

Unauthorized Arrivals: The Unpalatable Alternatives

TESS ROD AND RON BRUNTON

ULTIMATELY, there are only two ways of approaching the problems posed by the growing number of people who are entering Australia without authority and requesting asylum. The tragedy is that, for different reasons, neither is acceptable.

The first would be to introduce a virtual open-door policy, which would grant residence to anyone apart from individuals who posed a definable threat to Australian society. It is very hard to predict how many people would eventually take up the opportunity to enter Australia under such circumstances, because the present comparatively low number of a few thousand boat people a year provides no guide to the potential demand under a changed legal and administrative regime. A few years ago, for instance, Britain had very few unauthorized arrivals. But now, as a consequence of certain legal and political decisions, together with a crackdown in neighbouring European Union countries, it has around 70,000 a year.

Australia is one of only ten countries in the world that offer permanent resettlement for refugees. This, together with our generous welfare arrangements for needy new arrivals, and the fact that the United Nations has identified more than 22 million refugees or 'people of concern', makes it likely that the removal of restrictions would soon result in a huge demand for entry, far surpassing the present intake for all forms of immigration.

Such a move would be widely denounced, particularly by those who believe that environmental imperatives require Australia to stabilize or even reduce its population. This is what groups such as the Greens and

the Australian Democrats have been saying for years, yet strangely, they are also amongst the strongest critics of the Howard Government's attempts to deal with the clients of people-smuggling gangs. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of those who want to bar all immigrants from our shores have been influenced by dubious arguments about population levels emanating from Senator Bob Brown and his fellow travellers.

The second approach involves some variant of current policies which ration the number of places available under Australia's humanitarian pro-

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gramme, and which include strong measures designed to deter people from misusing the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. Certainly, it is possible to quarrel about the effectiveness or justice of specific actions that the Howard Government has taken, or to argue that Australia should significantly increase its refugee intake.

But any attempt to impose limits—no matter how high—on the number of unauthorized arrivals creates the potential for tales of heartbreak, iniquity and lost opportunity; stories

of desperate people rotting in Third World refugee camps, or 'what if' scenarios of the future great scientists, artists and wealth creators Australia may be denying herself. Unfortunately, very few of those who resort to these emotional tactics are candid enough to admit that the logic of their position leads ineluctably to the open door.

Many advocates claim that Australia's present approach contravenes the Refugee Convention and other international agreements. They do not, however, point out that by travelling to Australia through a number of countries where they could have sought protection, nearly all the unauthorized entrants fail to meet the Convention criterion requiring that they come directly from the country they are fleeing.

Given the persistent cultural cringe amongst many Australian opinion-makers, there is also a strong tendency to make unfavourable comparisons between our policies towards would-be refugees and those of other, supposedly more humane, countries such as Sweden. These comparisons sidestep some rather embarrassing facts.

While it is true that Sweden releases illegal immigrants into the community after only a short period of detention, it is able to keep track of them because, unlike Australia, it requires all residents to carry an identity card. And rather than remain in detention, children may be forcibly removed from a parent. Again unlike Australia, most asylum-seekers fail in their claims, have only very limited rights of appeal, and are removed from the country. Under the 'Swedish model', those who stopped first in another safe country are immediately returned, and they cannot appeal. ▶

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Furthermore, like nearly all European countries, Sweden has no migration programme.

Some of the government's critics seem to believe that easing the penalties and restrictions on people who have entered Australia without permission would not act as an incentive to others. This is an odd notion which flies in the face of common sense, and those who take it seriously should consider whether a similar approach should be adopted for offences such as tax evasion and environmental vandalism.

The smug comments about mainstream Australia's supposed 'fear of the Other', and lack of compassion towards asylum-seekers, do not address important majority concerns. It is not unreasonable for Australians to think that whatever the imperfections of current official refugee selection procedures, they are much fairer and more accountable than leaving the effective decisions to people-smuggling gangs.

Nor is it xenophobic to expect refugees and other immigrants to respect our laws and adjust to our ways. This does not mean that they must become like the hackneyed Anglo suburbanites that play such an important role in the mythology of our intellectuals. But it is foolish to encourage a situation in which unauthorized arrivals learn that Australia will reward those who become the clients of criminals, rot the system, and threaten suicide or violence if their demands are not met. While intellectuals may believe that such lessons will produce good citizens, ordinary people tend to be much more sceptical. The current measures designed to deter unauthorized arrivals clearly have wide public support and should be maintained. Australia cannot afford to be seen as a soft target for people-smugglers.

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Misguided Views from Defenders of the Clever Country

How are distinguished dissident scholars treated by the defenders of 'Knowledge Nation', the 'Clever Country', or whatever other slogan marketing men coin for the ideal of a scientifically literate Australia?

Badly, if the *Canberra Times*' reaction to the death of Professor Derek Freeman on 6 July offers any guide. Just seven days later, the paper's editor Jack Waterford wrote that Freeman, one of Canberra's most eminent academics, was 'barking mad', and that a previous editor had banned most coverage of the professor's activities 'because it was not good form to make fun of the insane'.

Waterford's comments immediately raised two significant questions. Since when has it been 'good form' to cause gratuitous distress to the grieving family of an honourable man? And are any other prominent individuals being subjected to the *Canberra Times*' self-imposed censorship?

Professor Freeman was an anthropologist who achieved international fame in the early 1980s for showing that Margaret Mead's idyllic portrayal of a sexually permissive adolescence in Samoa was false. Many people, including anthropologists who had previously dismissed Mead as more of a popularizer than a scholar, could never forgive him.

It may seem strange to make such a fuss about research on teenagers in a remote South Pacific country carried out by a woman at the

beginning her career. But the results of that research, published in 1928 as *Coming of Age in Samoa*, had an influence far beyond the confines of anthropology, popularizing a view about human culture that is fundamentally misguided, although still remarkably prevalent.

The book launched Margaret Mead on the path towards her eventual status as an American icon. *Time* magazine once declared her 'Mother to the World'; she appeared on a recent United States stamp commemorating the 20th century; and the committee celebrating this year's centennial of her birth is chaired by former US President Jimmy Carter.

Mead went to Samoa with a task that had been set for her by her teacher, Franz Boas, who wanted to test his conviction that it was culture, and not biology, that was the overwhelming determinant of human behaviour. She would investigate whether the emotional turbulence and crises that were a common characteristic of adolescence in America were also present in societies with very different patterns of culture.

Mead's research supposedly showed that Samoans went through an adolescence that was 'peculiarly free' of stress. And this was because in Samoa—unlike what was then the practice in Western countries—the community did not attempt to curb teenage sexual activity.

This was great news for the then-young discipline of cultural anthropology, struggling to establish the autonomy of its subject matter. There was no biologically-based human nature, for human beings were almost infinitely

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