



ROUNDTABLE ON REFUGEE ISSUES
Affinity Intercultural Foundation and St James' Institute
Tuesday 22 February 2022

Summary

A gathering of groups concerned with refugee, immigration, and asylum seeker issues met under the Chatham House Rule to share their observations regarding current realities and discuss possible ways forward. Each participant took three to five minutes to outline their concerns. Whilst each participant offered a distinct perspective, many also reinforced observations offered by others. These presentations were followed by a round-table conversation. Below is a summary of the general discussion. It is not a summary of each individual contribution.¹

Historical Context Observations

Australia has long celebrated its self-image as the land of the 'fair-go' and 'mateship.' But a cursory look reveals a long and turbulent history when it comes to immigration and refugee policy. From the anti-convict transportation groups of the 1840s to the anti-Asian groups of the 1850's gold rush, and on to the 1880s opposition to 'Kanak' (Pacific Islander) labour — all played on fear of the 'foreigner' linked to exploitation of local workers. In 1901, 'White Australia' became the defining issue of our national birth at Federation. These policies were not repealed until the 1970s. In the past 20 years shadows of these older sentiments continue to be glimpsed both within government departmental policy and in the wider culture.

Perhaps the most significant periods of enlightenment in this sorry story were the immigration and settlement policies of the Chifley Labour Government post WW2, and the refugee policies of the Fraser Liberal Government post the war in Vietnam. Neither of these initiatives was free of tension but within a few years they became central elements in the development of Australian multi-culturalism. This background may be an indication that, rightly handled, the issues surrounding asylum and refugee policy may be turned to both political advantage and public good.

¹ This roundtable discussion took place on the eve of the Russian incursion into Ukraine. Humanitarian issues emerging from these events were not part of the conversation outlined below. The scale of what is taking place in Europe is likely to have a substantial impact on any discussion of Australia's current humanitarian policies.

Current Situation

There was some sense that public perception of the issues surrounding refugees may be shifting. This is in some part due to the media coverage of recent events, including: the Biloela Family, COVID lockdowns, the Afghanistan evacuation, and the conditions of long-term detainees revealed by the Djokovic tennis controversy. The unfolding tragedy of Ukraine is also likely to produce calls for a significant show of compassion regarding refugees from Europe.

The evident urgent need for change in Australia draws on both Australia's responsibilities under the Refugee Convention and the lived experience of refugees and asylum seekers attempting to negotiate Australia's politically-driven system. Changes in both areas are critical.

International Obligations

Any new policy initiative should be based on non-partisan humanitarian principles of dignity and justice evident in our historic early engagement with the foundation of the United Nations, and as a drafter of the 1954 UN Refugee Convention. The UNHCR has had an office based in Australia since 1959. These values remain at the core of the 2018 Global Compact of Refugees, yet today there is evidence Australia is in breach of some of the relevant statutes we helped shape, including the Rome and The Hague Statutes.

Our international obligations should be more explicitly reflected in our national policy, and individual cases should be dealt with within the framework of those international obligations. This would involve reform of long-term cultural values within the Immigration Department based on inherited practice, to models based on adherence to both the letter and the spirit of the refugee conventions. Compassionate practice based on those obligations should replace the extensive authority of the minister's office, and crude political assertions such as, "We will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances in which they come." There are varying models operating in similar countries to Australia. Canada uses the CRISP (Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot) model. Alternate models such as this deserve more public exposure in Australia.

Refugee Experience

There is a considerable legacy caseload, Temporary Protection, and other visa issues. One thousand people are still on bridging and medical visas. There are still around two hundred people detained in Nauru. Evidence of the damaging impact of physical and psychological difficulties and delays on adults and children abounds. It provides consistent evidence of what would, in other circumstances, be regarded as inhumane and even unjust. Such experience, when exposed to public gaze—as in the refugee backdrop to the recent Djokovic tennis controversy—can elicit public sympathy and even outrage. Such lived experience should be drawn on. These examples also demonstrate the value of increased engagement of diaspora leadership in effective design and delivery of both policy and programs.

Federal Election

“We have to find a political way of reaching our goal that offers to whoever is in government a political win with the electorate” – participant comment.

There was general agreement that the coming Federal Election presents an opportunity for seeking policy change. However, it was also broadly felt that any renewed efforts at such change should take place after the election to avoid political exploitation of the issue during the campaign. It is important to avoid the topic becoming a wedge issue.

The Way Ahead

As indicated above there is evidence of a shift in public sentiment around refugees and asylum seekers which could make a justice-based initiative a politically viable one.

- Biloela family from Sri Lanka – Local community support has been critical in attitudinal change. Sympathetic media coverage generated by local experience helped influence national opinion.
- Djokovic – The confinement of a tennis champion in the same hotel as asylum seekers held in confinement for up to nine years awakened the public to the issue, highlighting the value of exposure of people’s lived experience.
- Afghanistan – The evident tardiness in response by the Morrison government to the emergency refugee evacuation exposed both political and policy weakness.
- COVID-19 – The past two years of COVID bans, including public lockdowns, have given Australians some sense of what it is to experience restriction and confinement. Australians have endured personal isolation and difficulties of family separation due to visa issues.
- Ukraine – The continuing flood of cross-border refugees is likely to produce a significant European humanitarian crisis.

The signs of openness to a more compassionate understanding revealed by these stories should encourage the development of a more co-ordinated approach by civil society groups.

- There is also evidence from the shift in world events, from climate change to increased political instability, that refugee and asylum issues are going to be a greater part of national and global politics.
- Other countries have developed resettlement models worth considering. Canada is using the CRISP resettlement model.
- The issues outlined above indicate that it is in the interests of both major Australian political parties to develop a refugee and asylum system based on a principled regular policy, but which also has the capacity to rapidly respond to the irregular nature of such crises, with regard to the impact on individuals in urgent need.

Role of Faith Traditions

If attitudinal changes are opening possibilities for policy change, then civil society groups are among the more important agents of change. Of these, formal religious identity and practice still has

considerable social and political significance. Faith traditions are one of the most vital connections for many migrant communities. The Muslim community is especially sensitive to the humanitarian issues experienced by many refugees and asylum seekers in countries from Syria to Afghanistan. The Buddhist faith is widely represented through our growing Asian communities, Myanmar being a current example of concern. The Christian churches, though declining in influence in Australia over the past half century, remain one of the best connected and socially influential groups.

Whilst the media has highlighted groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby in the recent Religious Freedom debate, there is a significant 'silent majority' of moderate and progressive elements within major Christian communities.

For 'People of the Book'—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—the hospitality principle of welcoming is foundational. Both major parties have in recent years recognised the political significance of these religio-cultural groupings.

Religious principles are personally important with several key politicians, yet the place of principle in their practice regarding refugees and asylum seekers seems subject to political qualification as evidenced in the views of Prime Ministers (Rudd, Morrison) and, most recently, the current Immigration Minister Alex Hawke.

Faith communities provide an important potential base of support.

- Abrahamic traditions' significant common teachings on care of the stranger and refugee.
- Faith communities retain local and national leadership structures with significant societal support.
- Many communities have already taken initiative, at both the local and national level. For example, the façade of St. Paul's Cathedral Melbourne features a large sign: "Let's fully Welcome Refugees." Local parishes are also doing good (e.g. email and Zoom groups; supporting individual refugee cases; Good Samaritans).
- Many church advocacy groups share a depth of experience in dealing with *realpolitik* (e.g. Government offering to provide funding for service provision to charitable agencies and then threatening to defund those groups who engage in public advocacy on behalf of the very groups they are funded to support).
- The Anglican and Catholic Archbishops of Sydney may be important in this context. If they, as respected conservative Christian leaders, were to speak on the issues, it may provide encouragement and support for many other more conservative religious bodies to take up the matter.
- Other Protestant churches not present for this roundtable, including the Baptists and the Salvation Army, also provide refugee and asylum seeker related services.

Challenges Confronting Policy Change

Some observe that the current lack of confidence in democratic institutions has been facilitated by the general decline of trust in Government over the past 40 years beginning with the view of Margaret Thatcher that "There is no such thing as society," followed by Ronald Reagan's declaration that "Government is the problem."

Most recently this has been fed by a general growth of cynicism towards parliamentary government in which policy is seen as based less on principle than on immediate political advantage.

Over the past few years, the growth of long dormant populist views has been fed by the explosive growth of social media platforms such as Facebook. These new platforms have also had a major impact on the revenue base of mainstream media, leading to an increased focus on the bottom line, and in some cases a loss of traditional editorial criteria in favour of for-profit exploitation of populist rhetoric linked to cultural chauvinism. These factors have also contributed to the growth of more formalised right-wing political groupings such as One Nation and The United Australia Party.

The cumulative effect on the current debate is to highlight the power of fear-based politics. And in the current election atmosphere the opportunity to run an election against 'the other' may find traction. In this context the very words "refugee crisis" are seen to imply some fault on the part of the refugee, rather than our national failure to live up to our own commitments. In the words of one participant, "Those who oppose change have captured the language."

Possibilities

The roundtable conversation of 22 February provided a valuable opportunity for sharing of experience, insights, and views. Whilst there is no intention to form yet another group, the discussion presents the possibility of continuing cross-network conversation and possible co-ordination of initiatives as opportunities arise.

Participants

The roundtable was co-sponsored by Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the St James' Institute. It was moderated by former ABC broadcaster John Cleary.

Affinity and St James arise from the Islamic and Christian traditions respectively, and thus one aspect of the ensuing dialogue was an exploration of the moral dimension of the refugee crisis and the role of religious traditions in responding. This, however, was not the only aspect of the dialogue which was wide ranging, as represented by the following groups:

- Amnesty International Australia
- Asylum Seeker Centre
- Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
- UNHCR Australia
- Uniting NSW.ACT
- Refugee Advice & Casework Service (RACS)
- Refugee Council of Australia
- House of Welcome
- Who is My Neighbour?