

Chapter Seven

Immigration Policy, Sovereignty and the Media

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In all modesty, I must begin with an expression of gratitude to the convenors of this meeting, because they've asked me to talk about immigration policy, sovereignty and the media – and I don't know of any other three subjects today ... well, hardly any ... that could be tied into one parcel and not be guaranteed to capture the widest audience.

But where to begin? Immigration policy is such a tremendous catch-all of talking points that we might easily start with an exploration of the first waves of dark-skinned people who found their way to this country ... and then we might talk about the curious reluctance of their descendants to join any serious attempt to trace their genetic origins...¹

That, at least, would lead us into a fascinating aspect of history. But it would also lead us away from the other intended points of our discussion today. At the same time ... the word history suggests a starting point, because whenever we look at contemporary media, we are also looking at history of a kind. Or we like to think we are.

One of the many boasts of journalists – in their frequent bouts of self-congratulation – is that what they present today as news is, in fact, the first draft of history. Up to a point, here and there, this is true. But when news reports are wrong, in points of fact or emphasis, or because of subjectivity or outright ignorance, history flies out of the window.

As, indeed, it did last year – when anyone depending on newspapers for an understanding of Australia's immigration policy was left with a thin, pathetic grasp on historical reality. This is not because newspapers didn't have much to say about the subject. Not at all. They had a great deal to say. Hysteria, though not much history, was everywhere.

Immigration has become a topic very dear to the hearts of the left-leaning journalists and their editors who dominate the media in this country. No one listening to the ABC – the biggest media operation in the nation – could doubt the predominant role it has on their agenda.

The ABC pilgrims on, one commentator said the other day. Look at the extensive campaigns run since the last election by *The Australian*, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the national broadcaster to see how seriously they regard the subject.

Why are they so concerned? Is it because they genuinely want a better, fairer Australia? Are they concerned with the kind of ethnic mix we might become? Are they worried about how many newcomers this country might accept? Or about giving undue protection or exclusion to those ethnic people who would add their mosaics to the culture of Australia?

No. These campaigns have no other fundamental aim than to hammer the federal Government, in particular to denigrate John Howard, who – in their sad, myopic view – has wrong-footed every move since he entered The Lodge. Immigration policy here is merely another cudgel with which to hammer Howard and his team.

And look how they wield it. Almost every day brings new headlines about boat people, asylum seekers, refugees, children torn from parents ... only rarely does the media describe these people as they are: would-be illegal immigrants. Instead, the media presents them as poor and desperate wretches whose treatment by Howard's cruel, inhumane, cold and unfeeling bureaucracy has brought withering shame on Australia in the eyes of the world.²

Some shame – as we saw in Mr Howard’s reception in Washington this week. Some shame – as we watch Britain and other European countries rapidly discarding unworkable policies and turning to Australia for a model on which to base immigration policy.

And some thick-headed blindness, let me say, from former Senator Gareth Evans. Biggles has a cushy job in Europe now, yet he was in *The Australian* on Thursday complaining that on the treatment of refugees – and other issues – Australia was walking away from any kind of good leadership role.³ Perhaps, when he gets promoted, Gareth’s new employers will take off his blinkers.

This is not the first time the media – or Biggles, for that matter – has been so thoroughly out of touch. A major attitudinal study by Queensland University Professor John Henningham in 1996 found the views of those employed in all forms of the media were well to the Left of the bulk of their public on almost every social issue – drug use, divorce, abortion, multiculturalism to name a few.⁴

Yet the press continues to insist that on illegal immigration, the press is the only one in step. A United Nations report this week showed how much in step they were. Of those 400-odd people who deliberately sank their boat so that the Norwegian ship *Tampa* would rescue them and carry them into Australia, the UN found only 25 could be classed as genuine refugees.⁵

Robert Manne who, like Philip Adams, tries to demonise and vilify everyone who disagrees, has written calling for the release of all people from detention centres who have passed health and security checks, but whose claims are either in process or have failed, if they cannot be repatriated to their homelands.⁶

To my mind, Mr Manne still fails to grasp what I believe is the principal reason why most Australians do not share his sentiments. It is this: Australians believe in a fair go.

And the way these so-called asylum seekers try to settle themselves in Australia is anything but fair. They are quite happy to travel through one or more countries in which they could legitimately contact refugee organisations or Australian consulates – but no. They prefer to try to break the law in the hope they might obtain an unfair advantage over others prepared to work their way through the established systems of refugee settlement.

The last election, I think, showed how very wrong the media can be on this subject. A post-election study for the Liberal Party⁷ showed 81 per cent of those surveyed believed Labor should have supported the Government on the issue of illegal entrants – and that view was supported by 76 per cent of the Labor voters quizzed in the survey.

Moreover, for all the screaming front pages, the expensive, time-wasting lawsuits, the dreary hours of late-night television talk shows and the endless opportunities non-governmental organisations had to air their sludge on Radio National, where did the issue of illegal entrants rank when voters were asked to list in order the reasons they voted for the Liberal Party? I can tell you. It ranked Number Six.

Twenty-nine per cent of voters polled cited party reasons (either a long-standing commitment to the Liberals or opposition to Labor) for their choice of candidate, 22 per cent cited economic and financial management, 18 per cent cited John Howard’s leadership, 14 per cent said they wanted the current path of government to continue, 11 per cent cited Kim Beazley’s leadership.

The number persuaded to vote one way or another on the issue of illegal immigrants was just ... 10 per cent. So much for an election driven by hatred and fear. So much for dividing the nation.

Perhaps even more interesting is the finding that 73 per cent of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds supported the Government’s border protection policies, and 79 per cent of those from a non-English speaking background believed the Labor Party should have supported the Liberals.

One more statistic. For those who claim the Government policies are inherently racist, fascist, or worse, consider this: 80 per cent of those surveyed believed Australians should welcome refugees from any country – provided they go through the correct processes.

All this suggests that the border protection issue is a matter of national sovereignty rather than one of racial or religious discrimination. Yet the race card is played frequently in media campaigns against those who believe in national sovereignty. This is a cheap trick – and it is not sustainable against Australia while we go on resettling refugees and other people on humanitarian grounds from Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and West Asia.

Those who loathe the West would no doubt be astonished to discover that there is actually not a queue of refugees seeking resettlement from the UK, North America and Western Europe, too.

The intense fervour of the media campaign puts me in mind of the extensive education – or re-education – attempts foisted on the public by less liberal regimes.

And the fact that clearly, the media campaign has failed, would be demonstrated still more convincingly were the public to be asked: Who should make the laws for Australia – Australians or an international body? Or: Who should decide who is permitted to live in Australia – Australians or an international body? Does anyone doubt what the answer would be?

Mark Latham, the pugilistic Member for Werriwa, has made a number of speeches on this issue but has found stony media ground. In January, he wrote a stinging letter to John Robertson, the secretary of the NSW Labor Council, taking him to task over the simplistic approach adopted by the group Labor for Refugees, one of the organisations which applauded the actions of the rioters at Woomera.

The seven points he made demolished the emotional campaign run by the Labor group and, as Latham noted, suggested the replacement of “the rule of law with an open door asylum seeker policy”.

“The first priority for a just society is to help needy people within the collective boundaries of the law. The first priority of your organisation is to find excuses for people who break the law”, he wrote.⁸

Had such a high-profile MP from the Coalition side written so scathingly to a Conservative body, the press would have been full of stories of splits and divisions on party policy. Latham’s letter languished largely unreported.

There is a mass of other evidence to demonstrate the media’s disgracefully one-sided approach. Let me quote, as one example, an editorial from *The Sydney Morning Herald* in March⁹ which demanded the release of children, with their parents, from detention, claiming that maintaining the policy of detaining them “becomes a kind of cruel madness. It disgraces those responsible for it, diminishes the nation and should be ameliorated”.

Here we are: diminished again. If the critics go on diminishing us like this, there’ll soon be precious little left of Australia. And I have to wonder, while newspapers go on crying about the vast numbers of so-called celebrities and other people forced by disagreeable government policies to leave this country, how it is that the Australian Bureau of Statistics manages to find that the population is actually growing.

Ever since those seal-saving seventies, when a stream of untalented young actresses trekked to join an ageing Brigitte Bardot on an icy strand of Newfoundland and, hopefully, kick-start their stillborn careers, it has been popular among public profiles to lend their names to causes. The illegal immigration issue has attracted most of the usual suspects – Tom Keneally, David Williamson, Peter Carey and so on, with attendant hand-wringing publicity.¹⁰

The media has also given spokesmen from non-government organisations the opportunity to make various unchallenged and nonsensical statements. Among them, Duncan McLaren, the secretary-general of the Vatican-based Caritas International, distinguished himself with this remark:

“In terms of those seeking a better life in Australia and elsewhere, we have to work towards a more compassionate solution”.¹¹

It does not appear that Mr McLaren was asked if he believed all those who wished to live “elsewhere” were refugees, or whether every nation should be forced to open its doors to everyone who wanted a change of scenery. We might reasonably guess, however, that the reporter and editors who placed this statement in *The Sydney Morning Herald* knew he supported their attitudes, even if, as seems clear, he was ignorant of the detail of the argument.

Among the more notable public profiles, former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser is to talk about asylum seekers at the national conference of the left-wing Australian Manufacturing Workers Union next month. Mr Fraser has no trouble finding a media audience for his views on this issue – notwithstanding his role in the downfall of Labor’s supreme living legend, Gough Whitlam. Now that Mr Fraser has seen *their* light, those who once vowed to maintain the rage are cheerfully prepared, it seems, to forego the opportunity to relive their adolescent passions...

The Age, once one of Mr Fraser’s natural enemies, had a change of heart about ten years ago when the distinguished Eminent Person appeared with the National Treasure, Mr Whitlam, at a rally in Melbourne’s Treasury Gardens. They were protesting against the possibility of sound professional management returning to Spencer Street through the offices of Conrad Black.

The editors have apparently not forgotten the favour. They laid it on with a trowel in an editorial titled *Asylum seekers deserve better*: “Malcolm Fraser has rightly drawn attention to the conditions at Woomera’s hellhole”.¹² The newspaper claimed – wrongly – there was no evidence that fewer people were seeking refuge in Australia, but it has not yet apologised.

Mr Fraser’s arguments can look different under close scrutiny – as, indeed, did the fence he built around his show ring – a little lower than usual so that the cattle would look bigger. Writing in the Fairfax newspapers in February, he said:

“We also need to understand that Australia’s problem is small compared with problems in Europe, a magnet for the Middle East and Africa. More than 400,000 asylum seekers and refugees move to Europe each year. Except for a short identification period, they are not in compulsory, mandatory, non-reviewable detention”.¹³

He is perfectly correct in this description of some European countries, but he – and his editors – should have made clear that, because of the hundreds of thousands who have disappeared into the populations of their choice, many of those same countries are revising their policies rapidly and – as I said earlier – are looking – like Tony Blair’s Britain – to Australia for inspiration.

It might be, of course, that perhaps Mr Fraser is ignorant of the revolution in thinking on strategies to deal with illegal migrants in Europe ... especially if he has been relying on the London bureaux of our major news organisations. They don’t write much about the subject at all – though there is plenty of information on the websites of the BBC and London newspapers.

Just yesterday, European Union justice ministers agreed on a series of tough measures to crack down on illegal immigration, and there will be a major summit of EU leaders on the topic. Perhaps we shall soon witness an Incredible Shrinking Europe.

Very little has been published here about the British plan to educate the children of asylum seekers in segregated centres, forcing them to learn English, and to deport thousands of would-be refugees to their home countries before they can appeal to the courts.¹⁴ Why not? Is it politically correct self-censorship at the London end ... or wilful censorship at this end because fair and honest coverage would prove the absurdity of the claim that Australia has become an international pariah?

Sadly, looking at how the international press reports events here, it is clear they lean heavily on information from various immigrant activist groups and a plethora of non-government organisations opposed to government policy.¹⁵

Many of their reports are so derivative they repeat the errors Robert Manne made in December – in *The Age* – when he failed to note that the period of mandatory detention is determined largely by the number of appeals lodged by applicants whose claims have been rejected, and he claimed wrongly that a 12-year-old boy had been raped at Woomera.

Nor have they made clear that all the detainees in Australia arrived here only by travelling through other countries in which they could have asked legitimately for asylum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has offices in Islamabad, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. But these facilities have escaped the attention of these sharp-eyed international newsmen.

On this subject, John Pilger's eponymous style of journalism prevails. His own contribution is masterly in its manipulation of the numbers of refugees and illegal entrants which Australia accepts.¹⁶ If he, and those who parrot his figures, compared like with like, they would find that Australia resettles about 40 people per 100,000, while the US resettles 29 people per 100,000 and Germany resettles zero. Australia, in fact, is one of the few countries which actually has a proactive resettlement program and does not merely try to cope with people crossing its borders illegally.

But advocacy journalists like Pilger have a free rein and what they write makes for potent, emotive reading. Yet what of the facts? What of the substantial arguments?

The Australian's Mike Steketee claimed in January¹⁷ that the government's response to asylum seekers was unsustainable and falling apart. Perhaps Mr Steketee's crystal ball looks further ahead than mine – because nothing of the sort has happened yet.

Yet Mr Steketee – perhaps he really *is* an expert on the subject – appeals for minimal time of detention while the illegal immigrants' identity, health and character are checked. There are, of course, obvious and bigger questions concerning the millions who do not read his newspaper: at what point, for example, *should* a nation become concerned at an influx of illegal entrants, and at that time, with a much bigger problem, what should the response be?

Interestingly, Steketee also offers his views in the same issue of the media union's *Walkley Magazine*, as an article by ABC reporter Natalie Larkins who describes her arrest at Woomera. I make no comment on Larkins' piece, because it adds nothing to the debate. But something needs to be said about the objectivity of the organisation she works for. One week *before* the Woomera demonstration, a person from the ABC called the Prime Minister's Department to find out where he could be contacted during the following weekend.

This is not normally something the ABC – or any other news organisation – does every week. So why, we must ask, would the ABC do it this time? The answer is simple. Once the demonstration and burning and destruction of property at Woomera had begun, the ABC wanted to grace its on-the-spot report with instant reaction from the Prime Minister. Now ... is that news management or is it not!

Steketee argues that it is the media's role to identify the root causes of Australians' genuine concerns about border security, including the increased insecurity of employment and the downward pressure on incomes for many low to middle income earners. "And", he writes, "we should take up the debate on ways to address these problems, rather than accept them as the inevitable consequences of globalisation".¹⁸ By *we*, I have to guess he means the media – those wonderful proponents of re-education.

Forget the news, let's get right into the process – which is precisely what nine Canberra press gallery journalists did in March, when they wrote a highly political submission to the Inquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident.¹⁹

John Howard, according to the almost unanimous view of the media, was very much alone in the stand he had adopted against illegal entrants in support of Australia's sovereignty.

If the dullards of the media were to be believed, the nation was an international pariah, and Mr Howard was the target of justifiable global opprobrium. I would like to remind the dullards that

there has been a resurgence of conservatism across Europe. Migrants are in the forefront of political discussion. Tony Blair's tough stance is being cheered by the French, to say nothing of the Dutch, the Italians and the Austrians.

What has been demonstrated here again is that there are two Australias – major and minor... The minor Australia is represented by the whingers in the media so determinedly out of touch with their public – off the pulse, I think is the current jargon. The greater nation is represented by those who enthusiastically support a proud and independent country.

Endnotes:

1. *Quadrant*, June, 2002, *The extinction of the Australian pygmies*, Keith Windschuttle & Tim Gillen.
2. For example, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 4, 2002, Robert Manne, *Howard squanders our good name*.
3. *The Australian*, June 13, 2002.
4. Professor John Henningham, University of Queensland, 1994 study of 173 journalists' attitudes compared to random survey of 262 members of the public, published *Independent Monthly*, February, 1996, *How Political Correctness Shapes the Media*.
5. *The Australian*, June 13, 2002, *UN denies Afghans refuge*.
6. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 10, 2002, *Oh for a show of mercy, sincerity*.
7. Lynton Crosby, Liberal Party federal secretary, National Press Club, November 21, 2001.
8. Latham letter to Robertson, January 2, 2002.
9. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 25, 2002, *Moral questions on immigration*.
10. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 13, 2002, *Writers attack dark chapter in asylum policy*.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *The Age*, December 13, 2001.
13. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 21, 2002, Malcolm Fraser, *No refuge in a richer, meaner world*.
14. BBC Website, News, UK politics, June 11, 2002.
15. *The Australian*, February 14, 2002, Paul Ham, *Damned for desert hell-holes*.
16. *New Statesman*, January 28, 2002.
17. *The Australian*, January 30, 2002, Mike Steketee, *No excuse for all this inhumanity*.

18. *Walkley Magazine*, Issue 16, Autumn, 2002, Mike Steketee, *Puncturing the propaganda*.
19. The signatories were Graeme Dobell, Fran Kelly and Jim Middleton from the ABC, Geoffrey Barker, Andrew Clennell, Mark Forbes and Craig Skehan from the Fairfax newspapers, Chris Hammer from SBS and Ian McPhedran from News Ltd.