), making Australia, except for its Aborigines, a country consisting entirely of immigrants.

Prime Minister John Howard's statement “We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” can be argued to be discriminatory, and against the International Refugee Convention of which Australia is signatory. People who face persecution in their country of origin have the same right to seek asylum when they arrive on Australia's shores as refugees who arrive in the country after they are recognised as refugees ([www.erc.org](http://www.erc.org)).

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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Australian society” (Roach to Seccombe and Clennell, 2002). The ‘boat people’ had to be deterred or detained at any price.

It is interesting to see the degree of attention and resources directed at the asylum seeker group, when they comprise such a small proportion of total foreigners settling in Australia each year. 12,900 people on average were granted visas through Australia’s Humanitarian Program in the years 2000-2003. Comparatively, an average of approx. 100,000 persons were granted migration status, and the Australian government is planning for 120,000 migrants in 2004-2005 ([www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)). The Howard government has not addressed the more than 10,000 British and Americans living in Australia without a valid visa each year, making up the bulk of Australia’s illegal immigrants in recent years (SBS 2005).

“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, Australia witnessed the tumultuous exchange of what was later proved to be misinformation and manipulation known as the “Children Overboard” (*Olong*) affair. This period is also referred to in Marr & Wilkinsons book *Dark Victory* and Iain Lygo’s *News Overboard* books as “Truth Overboard” (2003, 2004), referring to the lies told by the Howard government and their allies in an attempt to build on the public support gained during the tough stance on the *Tampa* crisis. Pictures taken by crew members meant to illustrate the heroic rescue of asylum seekers from a sinking boat by the Australian Navy were intentionally misinterpreted and portrayed to the public in order to confirm that “these are people we do not want – people who throw their children overboard” (Marr & Wilkinson 2003).

To establish that “these are people we do not want”, the Howard government and media engaged in conscious blacklisting of people both from the *Tampa* and the *Olong*, choosing to focus on the supposed high-jacking and throwing of children into the water respectively rather than the situation itself – that these were distressed people from sinking vessels seeking asylum.

Based largely on his handling of these events, PM John Howard won the election in November 2001.

“THE ONLY GOOD IS KNOWLEDGE AND THE ONLY EVIL IS IGNORANCE”

-SOCRATES

After the *Tampa* incident, Australian citizens were invited to express their opinions in the leading Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*. The responses from Australian citizens suggest that misperceptions do exist regarding Australia’s share in taking on the burden of the world’s refugees.

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 long waits for the refugees going through the correct processes”
- “How many of these people are genuine refugees?”
- “Australians are supportive of refugees but what we don't appreciate are the "queue jumpers" who with a lot of money, buy and bribe their way to Australia and unfairly displacing legitimate refugees who have gone through the proper processes”
- “Australia is now saturated with illegal immigrants, which we feed, clothe, house, educate and provide with medical and dental care”

([www.aftenposten.no](http://www.aftenposten.no))

These are representative quotes from some of the Australian respondents, and their claims will be addressed later in this paper. Others show a more humanitarian face – some apologise on behalf of their country and some say they are ashamed to be Australian. The most interesting conclusion from reading these responses is not whether people are sympathetic to or against the Australian government’s handling of the *Tampa* affair, it is the highly erroneous nature of the “facts” which they present us with. Where have they come across these figures? PM John Howard has certainly contributed, in a radio interview on September 6, 2001 he said: “We continue to be ready to take genuine refugees, we take more on a per capita basis than any country except Canada.

So nobody can say we aren't generous and reasonable" ([www.pm.gov.au](http://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 importance of words and how they can be, and are, frequently misused. 'Doublespeak' is a method of smuggling uncomfortable ideas into comfortable minds – a tactic used by Nazi-Germany and recently by the Australian government – without suggesting that there are other mutual traits between the two. The fact is, many governments use it, and if readers are not skeptical, it can mislead us. Locking up 'illegals' in detention centres without trial seems justified; locking up innocent, traumatised human beings is not. Using a term such as queue-jumper suggests that there is a queue and that the asylum seekers should be standing in that queue. In Iraq and Afghanistan, there is no queue to jump, as Australia has no representation in these countries where asylum seekers can apply for a visa (RAR website).

In a *Brisbane Courier Mail* article the UNHCR Convention on Refugees was referred to as a 'loophole' in Australia's immigration laws. This 'loophole' implied

that anyone arriving on Australia's shores could apply to become a refugee (Pickering 2001). It can be argued that a 'loophole' is not an appropriate synonym for the UNHCR Refugee Convention, as the first is associated with an opportunity for exploitation, while the latter carries weight and authority. To quote Burnside: "When truth matters, language is often the first victim".

The Edmund Rice Centre created a fact sheet trying to unveil the most common myths about refugees in September of 2001 ([www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)). These were, with contesting information in brackets:

1. Boat People are Queue Jumpers (there is no queue in many countries)
2. Asylum Seekers are Illegal (asylum seeker is a legal status under international law)
3. Australia Already Takes Too Many Refugees (this is a subjective statement. Australia ranks however 38 on a UN list of 71 nations)
4. We're Being Swamped by Hordes of Boat People (4,174 people reached Australia without a valid visa in 2000 by boat or plane)
5. They're Not Real Refugees Anyway (90% of asylum seekers are recognised as legitimate refugees and granted permission to stay in Australia)
6. They Must Be 'Cashed up' to Pay People Smugglers (payments to people smugglers average AUD 4,500, and having money does not eliminate risk of persecution)
7. There is no Alternative to Mandatory Detention (other countries, such as Sweden, have found alternatives)
8. If We Let Them In, They'll Take Our Benefits (refugees, like migrants, create demand for goods and services and generate growth and employment)

Observe that with the exception of number 7, these misperceptions were in fact mirrored in the opinions voiced by Australians after the *Tampa*. This would appear to confirm the presence of myths with regard to refugees and asylum seekers.

Organisations like *Australians against Racism* and *Rural Australians for Refugees* are actively working to inform the public through events, protests, articles and newsletters in the hope that better-informed opinions can be formed about the refugees, not ones based on myths and propaganda.

“THE PROPAGANDIST’S PURPOSE IS TO MAKE ONE SET OF PEOPLE FORGET THAT CERTAIN OTHER SETS OF PEOPLE ARE HUMAN”

-ALDOUS HUXLEY

Former Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock addressed the increased number of asylum seekers during 2000 as an urgent threat to Australia’s very integrity (Coghlan et al. 2005). A threat triggers fear, and Carmen Lawrence argues in the Book *Refuge Australia* (2005), that fear is consciously used as a control mechanism: “Appeals to fear are used simultaneously to justify restrictions on our civil liberties and the detention of persecuted asylum seekers (...) a populace is best controlled when it’s afraid – controlled and diverted” (Coghlan et al., 2005, p. 71). Based on this theory, the Howard government helped secure their victory as a result of the control they obtained by spreading fear, and perhaps more importantly – by their promise to eliminate the threat that caused the supposed need for fear.

Eliminating the supposed threat that asylum seekers impose on Australia through deterrence and detention is not economically justified. The costs of deploying the Australian Royal navy is estimated at AUD20 million a week, which would be 1 billion a year (Mares 2001 p126). This is hardly sustainable. In addition, the cost of keeping asylum seekers in Australian detention centres was AUD78,000 per person in 2002, AUD97,000 on Nauru (Hewett 2005). In contrast, an experience with Afghani refugees in Young, NSW, showed that they contributed in excess of AUD2 million to the local economy over 18 months. The

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 detention centres, and the loss of human lives trying to get to a country of refuge by crossing dangerous oceans. 4,000 asylum seekers drown at sea every year, and up to one-third of the people who embark on the journey by sea never reach their destined country of refuge (Bowcott 2004). These are unfavorable odds, arguably too risky for migrants seeking economic gain, yet accepted by desperate, persecuted persons who have no other choice but to risk their lives on the crossing rather than face their status quo.

Former Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock acknowledged in a comment on SBS News that the government is counting on drowning tragedies to discourage additional refugees from reaching Australian borders (Head 2001). This suggests an inhumane stance by the government if they consider deaths of innocent people beneficial to the success of maintaining their policies.

"FOUR HOSTILE NEWSPAPERS ARE MORE TO BE FEARED THAN A THOUSAND BAYONETS"

-NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

Sharon Pickering (2001) has conducted discourse analysis based on newspaper stories concerning refugees in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Brisbane Courier Mail*, identifying use of language that deviates refugees from the general

population. Refugees have been consistently referred to in the media as 'boatpeople', 'illegals' and 'queue jumpers' who 'invade', 'flood' and 'assault' Australia's shores, descriptions that are likely to create negative associations in readers' minds. Furthermore, the frequent and deliberate identification of refugees as a problem has become regarded as 'common sense', no longer contested by the general public (Pickering 2001). Rather, contesting this 'common sense' would make the critical readers deviant themselves in the sense that they would not be like 'most Australians' and hence part of the problem. This is unappealing to most people, making them more receptive to believe what they read rather than mistrust it.

The use of 'war talk' by the press is common in the context of refugees, as there supposedly are 'sustained assaults on Australia's shores', 'incursions', and 'invasions' that must be 'combated' through 'defense plans' (Pickering 2001). Similar to "The War on Terror" and "The War on Drugs", this language suggests there can be only one good side and one evil side, right or wrong, and that there can be only one winner (Pickering 2001).

It should be noted that the concept of deviancy – the 'US vs. THEM' mindset and 'boatpeople' as 'illegals' was already present when the *Tampa* and 'Children Overboard' crises occurred. The Howard government did not need to establish new prejudice; it was already in the community to be further exploited.

The success of the media does not come from solid research, but from sensational news – the general public are interested in the caption and lead paragraphs only, not the details.

“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 and in everyday interaction of everyday spaces” (Dunn 2004, p. 418). Similar to Pickering’s “US vs. THEM” deviancy analysis, it is about who does and does not belong (2001). PM John Howard’s statement “these are people we do not want” (people who throw their children overboard), plays on this intolerance and creates deviancy between the public and refugees.

The survey identified the most commonly mentioned out-groups as Muslims, people from the Middle East and Asians, people earlier mentioned in this paper as being the subject of campaigns (Anti-Asian) and linked to terrorism threats (Afghani and Iraqis). Another key finding from the survey is that the older the persons are, and the less schooling they have, the more likely they are to express racist attitudes and make assessments of who they believe do and do not belong in Australia. This would represent those older persons who have lived in Australia during the White Australia policy, and people who are not educated and hence not familiar with international law and foreign politics.

"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 Solon, an Australian citizen, was found to have been deported in 2001 (Grattan 2005). The accounts of how badly they have been treated have opened peoples' eyes to the terrible conditions in detention centres, and made them question why the government is keeping innocent people in detention (Dabscheck, 2005).

An informal poll in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on October 28, 2005 showed that 86% of respondents of this particular poll found the proposed new Anti-terror Bill proposed by PM John Howard "Over the top". Elements of the bill gives the right to hold terror suspects in preventative care for up to 14 days without charge (Dodson and Metherell 2005). Although the word 'Muslim' is not uttered, the general public reads in to it that it is to this group in particular PM Howard is referring, as it is Muslim extremists fighting Jihad who have been behind the terrorists attacks of 9/11, the London bombings and the Bali bombings. The danger is that by not explaining this, fear is created and all Muslims are considered a threat in the eyes of the general public. Where a message is phrased so it will not cause general offence, but is still open for interpretation and clear to those for whom it is targeted, it can be referred to as 'dog whistle politics' (Marr & Wilkinson 2003). On the account of keeping people without charge, Peter Qasim, a refugee from Kashmir, was held in detention for almost 7 years (RAR website). Despite the public opinion being in support of the government's mandatory detention policy in 2001, they are now opposed to keeping terrorist suspects for 14 days without charge.

## 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 feeling that it is acceptable to lean on the side of majority.

Recent events like the illegal deportation of Vivian Alvarez Solon and the detention of Cornelia Rau have unveiled the inhumane conditions in the detention centres, created cover stories and engaged the public. Perhaps this can be the beginning of an era when the Australian public will form opinions based on newspaper articles representing a more impartial view of the refugee political debate.

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*Informal interviews have been conducted with refugee advocates and activists who have helpfully guided me in the direction of important issues and sources.*