

MELTING POT, SALAD OR FISHBOWL : AUSTRALIA'S TORTUOUS HISTORY OF REFUGEE IMMIGRATION

Australians have great difficulty in defining what it means to be Australian rather than Canadian or New Zealander. We all say we believe in democracy, 'a fair go' and, more recently, women's equality to men. We are unusual, like New Zealand, in being an island country without the need to defend land borders against invaders. We have actually deleted some of our island territories from our 'migration zone' in order to keep out asylum seekers. Prime Minister John Howard won an election by declaring: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Election Launch 2001), He also deleted the word 'multicultural' from the government's vocabulary. Ever since becoming a nation in 1901, Australia has been paranoid about being invaded by sea from the north with the Chinese being the original bogey men (Chinese women were not allowed into Australia) leading to the creation of the White Australia Policy simultaneously with the creation of the country in 1901, which survived until the 1970s.

Yet since World War 2 Australia has taken in over 900,000 refugees and humanitarian entrants. [Humanitarian entrants are people who have had to flee their home countries, often due to war, but do not meet the exact persecution criteria of the United Nations' Refugee Convention]. Australian governments have had to balance a perceived need for a more numerous population against frequent xenophobic reactions to anyone from a non-Anglo-Celtic background. Starting with anti-Soviet Eastern Europeans displaced by World War 2. delightfully known as the Beautiful Balts, the next refugee wave were the Vietnamese and other Indochinese, then people fleeing the former Yugoslavia, who unusually came on a temporary basis preparing to return home when fighting ended. Africans fleeing war were followed by Syrians and Iraqis. Today refugee arrivals in Australia include Ezdidis, Afghans, Ukrainians and even a few controversial Palestinians. This paper examines Australia's history of refugee immigration and the remarkable failures to increase the numbers accepted from the 12,000-14,000 range since the conservative Government of Prime Minister Howard, with the exception of 20,000 in 2012-13 under the Labour government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. We could do more and the paper explores Australia's failures in this area.

The Refugee Council of Australia, which is an invaluable source of support, stories and statistics, lists refugee visas issued by governments not by financial year as in the Government statistics. The 1947-49 Labor Government of Ben Chifley comes out top with an annual average of 27,789 visas, followed by the current Labor Government of Anthony Albanese with 17,460 and the Coalition Government of Malcolm Fraser with 15,008. Fraser publicly admitted that he favoured Vietnamese as he thought that they would vote for his political party but he also overhauled Australia's somewhat chaotic approach to refugee and migrant settlement in 1977. The meanest government was the troubled Labor Government of Gough Whitlam in 1972-75, apparently, too busy fighting for survival to grant more than 2,650 refugee visas a year. The very limited numbers of refugee visas has paralleled the acceptance of vast numbers of economic migrants from Asia. Australia now has 1,390,000 people of Chinese birth or ancestry representing 5.5% of the population and 976,000 Indians (2021 Census data). Given that Australia is busy arming itself against a potential threat from China, the lack of debate about Chinese immigration is remarkable. This paper argues that Australia's refugee programs can only be understood against the background of Australia's mass imports of Asian immigrants and the development of Australian multiculturalism and the movement from assimilation to integration. Malcolm Turnbull, who was the 'small l' Liberal Prime Minister from 2015 to 2018, recently stated on national radio that his government gave hostile debate on refugee issues free run in public and social media, so as to shield the admission of massive numbers of Asian economic migrants from dispute. Australia has increasingly focused on the immigration of highly skilled migrants and this has also influenced the arguments about asylum seekers and refugees who are perceived as being unskilled and in need of extensive and expensive settlement programs at a time when the emphasis is upon skilled migrants who are considered capable of settling themselves under what has been described as a 'post-multiculturalism' multicultural policy (sic) in Geoffrey Levey's very useful 2019 survey of the development of Australian multiculturalism. For Levey Australian multiculturalism has been distinctive because it followed a liberal nationalist model in which adjusting to a culturally diverse population was the responsibility of government. Such a model would allow for significant support for refugees. The problem is, as argued in the paper, that governments weigh the cost and duration of support per refugee against the number of refugees to be admitted. Currently the government is trialling a program, described in the paper, to which the author is a sponsor, following a Canadian model where communities pay to support refugees to settle in on their arrival in Australia.

with the visas for these refugees being additional to the basic quota. There are also said to be plans for a program to admit 'skilled refugees'.

A question for the near future is going to be: "What is Australia going to do about climate 'refugees' whose lands have disappeared under the sea?"

Australia is bordered by the Pacific and is seen as having a special responsibility for Pacific Islanders left homeless by rising tides or descending geological bases. The Australian Government has already quietly signed a Falepeli (Good Neighbour) Union Treaty in 2023 with Tuvalu, an island country with a population of some 12,000 souls, which ensures that Australia would still recognise Tuvalu's sovereignty, even if all of its lands were washed away. The Treaty also provides for 'mobility with dignity' (sic) resulting in a ballot for 280 work/study visas a year (i.e. 280 principals plus immediate families). If these families averaged four members and all opted to stay it would take little more than a decade for Tuvalu to be depopulated. Most pacific island countries have more numerous populations than Tuvalu but many also have solid land bases beyond their coral atolls. The Tuvaluan case demonstrates what the Australian government can do with political will and minimal media attention or fuss. The paper discusses the more controversial Kiribati case and the prospects for Australia perhaps setting aside off-shore islands as land bases for environmental refugees.