



# REVIEWS

into war to battle the myth of the terrorist state. There is not one Arab voice in the book, there is no dissenting argument put by the dissenters themselves.

Since the book was published in December 2002 there has been an invasion of a country said to be in league with superterrorists. There has been the “shock and awe” bombing of a major Arab city. There has been the continuing destruction of Palestinian homes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There has been the targeted killing, using precision bombing by helicopter gunships, of the enemies of the status quo in Israel. And there has been the ongoing torture and imprisonment, without charge, of suspected terrorists in the obscurity without name of Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay.

One is left asking how the bombing of the World Trade Centre can be understood and how can one compare it to other acts of large scale destruction. How does this one act of wonton killing change the nature of the debate of east versus west, of power versus oppression, of economic might versus the powerlessness of eternal poverty? One is left asking again, and in another light, what is superterrorism and what motivates the alleged perpetrators? ■

## Tampering with asylum A universal humanitarian problem

*(Frank Brennan. 234 pp. University of Queensland Press. rrp \$30)*

Reviewed by David Finlay

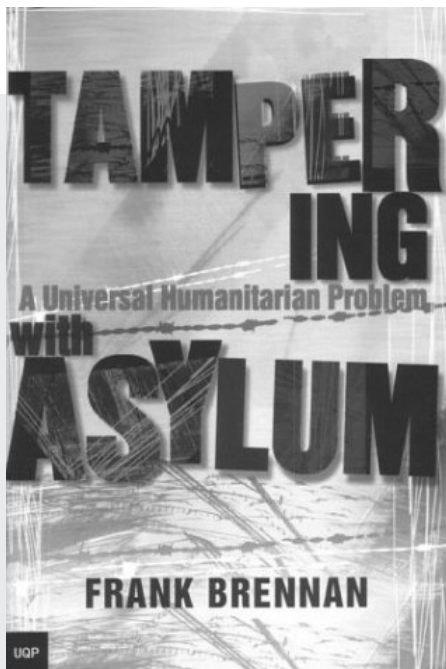
‘It is now virtually impossible for a refugee lawfully and honestly to flee into a first-world country seeking asylum.’

If nothing else Australia’s refugee/mandatory detention/secure borders/Pacific solution (echoes of the Final Solution?) policies have been a fillip to Australian publishing and academic paper production. A Google internet search on the terms: refugees + Australia + government policy yields 265,000 hits; a search on: asylum seekers + Australia + government policy results in over 110,000 hits; a search on: tampering with asylum + Brennan gives 301 results ! Similarly, I know of at least 30 books on the subject, including 3 children’s and 2 adult novels, published in the last 5 years.

The title under review is one of the more accessible non-fiction books. Frank Brennan is the most well known Jesuit in Australia. He is long time advocate of human rights in general and Aboriginal Australians rights, and more lately the rights of asylum seekers.

The book covers the history of Australian government policy on refugees/asylum seekers, the development and application of the present policies, a comparison with policies and practices in other First World countries, and suggestions for a better, more humane way of treating asylum seekers who reach our shores.

His book is strangely unemotional, as if the argument will be taken more seriously for being so. Too easily the isolationists try to dismiss calls for more humane treatment for asylum seekers as being “emotional”- how can one be concerned about the health, sanity, indeed life, of fellow humans without being “emotional”?



Similarly, he does not express an explicit Catholic or even Christian viewpoint (he does make an appeal to compassion). While I can see why he has done this I still find it incongruous that in an (at least nominally) Christian country with a self declared Christian Prime Minister and previous Minister for Immigration one can not use the words of Christ to support ones argument –

‘Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me...” [Luke 9:48]

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” [Matthew 25: 35-36]

Indeed the above esteemed gentlemen’s response might well be when they get to heaven: ‘Lord,

when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?’ [Matthew 25: 37]3

Brennan is at pains to provide a balanced view of refugee policy and, to my mind, is far too generous with the government and former responsible Minister Philip Ruddock.

Three things in the current debate annoy me constantly, firstly the above mention stricture not to be emotional, and secondly the lack of reference to religion which is supposed to be the underlying basis of our society and human rights in general.

Happily, Brennan does address the third thing. That is the idea that Australia has always been the land of a “fair go”, and that the policies of the last 10 years are an anomaly. He examines the historical context and finds the line adopted under the Government of Prime Minister John Howard since 1996 to be a result of evolution rather than revolution.

Australia has, unfortunately, a long history of exclusion stretching from the expulsions and barring of Chinese in the 19th century (culminating in the White Australia Policy), through the rejection of Jewish asylum seekers before and during World War II, and the stigmatisation of “reffos” immediately after that war.

Previous governments have readily stigmatised asylum seekers as ‘boat

people’ and ‘economic refugees’ and have willingly blurred the statistical boundaries around the intakes of refugees. *Tampering with Asylum* also explains and exposes the shameful use of neologism to stigmatise asylum seekers. Terms such as “queue jumpers”, “economic refugees”, “illegals”, etc.

Hopefully, the uninformed readers will be better informed about mandatory detention, interdiction at sea, refoulement, queue jumpers, appeals process and upstream disruption. And will treat asylum seekers as individual persons rather than statistics, or just as badly, as people from cultures where self-harm and suicide are, to quote the former minister, “part of their culture”

The author contests the unreasonable conditions of TPVs (Temporary Protection Visa holders); once accepted as a refugee, the asylum seeker should be allowed residency and the right to family reunion.

Finally, he points out Australia is in breach of the Refugee Convention, the ICCPR, the conventions on the rights of children and against racial discrimination; and in certain cases of forced return to unsafe countries, the convention against torture.

This is a book worth reading but I can’t help wondering who will read it, those who are already “converted” or those that are unthinking or uninformed supporters of current government policy?■