

Pull up the Drawbridge on the Gatecrashers from Hell

An extraordinary confluence of events has brought Australia to its lowest ebb in the public acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers. Lachlan Murdoch writes.

It's official, Australians don't want asylum seekers landing on our shores. The unedifying spectacle of the recent Federal election campaign is testament to this. As public opinion whipped into a frenzy over 'illegal boat people,' the campaign was ultimately book ended by the question of whether asylum seekers would throw their children into the sea to 'achieve an immigration outcome'. Our political leaders sang from the same song sheet when they led the chorus, "We don't want people like that coming into this country".

So why is it that 'illegal boat people' have become the new pariahs? Numerous opinion pieces advance racism and xenophobia as a basis for Australia's increasingly harsh policies against asylum seekers and the extraordinary campaign of demonisation that masqueraded as an election. Although there is no doubt that racism has played its part in the closing of minds and hearts to desperate people, the reasons are much more complex. Our national paranoia has more to do with perceived threats to security, strong emotions connected with who gets an invitation to Australia's party and general disaffection created by the loss of control over destiny.

Today Australians understand what most other people around the globe have known for a long time, the world is not a safe and predictable place. This realisation is not something new with its genesis in the events of September 11. It's a much more insidious process, anchored in Australia's long-held position as a British outpost surrounded by alien cultures and strengthened in recent decades as isolation from global events has been replaced with the immediacy of the dangers in the outside world. In the face of these external threats many older Australians yearn for an idealised notion of a relaxed and comfortable 1950s Australia. The story goes that once a upon a time you could leave your front door open day and night, secure in the belief nobody would come barging in.

Signs of Australia's developing security paranoia have been evident for some time and the Federal election campaign is not alone amongst election campaigns in its focus on security. Recent state elections across Australia became bidding wars of another kind, overshadowed by a singular concern for which party was tougher on crime and more able to protect the public.

When viewed in this context, asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq represent another unknown quantity that has the potential to threaten both personal and collective security. Their arrival has the effect of bringing home the fear and horror that has otherwise been held at arm's length. The accompanying uncertainty leads to a demand that front and back doors remain firmly shut and emotions run at fever pitch when deciding who to let in.

Indeed, emotion has fuelled the asylum seeker debate more than any other political debate in recent times. Newspaper letters pages reported deluges of mail over the Tampa incident and name-calling was common as readers threatened commentators on both sides of the debate. There is something almost hot-wired direct to our innermost emotion chip whenever Australians consider who might be coming into the big backyard to share in the family barbie and whether they are bringing the beer.

This emotion can be manifest in the cloying, suffocating embrace that accompanied the avalanche of public support for the Kosovars and Timorese who came just two years ago with Government approval. Australians generally like invited guests and will make every effort to make them feel welcome. In return we want to feel wanted, perhaps more than any other people on the planet.

Predictably, the response becomes far less welcoming whenever there is even the hint that our new guests are

not eternally grateful for all Australia is doing for them. The emotion of the squeezing embrace flipped into condemnation for the Kosovars as they were seen to trample on our hospitality, traipse in all manner of muck and dirty the carpets. It was difficult to understand what the Kosovars had been through when the actions of even a few left such a bad taste in the mouth.

In contrast, the Tampa (and other) 'illegal boat people' are viewed as gatecrashers, not guests. Gatecrashers are dangerous. Gatecrashers set off all sorts of fears in us about how they violate our space, will take advantage of the generosity laid on for the invited guests and pose a threat to how we control our patch. While everybody else waits for their invitation to the party the gatecrashers just come on in. The immediate response is to call the police and have them removed. Nobody gatecrashes with good reason, so there is rarely any question about understanding why a gatecrasher might be breaking down the door. They come to do nothing else but abuse our sense of fairness.

Discomfort only surfaces when Australians seek to balance our belief in ourselves as compassionate people with the awful reality of what the asylum seekers are fleeing. Supposedly a defining characteristic of Australians is our ability to empathise with and support those who have experienced disasters. When confronted with the horror of the individual stories of the boat arrivals, the resistance of many Australians dissolves as they find it hard to refuse the legitimacy of their claims, the awkwardly termed 'genuine refugees' emerge.

Difficulties arise though when Australians are asked to share some collective responsibility for the hell from which the boat people seek refuge. Speak of the collective rather than the individual and eyes begin to glaze over with sense that their misery is just too overwhelming and fears begin to surface that it is impossible to hold back the tide of hordes of fugitives. The problem becomes much too big and out of control.

In fact nobody should underestimate the importance of control in the minds of those Australians who are increasingly faced with fewer and fewer elements of their life that fall within their influence. In essence, the Tampa boat people and all those that came before and after were skillfully crafted into a political lightning rod for all the disaffection felt by thousands of 'battlers'. The Tampa drew kilowatts of political heat out of industry deregulation, privatisation, free trade disparities, job insecurity and the all the other evils of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

In a globalising world, rural and working people have lost control of things they once took for granted. Industries pack up and move off-shore, markets no longer provide the prices they once did, the economy is a two-headed monster subject only to international vagaries, banks close branches, doctors disappear, services evaporate and politicians seem more remote and less able to influence outcomes than ever.

In such an environment the election refrain, 'We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' takes on new meaning. There is something we can control after all, even if it means diverting the problem to precarious Pacific microstates. In a sense many Australians felt good about deciding something rather than nothing. Of course we are only in a position to decide the fate of those less powerful than ourselves and conveniently desperate boat people were sailing over the horizon. But many Australians decided to push back the boats because they were made to believe it was only fair to keep out gatecrashers, and others because taking back control at least made them feel a little higher than someone else on a slippery social totem pole.

The legacy of the last several months is that Australia has reached its nadir in accepting some of the most desperate and vulnerable people on the planet. Pre-election bi-partisanship has left us with pieces of the most draconian legislation passed through the Commonwealth parliament which if used declare all actions to turn away boat people as lawful and will see a 'family-friendly' government enforce the permanent separation of children from their parents. (**See inset**)

Under the new arrangements, the prospect for the boat people is that nothing will get better before it gets worse and there remains the spectre that the desperation now played out behind the razor wire of the detention centres will spill out into the streets.

The challenge for refugee advocates is to understand exactly how all this came about and to engage with people over their opinions, for without this understanding and communication, we risk driving Australians further from support for refugees in a haze of attacks and name calling over the racism many believe is basis for the policy. A constructive process of engaging with the wider Australian community and their fears of boat people may not be easy but it is vital in turning around a juggernaut that presently has the momentum of a massive fully laden container ship.

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