



Seven days is a long time in politics... or so the saying goes. If this is true, then seven years must be an eternity!

It's almost seven years since Australian politics was turned upside down by the emergence of a new political force from regional Queensland. The rise of One Nation now seems nothing more than a hazy memory or even, some may say, a bad hangover. Pauline Hanson, the flame-haired former party leader, who brought such passion to politics inspiring undying loyalty among many and howls of derision from others, has lately been seen strutting her stuff on prime time television as a rather awkward ballroom dancer!

One Nation's policy platform imploded along with the party structure and both have been consigned to the waste paper bin of history. The party took an extraordinary array of policies to the 1998 Federal election. Does anybody remember the policy to abolish aboriginal health, housing and education programmes because they were racially motivated; the flat 2% personal income, company and sales tax that would reduce government revenue by an estimated \$50 billion per annum; the proposals to print money to pay the national debt; the massive cuts to immigration to keep out disease and reduce unemployment; or the no interest loans from a gov-

ernment bank to rural constituents? All of these and more were firm planks in One Nation's bid for election and rightly dismissed out of hand as irresponsible and prejudiced by the major parties.

So what was the single One Nation policy adopted by both sides of politics? Yes, there was just one that emerged from the sound and fury of the 1998 election hustings to enter the political mainstream - the granting of temporary protection status to refugees.

While everything else One Nation stood for is now a bad memory, the more than 10,000 refugees who have received temporary visas in Australia can attest to the power of politics and efforts to woo popular opinion.

The temporary visas instituted a year after One Nation came to prominence now form a foundation stone of refugee and asylum seeker policy. The visas were a bad idea then and are an even worse idea now. The policy of denying refugees access to permanency and restricting entitlements to what is an excellent array of government supported settlement services is nothing if not short-sighted. Firstly, it created a second class of entrants and denied le-

gitimate refugees the opportunity to learn English, participate fully in the labour market and tertiary education system and placed barriers to participation more widely in Australian society. Secondly, it made it virtually impossible for refugees to be reunited with close family members and created a long-term limbo from which many have not recovered.

The argument that Australia was a “soft-touch” and thereby attracted those refugees who were shopping for the best outcome is hard to substantiate. The temporary visa was conceived as a deterrence measure, but the idea that people were seriously making decisions about where to seek protection based on whether they would receive English classes or access to some forms of welfare is very hard to accept. Indeed, asylum seekers continued to arrive by boat in spite of the temporary visa and Australia’s hard line mandatory immigration detention system. What stemmed boat arrivals was the interdiction of asylum seekers at sea, greater regional co-operation to disrupt people smuggling and ultimately reduced pressure on the countries of first asylum as people flows eased following the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein.

The strength of Australia’s diversity is not just diversity itself but the capacity of people from many backgrounds to participate fully in the life of the nation. Opportunities for employment, secondary and higher education and to contribute to the communities in which new arrivals live are all vital to developing a sense of belonging and constructing a new identity. In contrast, a society that excludes any group within its midst paves the way for the development of health and social problems that will only become manifest over time. The temporary visa policy works against participation just as any temporary guest worker policy would do and judging by what we know to be the social determinants of good health is a recipe for longer-term health and social issues.

Australia can rightfully be proud of its strong tradition for respecting human rights and affirming the rights of individuals that form part of the society in order that they participate fully within it. Our approach to refugees that hold temporary visas is diametrically opposed to those values and a policy re-evaluation is well overdue. It is a source of some encouragement that a bi-partisan movement is gathering momentum to effect just that change.

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The final chapter in the story of the temporary visa has yet to be written. While many of the mainly Iraqi and Afghan refugees holding temporary visas are now receiving permanent visas, a substantial group are apparently condemned to their future as interlopers, receiving yet another temporary stay even though they have substantiated a well-founded fear of persecution.

I’m a great believer in the turning of full circles that others describe as cycles. Ironically, but perhaps fittingly, it has been the members of regional and rural communities, the birth places of One Nation’s policy, who have had most contact with refugees on temporary protection visas since their release from detention centres. Once in contact with the holders of temporary visas, many rural Australians have befriended them and become some of the most vociferous agitators for change to Government policy as they have grown to appreciate the great contribution refugees have made to rural industries starved of labour.

Perhaps Pauline Hanson can also attest to the transformational power of understanding by direct contact with those people most affected by a policy. Ms. Hanson was visibly impacted by her contact with inmates during an unjust stay in a Queensland prison. Is it too much to hope that she may one day champion the cause of the temporary refugees?

Since this article was produced a group of Liberal Party Federal members lead by Petro Georgiou has negotiated a softening of the Howard Government’s stance on mandatory detention and temporary protection visas. While the detail of these changes is yet to be fully communicated and conclusions should not be drawn at this stage, it appears that many, but not all, current holders of temporary protection visas will be eligible for permanent visas. Even so, there were a number of policy changes that could not be successfully negotiated by the Georgiou group. As a result, the temporary protection visa regime remains unchanged.