



Neumann, K. (09 October 2007). Scandalous to invoke the race issue. *The Australian*.

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The Labor Party had been in opposition for many years. The government was about to call an election. Four months out from the election, a refugee crisis developed in Africa. The British government asked Australia to accommodate some of the refugees. Unlike its counterpart in Ottawa, the government in Canberra decided that the only refugees it was going to admit were those who would meet its normal immigration criteria. In Parliament, the immigration minister said that Australia would accept only ‘those people who can integrate successfully into the Australian community. We believe that this is in the interests not only of the Australian community but also of the migrants coming to Australia for settlement.’

The refugees in question were fleeing Uganda. Many of them were Ugandan citizens. They or their forebears had originally come to Uganda from the Indian subcontinent. They were fleeing their country as a result of the racist policies of its president, Idi Amin. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the British government had difficulties in identifying resettlement options because of the racist immigration policies of countries such as Australia.

It is worth recalling this episode for several reasons, all to do with intriguing differences between the dying days of the McMahon coalition government, and what arguably are the dying days of the Howard coalition government.

Thirty-five years ago, Australia still had a White Australia policy. It did not have a refugee determination process. It did not have a humanitarian program. Since then, Australia has come a long way. For many years now, the immigration department has distinguished between refugees from Africa, Asia, Europe or South America on the basis of their protection needs rather than on account of their race.

There are good reasons why Australia may wish to accept more refugees from Iraq (because of our responsibilities as a key member of George W. Bush’s coalition of the willing) and from Burma (because of our responsibilities as a regional power). To cut the refugee intake from Africa on the grounds that African refugees don’t integrate well, however, takes us back to a policy according to which refugees are selected on account of our, rather than their, needs.

Thirty-five years ago, neither the government nor the opposition was prepared to make the acceptance of refugees from Uganda an election issue. Although the government did not want Australia to play a prominent role in the effort to relieve the plight of Uganda’s Asians, it carefully avoided arguing its point by reference to race. Former Labor leader Arthur Calwell, who had earlier invoked the spectre of a ‘chocolate-coloured Australia’ if the ‘flood’ of immigrants from countries such as Burma and Mauritius were to continue, tried to exploit the issue but was quickly isolated, both within the Labor Party and in the court of public opinion. To appeal to Australians’ fear of an influx of non-European refugees was irresponsible then. It is irresponsible now. That such recklessness is not coming from an opposition backbencher on the eve of his retirement (as it did 35 years ago), but from a senior government minister is scandalous.

Thirty-five years ago, federal Labor was as reluctant to criticise the government's approach to refugees from Africa as it is now. But in 1972, prominent members of the Liberal Party (such as the Victorian Premier, Rupert Hamer) did not mince their words when commenting on the government's reluctance to accept some of those fleeing Amin's Uganda. We have become accustomed to the silence of the Federal Opposition when it smells a wedge issue. But where are the voices of those aspiring to lead the Liberal Party in the post-Howard era? Aren't Peter Costello, Malcolm Turnbull, Julie Bishop and others capable of telling the immigration minister to shut up?

'Australia has the right to ensure that those who come here are integrating into a socially cohesive community', Kevin Andrews said last week. It is troubling that this statement has echoes of John Howard's 'We have the right to decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances in which they come', the defining slogan of the 2001 Tampa election. It is even more troubling that Kevin Andrews' 'socially cohesive community' smacks of the 'homogenous society' that Jim Forbes, Minister for Immigration in the McMahon government, wanted to maintain when he tried to keep out refugees from Uganda in 1972.

'The Government has been aware that many refugees from parts of Africa have had difficulties settling in Australia. . . . Most have come from war and conflict including torture. Many have lived in refugee camps for up to and over a decade.' Australia had accepted to resettle these people precisely because of their horrific experiences and because many had been stuck in refugee camps for ten years or more. Australia's capacity to resettle refugees is far greater now than it was 35 years ago. And if the accommodation of people 'from a vastly different culture', to use again Kevin Andrews' words, who have went through hell on earth before being accepted for resettlement, is particularly complex and costly and challenging? Then Australia, more so than most other countries, has the resources to meet the challenge.

Professor Klaus Neumann of Swinburne University will deliver his inaugural lecture on the topic of 'Refugees, Compassion and Australian Values' on Wednesday at 6 pm at the State Library of Victoria.