

Providing a 'Home for the Oppressed': Australian Responses to Refugees from the Late 1930s to the Mid-1960s

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I am grateful to the National Archives of Australia and Swinburne University's Institute for Social Research for giving me the opportunity to present the results of my research tonight, and for making this research possible in the first place. Last year, the National Archives awarded me a Frederick Watson Fellowship which kickstarted my research into Australian refugee policies. The Institute for Social Research has since provided me with further research funding.

To introduce the themes I will be talking about tonight, I would like to give you three quotes. Each represents widely-shared views about the history of Australian responses to refugees. You will have heard numerous variations of these statements in the past twelve months. In the context of a recent rejoinder to demands put forward by the organisation Rural Australians for Refugees, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs states: 'Australia has a proud history of humanitarian aid and resettlement, every year welcoming thousands of refugees under the second most generous per capita refugee and humanitarian resettlement program in the world.' Rural Australians for Refugees claim on their website under the heading 'Know the Facts': 'After World War II the Snowy Mountains Scheme was built largely with the labour of thousands of refugees. Let us again give refugees a chance to contribute to this country in the twenty-first century. Let's give them a fair go!' Australians for Just Refugee Programs say in their mission statement: 'We believe that Australia's policies toward refugees and asylum seekers should at all times reflect respect, decency and traditional Australian generosity to those in need, while advancing Australia's international standing and national interests.'

The government and the Department of Immigration have repeatedly claimed that Australia's responses to refugees were generous in the past and continue to be generous in the present, and suggested that generosity can be measured numerically. Many refugee advocacy groups have repeatedly implied that Australia's responses to refugees in the past were generous, and that the current policies towards refugees and asylum seekers represent an aberration. They have also pointed out that refugees make good immigrants and that they have made a huge contribution to Australia.

Claims of a distinguished history of resettling refugees can easily be illustrated by statistics. Australia accepted disproportionately many refugees sponsored by the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It opened its doors to a disproportionately large number of Hungarian refugees in 1956 and 1957. It accepted a comparatively large number of Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s. So why the question mark in the title of my lecture? Did not Australia provide a home for the oppressed? (Or, if not for the oppressed, then for those who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, [are] outside the country of [their] nationality and [are] unable to or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country'?)

But statistics do not necessarily prove what they illustrate. A 'proud history' and 'traditional Australian generosity' entail more than can be quantitatively measured. In the following, I explore dimensions that cannot easily be quantified by briefly discussing five cases ranging from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s. Rather than dwell on the quantifiable effects of Australian refugee policies, I will focus on their underlying motives.

My first case has to do with the image illustrating the invitation to this lecture. The photograph depicts, from left to right, Zenta, Maira, Richard and Inars Kalnins. They are standing on the deck of the *Fairsea*, a converted American aircraft carrier used by the IRO to transport displaced persons from Europe to Australia. The key person on the picture is the little girl, because in August 1949 she was welcomed as Australia's 50,000th refugee – or rather, the 50,000th displaced person sponsored by the IRO and to be resettled in Australia. When the Department of Immigration decided to celebrate the arrival of the 50,000th refugee, it asked the Australian Mission in Germany to identify an 'attractive female child under 10 accompanying parents who are suitable subject for publicity'. Being, in the words of Arthur Calwell's subsequent press statement, a 'smiling, flaxen-haired girl of seven', Maira certainly fit the bill. As did their Latvian parents. The family had left their native Riga for Germany in 1944, fleeing the advancing Red Army. Maira's father had studied engineering and had a basic knowledge of English.

The Kalnins family represented not so much the typical postwar European refugees but the ideal immigrants. As non-British Australian immigrants they were not atypical, at least not during the first two years of the Australian DP resettlement program. In early 1948, an American ship's surgeon, Dr Ergas, accompanied another converted US warship, the *General Black*, on two IRO-funded trips, the first from Naples to South America, and the second from the German port of Bremerhaven to Australia. About the first group of passengers, he wrote: 'Many of them had skin diseases . . . and some had venereal diseases. It was a blessing to them when they found out that we were so well equipped . . . to care for their various ailments. . . . Men and women were a mixture of all ages and the majority of them had dark complexions, brown eyes and dark hair. Their past hardships hid much of their normal appearance. Many of them were melancholy [sic] with a sad, forced smile.' All these people were resettled in either Venezuela or Peru.

Ergas described the Australia-bound refugees in a very different vein: 'Most of this group consisted of young men and women with very few children. They were well dressed, carried additional clothes, made a fine appearance, and looked bright and intelligent. Most of them were from the Baltic countries . . . The majority spoke English and German . . . The women in general were very good looking. Some had beautiful, dark, long hair; others were platinum blonde with blue eyes, light complexion and very tall. The men were fine looking too. Many of these displaced persons had college and university degrees. . . . All the immigrants had to pass a thorough physical examination by two Australian physicians before they were granted permission by the Australian Consul to make the long journey to Australia. Anyone found with a lung or heart disease, or any other serious ailment, was rejected. It was indeed a very select group of young people. They all appeared to be energetic, ambitious, and full of life.'

The Australian government's decision in 1947 to admit a large number of DPs was motivated by its desire to significantly increase Australia's population. Given that suitable British settlers were not available in sufficient numbers, Australia recruited other suitable immigrants. The emphasis here is on the attribute, suitable. Suitable non-British immigrants were young, educated and healthy, and, ideally, they possessed certain racial

features. Flaxen-haired, fair-skinned and blue-eyed young men and women from the Baltic countries who did not want to or could not return to the Soviet Union were preferred to survivors of German concentration camps who were ill as a result of their ordeal. As the American doctor correctly observed, Australian selection criteria were indeed very strict. Members of the Australian selection teams were instructed to reject 'cases requiring continued medical care even for minor complaints' – including varicose veins and rotten teeth. Those refugees who helped build the Snowy Mountains Scheme were arguably given a fair go. But that did not necessarily mean that Australia gave a fair go to European refugees in the immediate postwar period.

In 1949, refugees did not queue for a limited number of Australian resettlement places. Rather, the Australian Immigration Department and its counterparts in Washington, Lima, Caracas and other New World capitals, queued for a limited number of ships ferrying DPs to their countries of resettlement, and Australian officials tried to sell the destination Australia to the Kalnins and other potential immigrants from the Baltic countries to attract the maximum number of suitable passengers for those ships. 'I think that we should get all who are available of those good people, and get them while we can, because next year will be too late.', Calwell admonished his successor in April 1950 with regard to the admission of DPs. Instead of distributing films featuring poisonous snakes, the Australian government published brochures in German that depicted Australia in glowing terms.

Australia never again accepted as many refugees per year as in the late 1940s and early 1950s under the auspices of the IRO. The pool of suitable European refugees was not unlimited. Also, during the 1950s, the assisted passage agreements with Italy, Germany and Holland provided a significant proportion of the number of immigrants required by Australia. Nevertheless, Australia continued to resettle large numbers of refugees. After the abolition of the IRO in 1952, most refugees resettled in Australia during the 1950s were brought here under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), which had been set up upon US American initiative to allow countries such as the United States and Australia to bypass UN organisations (including the ILO and the UNHCR).

The Allied-controlled Zone A of Trieste was one of the recruiting grounds of Australian selection teams after 1952. On 1 November 1953, there were 6,200 refugees in Trieste. They included Venezia Giulians (ethnic Italians) from the area now administered by Yugoslavia, Cominformist sympathisers who fled Yugoslavia after its government left the Cominform, other Yugoslav dissidents, White Russians who had fled to Serbia after 1917, and Eastern Europeans from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia. Most of them were accommodated in camps. The camps were overcrowded, and the internal situation in Trieste was volatile. By the end of 1953, the permanent resettlement of the Triestian refugees was considered a matter of great urgency. This urgency became even more pressing when in late 1954 the US-American and British governments handed control of Zone A to the Italians. In 1954, 1955 and 1956, Australia took in more refugees from Trieste than any other country. For 1953-54, the Australian migration programme had initially provided for the migration of 250 persons from Trieste. By February 1954, an additional 650 persons had been approved and selected. In February, the target was once more adjusted: from 900 to 3,000. There were no equivalent upward adjustments of the intake from other European countries. Was the Australian government moved by the plight of the refugees living in the overcrowded camps in Trieste?

The deterioration of the situation in Trieste happened at a time when demands by the

Queensland sugar industry, that the Department of Immigration recruit more immigrants specifically for the cane harvest, were put forward with particular vehemence. Repeatedly, the General Secretary of the Australian Cane Growers' Association, Muir, urged the government to take steps to ensure that the harvesting of sugar cane not be impeded by the shortage of labour. Muir's complaints about the Department's lack of action were not entirely justified, for many of the DPs admitted to Australia before 1953 had been specifically recruited for the sugar industry; for example, 285 men among those fine looking 860 DPs on the General Black had been specifically recruited for sugar harvesting. Muir was also concerned that many of the migrants who came to Australia under bilateral assisted passage agreements were unwilling to work in the sugar industry, or entirely unsuited for heavy manual labour.

Over the years, Muir suggested a number of different nationalities who in his opinion would be able to adapt to the harsh working conditions on the cane fields: they included Greeks, Spaniards and Italians. In 1954, Muir identified another target group: Yugoslavs. In October 1954, the Secretary of the Immigration Department, Tas Heyes, ridiculed this suggestion: 'Representations we have received each year have varied in regard to the preferences for particular nationalities. . . . [T]he latest suggestion has been that Yugoslavs would be best suited for cane cutting. Next year, no doubt, they will be pressing for Eskimos.' But earlier that same year, the Immigration Department had given in to the intense lobbying by the Canegrowers' Association, and instructed the Migration Officer in Rome to substantially increase the quota for migrants from Trieste, including refugees, with the argument that 'Reports from the Selection Team operating in Trieste show that to the 14th April [1954] 300 cane cutters have been selected. These types are stated to be very good indeed and will be able to carry out the arduous duties involved.'

In the period from about 1947 to about 1956, refugees were admitted to Australia to boost its population and, at times, to relieve specific labour shortages. Refugees were selected on the basis of their suitability as immigrants. Australia was then reluctant to accept any of the so-called hard core cases – refugees who were old, chronically sick or had a disability, and could not be resettled because nobody wanted them. As Australia's immigration policy was determined by the White Australia policy, it did not offer to resettle, or provide a temporary safe haven for, non-European refugees, such as Palestinians or non-European Jews. (Even if Eskimos had proven to be very adapt at cutting sugar cane, and if they had been forced to flee their homeland, Australia would not have accepted them as refugees because they would not have been considered Europeans.)

The government policy towards DPs was not determined by humanitarian considerations. In fact, it was little informed by such considerations. Neither did the government make much use of the humanitarian argument to convince Australians that the admission of a large number of European refugees was good policy. In early 1949, the Immigration Publicity Officer of the Department of Information pointed out: 'It was never our intention to find acceptance for the displaced persons through an appeal to the charity and sympathy of the Australian people. An acceptance born of these sentiments can turn easily to tolerance or contempt. The line we took was one of frank reporting of facts. We pulled no punches and we made no apologies. We stated frankly the terms of the agreement under which the displaced persons entered Australia (for two years to be under Commonwealth direction). . . . Such a frank line appealed to the Australian people.'

While I disagree with how some refugee advocacy groups argue the case for accepting a larger number of refugees, I am not questioning their claim that the current refugee and

asylum seeker policies are most ungenerous. One of the more recent cases exemplifying the heartlessness of Australia's current approach has been the deportation of Nadar Sayadi-Estahbanati, an Iranian man who, together with his brother and another man, had arrived in Portland about two years ago as a stowaway on board an Iranian ship. They had applied for political asylum and were held in various detention centres. The brother gave up hope to be allowed to remain in Australia and voluntarily returned to Iran, where he disappeared on the day of his arrival – presumably killed or imprisoned by the secret police. Nadar Sayadi-Estahbanati's application for refugee status was unsuccessful, and he was forcibly deported on 1 June, even though there were serious doubts as to whether his state of physical and mental health would allow him to arrive in Iran alive, and even though it seemed likely that he would meet the same fate as his brother.

Australia has always been a popular destination for stowaways and ship-jumpers. Most of these 'unauthorised arrivals' have been British, and many, if not most of them, have been allowed to remain in Australia. There have also been cases of refugees entering Australia as stowaways or ship-jumpers – long before the current hysteria about boat people (in fact long before the first boat people arrived from Indochina in 1976). In the second half of the 1930s, dozens of German sailors jumped ship in Australia. They included men who fled an intolerable situation in Hitler's Germany.

George Huelscher was fourteen, when the Nazis came to power. From a young age, he worked as a sailor. In 1937, a casual remark got him into trouble with the secret police. He was arrested, but got off with a warning. He decided to leave Germany. In December 1938, he jumped ship in Newcastle.

Neither Customs nor the Department of the Interior were initially willing to press charges against Huelscher (who could have easily been deported as a prohibited immigrant). It was only on 1 September 1939, the first day of the war, that Huelscher was arrested in Maitland. A few days later, he was discharged, after neither the police nor the Intelligence Section of the AMF had wanted to pursue the matter.

Like nearly all of the German ship-jumpers in the second half of the 1930s, Huelscher was young, single, male, healthy and non-Jewish. He was welcome as an immigrant – and in that sense it did not matter at all why he chose to come to Australia. In a directive issued in 1936, the Department of the Interior advised that the Collector of Customs was not obliged to charge a 'deserter of good type' with being a prohibited immigrant, and that if such charges were laid, it was not always desirable to secure an immediate conviction.

Initially neither of these ship-jumpers drew attention to the reasons that made them leave Germany. There was no public discussion about them. The Department of the Interior was not at all concerned about their biographical background. The refugees among them were not counted as part of the quota of 15,000 European refugees set by the government in December 1938.

Latvian DPs, German ship-jumpers and refugees from Trieste were admitted to Australia because they were considered to be suitable immigrants. Humanitarian considerations hardly entered into the equation.

In the case of Sayadi-Estahbanati, refugee advocacy groups demanded that he be allowed to stay in Australia on humanitarian grounds. The government rejected these demands. To what extent were humanitarian considerations raised in public debate in the 1930s, 1940s or

1950s? George Huelscher, like many other German refugees, was interned as an enemy alien in mid-1940. Internment was conceived as a precautionary measure. Because Huelscher had arrived shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the security services did not want to discount the possibility that he was, or would become, a spy or saboteur. Refugee advocates such as Brian Fitzgerald of the Council for Civil Liberties or the Anglican bishop of Sydney, Venn Pilcher, lobbied for the release of refugees like Huelscher. While the government rarely met Fitzgerald's and Pilcher's demands, it did not publicly dispute the validity of their line of argument. Without needing the prompting of refugee advocates, it did not communicate details about Huelscher's internment to the representatives of the German government. Huelscher was released after about fifteen months in internment. Others who had entered Australia as ship-jumpers or on tourist visas were not so lucky and remained interned for three years or more. But even in cases where the Australian authorities remained unconvinced about an internee's refugee claim, they did not deport him or her.

In the 1930s, 1940s and first half of the 1950s, humanitarian considerations did not carry much weight in public debates about refugees (certainly not when the White Australia policy was concerned). But when publicly engaging with the critics of its refugee policy, the government always pretended to respect the validity of the humanitarian argument in principle, even though it more often than not did not engage with it. The Council for Civil Liberties was spied upon by the Australian security services, and Brian Fitzpatrick may have been considered a nuisance or worse by the authorities. But successive Attorney-Generals and Ministers for the Army (who were responsible for the internment of enemy aliens) did not publicly dispute the validity of Fitzgerald's and Pilcher's arguments in principle, or publicly label them pseudo-intellectuals, bleeding hearts, or 'members of the elite' on account of their humanitarian convictions.

Gradually humanitarian considerations became more prominent in public debate. Let me fast-forward to the 1960s. In December 1961, three Portuguese sailors deserted a navy frigate in Darwin and applied for political asylum. Officially, Portugal was considered a friendly nation, and the government was initially determined to deport the three men to Portuguese Timor. Their case attracted a lot of public attention, and became the subject of a nationwide campaign. At public rallies in several capital cities demonstrators demanded that the sailors be granted political asylum. In the end, while their applications for political asylum were unsuccessful, the three sailors were allowed to remain in Australia as immigrants, because the political costs of their deportation would have far outweighed the political cost of offending the Portuguese government. Its announcement that the men were allowed to stay would be 'the only sure protection of the Government from all sorts of emotional and illogical Press exhortation and criticism', Peter Heydon, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration, advised his minister. Ministers Downer and Barwick had also become convinced that Australia's reputation overseas would have suffered if Australia had deported the sailors to a country other than Portugal. The government's stance was not swayed by humanitarian arguments, but the government did not publicly discount them.

As it concerns large numbers of non-European 'unauthorised arrivals', my last case has the most obvious parallels with what is happening at present. After the Dutch withdrawal from West New Guinea in 1962, many West Papuans crossed into the Australian territory of Papua and New Guinea without holding a valid visa. In the first year after the Indonesians took control of West New Guinea from the United Nations, from June 1963 to May 1964, 377 'non-political native refugees' crossed the border without a valid visa – according to the Department of Territories mainly for either of two reasons: 'general dislike of [the]

Indonesian administration', or 'avoidance of conscription'. All these people were turned back.

In March 1964, Charles Edward Barnes, the Minister for Territories, reiterated his government's commitment to returning unauthorised border crossers to West Irian. He said: 'The fact is that, by an international decision to which Australia was party, West New Guinea is under Indonesian Administration and the people of West New Guinea and the Administration of Papua and New Guinea alike have to learn to live with that situation.'

From 1965, small numbers of refugees who were able to convince the Australian authorities that they had been politically active in West Irian and had been persecuted by the Indonesians were allowed to remain in Papua and New Guinea. According to Australian government statistics, 573 people crossed the border illegally between 1963 and 1966. There were 866 illegal border crossings in 1967, and 801 in 1968. While not granting any request for political asylum, between 1962 and August 1969 Australia allowed seventy-five West Irianese and their families to stay in Papua and New Guinea on five-year permissive residence visas.

The harsh line taken in 1963 and 1964, and the very selective acceptance of refugees after 1965, were informed by three main factors: First, the government was afraid of an even larger influx of refugees from Indonesia, and anxious not to encourage the movement of people across the border; second, it was determined to retain or establish a harmonious relationship with Australia's northern neighbour – in order to placate the Indonesians, Australia granted permissive residence to West Papuans only if they committed themselves not to become politically active during their stay in Papua and New Guinea; and third, it did not want to burden a future independent Papua New Guinea with either a large number of potentially undesirable residents, or with a strained relationship with Indonesia.

But throughout the first years of Indonesian rule in West New Guinea, the Australian government maintained publicly that its response to the influx of refugees was guided by humanitarian considerations. In August 1962, Sir Garfield Barwick, in his capacity as Minister for External Affairs, declared in Parliament: 'If any requests are received under the heading of political asylum, they will be entertained and decided on their particular merits from a very high humanitarian point of view in accordance with traditional British principles.' But in a directive to his department, the Minister was more explicit, saying that '[we] should not be too infected with the British notion of being a home for the oppressed'. Barnes and his predecessor, Paul Hasluck, also had a rather narrow understanding of the humanitarian considerations involved. A summary of the Department of Territories' policy in 1964 stated with regard to refugees who were sent back to West Irian: 'The Ministerial decision was that when [the border crossers] are required to return, their return should be managed humanely. The consideration of humanity does not come into the decision whether they should be allowed to stay or return if they are not political refugees; it only comes into the execution of the decision that they should return.'

While the fears of being swamped by West Papuan refugees and of offending the Indonesians were strong arguments against accepting any refugees from West Papua, the government was also concerned about the repercussions to its policy both in Australia and in Papua and New Guinea. It did not want to give the impression that West Papuans who were persecuted by the Indonesian authorities were forced back across the border, or that its approach to refugees was cold-hearted.

A humanitarian approach was regarded to be the correct way of dealing with refugees; the government did not publicly dispute the right of West Papuans persecuted by the Indonesians to seek refuge in Papua and New Guinea. Rather than defending its approach, the government attempted to keep it secret as much as that was possible. Ideally, the events at the border were to receive no public attention at all. The authorities were particularly anxious that the reasons why certain refugees were granted asylum not be publicly known. Djoni Jakadewa, the first West Papuan accepted as a refugee by the Australians after 1965, 'was permitted to stay on the basis of his claim that his family had been killed by the Indonesians'. 'These grounds', the Department of External Affairs advised all Australian diplomatic posts, 'should not be quoted, any questions being met with the reply that the man concerned was regarded as having a genuine case for admission'.

The desire not to offend the Indonesians, and the desire not to offend public opinion in Australia and in Papua and New Guinea were not unrelated. In January 1963, Garfield Barwick summoned the Indonesian ambassador to let him know that: 'It was to the interest of both sides to avoid a mass movement of population. But if the numbers and circumstances of the people seeking political asylum evoked humanitarian considerations public opinion in Australia would react sharply and the Australian government could not take a rigid or seemingly harsh line. It was therefore important that the apprehensions of the West Papuans should not be aroused.'

In public statements, the Australian government claimed that West Papuan border crossers who were sent back to West Irian came to no harm. On 18 May 1965, the Minister for Territories responded in Parliament to the suggestion that returned refugees were being ill treated in West Irian: 'I say very definitely that there is no evidence of this whatsoever.' But the files of the Departments of Territories and External Affairs contain many references to refugees who after their return to West Irian had reportedly been beaten, imprisoned or murdered. One day after the Minister's emphatic response, Djoni Jakadewa's brother Mesak was sent back across the border. He was said to have been killed by Indonesian troops within less than a month of his return.

The government seems to have been concerned about humanitarian issues largely because these issues played a big part in how the government's actions were perceived by the public in Australia and in Papua and New Guinea itself. Publicly-voiced concerns about human rights violations were endorsed by the government's response to these concerns. Publicly – vis-à-vis a domestic public and in international fora, such as the United Nations General Assembly – the government maintained that human rights issues and humanitarian considerations ought to guide its policy.

That is, the government did neither say: 'it is not in Australia's interest to care about human rights violations in West Papua', nor 'it is not in Australia's interest to admit West Papuan refugees to Papua and New Guinea'. Instead, it denied that there were human rights violations in West Papua, and it played down the number of people seeking refuge on the Australian side of the border.

Whenever the government decided against the admission of refugees, it was confronted with the humanitarian argument. Those advancing this argument represented a small minority until at least the mid-1950s. Subsequently, their voices grew louder. In the case of the Portuguese asylum seekers and the West Papuan border crossers, the government was not convinced by the humanitarian argument. But it nevertheless validated it publicly. In the first half of the 1960s, it allowed its critics to believe that its refugee policies were

informed by humanitarian concerns.

In 2002, Philip Ruddock does little to persuade his critics that the Australian asylum seeker and refugee policies are informed by humanitarian considerations. How could Nadar Sayadi-Estahbanati's forcible deportation be justified in terms of a policy informed by humanitarian considerations? Instead, the government claims that Australia's territorial integrity and security are at stake. Instead of soothing the long-standing fears of large sections of the Australian public – fears that they would have to share their suburban homes with the riffraff of European or Asian refugee camps, fears that their daughters would marry a Reffo or Balt or Chink – the government plays on these fears.

Australians are now also encouraged to disregard what others (outside Australia) think of them. Thus the argument that Australia's reputation overseas has been tarnished by the Tampa affair does not carry much weight. If the rejection of asylum seekers is done because Australia needs to defend the integrity of its borders, then any criticism of such a defence could be construed as yet another assault on its sovereignty (which needs to be repelled as sternly as those approaching Australia's shores in leaking vessels).

In the first half of the 1960s, the government conceded a common ground, when it chose not to dispute the validity of the humanitarian concerns put forward by its critics. In 2002, the roles appear to be reversed. Many of the government's critics now seem to be seeking to re-establish a common ground. They do so by suggesting that Australia has traditionally been generous. They appeal to Australians' patriotism. Much like the Prime Minister, they would like to celebrate 'traditional' Australian values.

An admittedly very perfunctory look at Australian responses to refugees from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s shows that there isn't all that much Australians can be proud of – neither as far as official responses, nor as far as public responses are concerned. The record is even less proud if one took into account that Australia could give the impression of being a compassionate nation because its policy makers endorsed an ethics they did not subscribe to themselves.

Some of Philip Ruddock's critics stress pragmatic arguments. Seemingly the most powerful of these is the claim that refugees make good immigrants. But taken on its own, this argument now makes little sense. (It did make some sense in 1949.) If a country sought to increase its population, then it would recruit immigrants on the basis of their skills, education, state of health, gender and age (if not cultural background), regardless of whether or not they had to flee their homes.

Notwithstanding the fact that Australians who are supporting the current refugee and asylum seeker policies, won't be won over easily to ethics that appear no longer endorsed by the government, the humanitarian argument is still the obvious alternative to the pragmatic line of reasoning. Admittedly, the humanitarian argument is essentially fundamentalist. It says that the enforced deportation of Nadar Sayadi-Estahbanati is fundamentally wrong. (It is not a little bit wrong, or perhaps somewhat not quite right, as the ALP might put it.) The humanitarian argument does not require pragmatic reasoning. Whether or not the Iranian stowaway would have made a good immigrant should not have come into the equation. Neither should the question of whether or not his deportation was un-Australian.

Rather than harking back to a purportedly better past, critics of the current inhumane asylum seeker policies could point to a present that is moving towards more rather than less

globalisation, in which forced migration is on the increase, and in which the world's citizens are called upon to act responsibly towards their fellow human beings regardless of countries of origin, race or religion, and regardless of what their own governments deem right or wrong.

Rather than expecting the state to act responsibly on their behalf, many Australians – be they prompted by Christian ethics or by their conviction that they are to act as responsible citizens of a globalised world – have drawn on their individual sense of responsibility. Thousands wrote to Philip Adams to say that they were prepared to harbour an asylum seeker escaped from a detention centre – even if the price were a prison sentence. For such a pledge to be effective, it does not need to be supported by pragmatic reasoning. At the same time, by wilfully ignoring the state's distinction between lawful and unlawful, such a pledge challenges the state's right to define unlawfulness. (Such blatant disregard for the state's authority is perhaps akin to that evidenced by asylum seekers who cross national boundaries without seeking prior permission to do so.)

An appeal to Australians' personal sense of responsibility may be more effective than an appeal to their patriotism. It may even lead to a much-needed debate about the (actual and desirable) limits of national sovereignty in a globalised world. But such a debate would be outside the parameters set by the Howard government.