

Our Nation Comes First

Australian scholar decries labels of intolerance and xenophobia

by Katharine Betts

Robert Manne, the *Age* columnist, has argued that Australia's public culture has been reshaped, for the worse, under the Howard Government. He blames this on Pauline Hanson's influence, together with John Howard's attitude to her. Instead of condemning Hanson's views about Aboriginal welfare and Asian immigration, Howard applauded the weakening of political correctness and the growth of free speech.

Manne wrote: "In the strange dynamic that now developed between the stridency of Hanson and the silence of Howard, Australia's political culture began to be reshaped."

But even as late as 1999 this change had not done its worst, because we still accepted the Kosovar refugees.

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"The moral turning point with regard to refugees began only in October, 1999, when boat people fleeing from two of the most vicious tyrannies on earth – Iraq under Saddam Hussein; Afghanistan under the Taliban – began to arrive in significant numbers on our northern shores.

This was the moment where the idea of the refugee began to be transformed in Australian public consciousness from a human being worthy of compassion into a human being deserving only our contempt," wrote Manne.

The opinion poll data do not support this interpretation. There was no sudden change after 1999, whether induced by Howard and Hanson or conjured up from some other source; attitudes to boat people had formed and firmed over a quarter of a century. The more experience Australians had of boat people arriving, the more unhappy about it they became and the less inclined to offer an open house.

It is not logical to compare public sentiment about the Kosovars with feeling about boat people. The Kosovars were invited to Australia for temporary respite on our terms. Most Australians seemed glad that our country could help, and many offered personal assistance.

We should not see the two sets of circumstances as similar; a

better comparison may be between giving to a charity of one's own accord versus being besieged by street beggars. In the first instance we believe the recipient is deserving and the money well spent. In the second we cannot know if the suppliant is deserving or a fraud – and people accosted in this way often feel stressed and resentful.

But the negative attitudes to boat people recorded in the current polls may be due to more than just experience or doubts about the asylum seekers' bona fides. The *Tampa*¹ incident illustrates some possible sources of changes in attitude.

First, there is the scale of the movement. This in itself captured public attention and, when combined with the growing numbers per boat, highlighted the role of people smugglers. Their prominence feeds the suspicion that, rather than being genuine refugees, many of the boat people are manipulating the system.

In the late 1970s many people could have thought that to turn the boats around would be to condemn innocent and desperate people to death by drowning. Today a person offering this response could think,

“Let the people smugglers take them back to Indonesia.”

And, of course, there is the shift from Asian source countries to the Middle East. It is curious that allegations of Australian xenophobia have focused on our supposed antipathy to Asia and Asians. Middle Easterners are, after all, phenotypically very close to Europeans. Yet a poll taken in 1988 found that the Middle East was the least popular region of the world as a source for future immigrants, less popular than Asia or Africa. This points to the importance of cultural rather than racial diversity.

The *Tampa* incident occurred while the nation was reading shocking accounts of rapes in western Sydney; gangs of young men of Lebanese origin had allegedly been raping young Caucasian women in a racially motivated fashion. This series of incidents was unlikely to make the public more inclined to offer the welcome mat to boatloads of unknown adventurers from the Middle East, a state of mind that the September 11 catastrophe could only reinforce.

Nonetheless, the evidence shows there was no sudden desire to close the door on boat people dating only to the past couple of years.

Critics are quick to dismiss this attitude as narrow-minded xenophobia, the mindset of a paranoid people still gripped by 19th century fears of invasion. Some critics cannot understand why Australians might want to distinguish between fellow citizens and foreigners; they do not see the

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importance of a common sense of peoplehood.

Modern nations consist of millions of disparate individuals. If they cannot also think of themselves as belonging to a group that has a collective responsibility for their common future, they will be unable to act as a group. Consequently, threats to a sense of common identity endanger a broad range of other goals we care about.

But many intellectuals are tone deaf to the ideas of nation and peoplehood, and the power these ideas have for most Australians. People who are secure in their identity may choose to act compassionately, as in the case of the Kosovars, but resent attempts to coerce them to share their home with outsiders.

Critics who cannot understand this imagine that if they assault and insult the idea of the nation with sufficient vigor, we will all become generous internationalists living in a world of peace and sharing.

In the recent election campaign the government emphasized its stand on the boat people. For the government’s critics, reminding voters of its respect for borders was a disgraceful appeal to the ever-present racism of the

Australian people. This is not the correct way to see it. Liberal democracies that care for their members, and for outsiders, must have a high level of social cohesion. Without this, members cannot believe that they are a people, and without such a belief they cannot function as a collective entity.

Some individuals, secure in the knowledge of their own human capital and confident of their international connections and marketability, do not see the need for a belief in peoplehood. But the majority do. They know that strong communities must have borders, and they want to continue to belong to a strong community.

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1. *Dr. Betts refers to the Tampa incident. On August 25, 2001, an Australian Coastwatch plane flying the line between Australian and Indonesian waters spotted an old Indonesian ferry with an SOS painted on its roof and reported its position to Indonesian authorities. The Norwegian cargo ship Tampa altered course after being alerted by Australian Search and Rescue in Canberra and picked up 438 mainly Afghani and Sri Lankan passengers from the sinking ferry on August 26. Later, Special Air Service troops were ordered to board the Tampa to prevent it from landing as it headed into Australian waters at Christmas Island rather than returning the passengers to Indonesia.*