

In Asia, Australia has been insulated as “the lucky country.” Can Australia—should it?—become a multiracial society?

Australia and the “Boat People”

Bruce F. Duncan

Australia is being forced to hard decisions about its future. More than 3,500 war refugees from Southeast Asia have sailed to northern Australia in the past two years. About 2,500 fled to Darwin harbor from East Timor after the invasion by Indonesia in 1976, and more than 1,000 Indochina refugees have trickled down to Australia’s north coast in twenty-nine small boats.

The arrival of these people poses far more important questions than their relatively small numbers would suggest. Perhaps for the first time Australia is asking how it could become a multiracial society that includes significant numbers of Asian settlers. The “boat people,” as these refugees are called, have hammered home the fact that the Australian mainland is geographically closer to Indonesia than to the southern island state of Tasmania, though many Australians continue to think of their country as being in “Euro-merica.”

The “boat people” are opening up a new refugee route that could become significant in years to come. They could also revive fears in Australia of a lightly defended northern coast open to invasion from Asia. The Japanese attack during World War II gave substance to these fears, but they have a much longer history going back to the gold rush days.

What is new is that Australia has become a country of “first asylum” for Asian refugees. While Australia has a good record of hospitality to refugees, the real question Australia faces is that of its own internal ethnic balance. Australia has only fourteen million people, and they are overwhelmingly European in origin. So the country cannot take large numbers of Asian refugees without changing the ethnic ratios of its migrant intake. The old “White Australia” policy has gone, but Australia is still moving cautiously. The example of Great Britain has shown that too many nonwhites immigrating too quickly can be counterproductive in the long term.

The urgent task for Australia, then, is to formulate a

long-term policy that aims at developing a harmonious multiracial society. Immigration and refugee policies can then be adjusted flexibly to meet that goal in the light of changing conditions.

The “White Australia” policy was determined in large part by the reaction to the sudden influx of Chinese during the gold rush days more than a century ago. Between 1850 and 1861 the number of Chinese grew from less than two thousand to more than forty thousand, making them the third largest national group after the British (including Irish) and the Germans. Though they were almost all males, other national groups were afraid the Chinese would bring out their families and greatly increase in numbers.

Perhaps more important, though, the Chinese were willing to work harder and for lower wages than other national groups. This sense of threat to the incipient labor movement remained a permanent part of labor’s attitude to Asian immigration. An Immigration Restriction Act was the first law passed by the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia when the former colonies federated in 1901.

The law required a written dictation test in a European language. That could be used to exclude all non-Europeans, a policy that became known as the “White Australia” policy. This was rigidly enforced up till the 1950’s.

Australia’s refugee intake, on the other hand, was not guided by any thought-out policy but has been a pragmatic response to circumstances.

The first notable intake of refugees as such occurred before the Second World War, when Australia agreed to take fifteen thousand Jewish refugees from Nazi oppression. War interrupted the program and only half this number actually reached Australia.

The Japanese attack on Southeast Asia later in the war made Australia revise its immigration policy. It realized that its population of seven million was too small to defend adequately the great land mass against foreign invasion. So after the war Australia adopted a population-growth target of 2 per cent a year. Natural

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growth was about 1 per cent a year, so an immigration target of 1 per cent a year was set. The first minister for immigration, A.A. Calwell, hoped that there would be nine British or Irish immigrants for every one from somewhere else. But that ratio could not be maintained.

With the strong economic recovery after the war Australia agreed with the International Refugee Organization to help settle displaced persons from Europe, and from 1948 to 1950 received 170,000. Total immigration during this period was about half a million, of whom only 40 per cent were from the British Isles, while Southern Europeans made up an increasing percentage. Large numbers of refugees continued to arrive throughout the Fifties. Between 1952 and 1961 they numbered 70,000, including 30,000 Yugoslavs and Italians from Yugoslavia, 14,000 Hungarians after the 1956 Revolution, and 7,000 White Russians from China. After 1968, 5,500 Czech refugees also arrived. By the late Sixties it was clear that Southern Europe was drying up as a source of new settlers, and Australia was looking more to the Eastern Mediterranean countries, particularly to Turkey and Yugoslavia.

However it was the one-time bastion of the "White Australia" policy, the Australian Labor party, that finally dismantled it. In August, 1965, the Federal Labor Conference deleted the reference to the "White Australia" policy from the party platform, and in 1971 it added that an immigration policy must be based "on the avoidance of discrimination on any grounds of race or colour of skin or nationality." At the same time, the conference intended to reduce the migrant intake into Australia. Thus, although the percentage of Asian immigrants might rise, their overall numbers would not jump dramatically.

Public opinion favoring more Asian immigration had already been growing in Australia, and in 1966 a major step had been taken toward easing restrictions on the entry of non-Europeans and part-Europeans, provided they had skills that were in demand in Australia and qualifications that were recognized. Under these conditions Asian immigration rose to about 10,000 for 1970.

The Labor party under Prime Minister Whitlam implemented its nondiscriminatory policy when elected to government in December, 1972, and the Asian intake rose to 12,500 for 1973. This does not mean that all these people are ethnically Asians, however, since they include Europeans from Asian countries. The Australian Government no longer keeps figures on the ethnic origin of immigrants, so we do not know how many ethnic Asians have come to Australia in recent years.

The more recent economic recession led to a decline in the intake of migrants, arrivals falling from 170,000 in 1970-71 to 52,000 in 1975-76, the lowest since postwar migration began. However, Australia continued to take refugees from traditional postwar sources. From 1969-70 to 1975-76 Australia took 35,000 refugees from Austria, mainly people of Yugoslav nationality.

Australian attitudes to the refugees are complex. Traditionally Australians had welcomed refugees, attaching to them something of the romantic preference for the underdog that is part of Australian folklore. A sense of solidarity against communism also helped secure

entry for Hungarian and Czech refugees, but this did not extend to the Tibetan refugees of 1970. However, Australia did take a small number of Ugandan Asians expelled in 1972. Here British Commonwealth links may have helped. Moreover, those who came to Australia had high qualifications and were no threat to labor.

So from July 1, 1947, to June 30, 1974, Australia accepted 385,000 refugees—12 per cent of the total migrant intake—of whom only 26,500 (6.9 per cent) later emigrated from Australia.

It has taken time for Australians to broaden their racial tolerance. Relatively insular till the last world war, Australians had little contact with cultural and ethnic traditions other than those of Britain and Ireland. Tolerance of other European traditions has developed with the immigration of three million people since the war.

Tolerance of Asian peoples has grown only more recently, particularly through the presence of more than 21,000 Asian students who have studied in Australia since 1950 under the Colombo Plan. Increased travel by Australians in Asia has also helped increase understanding.

Seen against this background the arrival of the "boat people" has forced new questions on the Australian people. While many of the refugees from Indochina can draw on a tradition of sympathy for the victims of communism, they have no significant ethnic groups in Australia that can prepare public opinion to accept them as welcome refugees. In this respect the Asian refugees differ from Jewish or, more recently, Lebanese refugees.

The case for the Asian refugees has been argued most insistently by the Indochina Refugee Associations in several states and the Australian Capital Territory, by the churches, and by various relief agencies. The Catholic bishops in June, 1977, called on the Australian Government to take ten thousand refugees and pledged Catholic resources to help in their settlement. The government, however, seems to be waiting for more widespread support before significantly raising the refugee intake.

There is still another dimension to Australian attitudes to the refugees. It arises from Australian involvement in the political events in Vietnam and Timor that finally forced the refugees to flee their homelands. Though Australian involvement in Timor was very different from that in Vietnam, the result was the same: a sense of obligation to the refugees.

The Australian response to the Indochina refugees was initially directed by the Labor government's leader, Mr. Whitlam. Labor's victory at the polls in 1972 owed something to its opposition to Australian-U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and Whitlam was not very sympathetic to the Vietnamese refugees. He was especially anxious not to antagonize the new rulers of Vietnam by doing anything that would displease them.

In the days before the fall of Saigon, Whitlam delayed decisions so long that only seventy-eight Vietnamese nationals could be evacuated by Australian aircraft (86,000 were evacuated by the U.S.). In 1976 the all-party Senate Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee

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in Australia declared that “we are unable to come to any conclusion other than one of deliberate delay in order to minimize the number of refugees with which Australia would have to concern itself.”

Whitlam eventually accepted some refugees from Hong Kong and Singapore through the agency of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, though they numbered no more than 500 by November, 1975, when his government was dismissed from office and not reelected. By the end of 1975, besides 283 orphans, only 748 Vietnamese had come to Australia.

Whitlam’s unwillingness to take evacuees was met by disbelief and shame in Australia. Since they had been allies in the fight against communism, many Australians felt some responsibility for the refugees. Whether one supported Australian involvement in the war or not, this feeling of obligation tended to cut across the old political boundaries. Even prominent left-wing politician Dr. Jim Cairns, who had led the moratorium marches in Australia against the war, supported taking refugees on humanitarian grounds. And the right wing in Australian politics, which had supported Australian involvement but which was more likely to oppose Asian immigration, obviously felt this obligation more keenly.

By mid-January, 1978, some 6,000 Vietnamese had entered Australia, more than 100% of them “boat people.” The arrival of the “boat people” prompted the Australian Government to speed up and increase its migrant intake directly from Indochina camps in an effort to head off unauthorized arrivals. Though the general lack of enthusiasm for more refugees in the Australian community has slowed the government intake of refugees, white backlash has been minor.

One of the boats bringing refugees had been taken over forcibly, though without injury or loss of life, and the Northern Territory Trades and Labor Council charged those responsible with being “pirates.” But the charge was generally rejected by academics, press, and public. The accusation that a small number of rich refugees is corrupt is not generally accepted. The Australian Government carefully screens the refugees to make sure they are genuine.

The Timorese refugees come out of a different political background, one of civil war followed by a bloody invasion by Indonesian troops. Australians tended to be quite sympathetic to the 2,500 refugees from East Timor who sailed into Darwin harbor in 1976. This was not merely a feeling of sympathy for

the Timor David fighting the Indonesian Goliath, nor of distrust of an expansionist Indonesia.

Prime Minister Whitlam played an ambiguous and probably major part in the process that led Indonesia to invade East Timor. Given the fact that the Timorese lost fifty thousand lives while sheltering a guerrilla force of Australian soldiers against much greater numbers of Japanese during World War II, many on both left and right wings of Australian politics felt they had betrayed a small but reliable old ally.

Whitlam’s failure clearly to oppose Indonesia’s invasion appears to have issued from a belief that small nations in the region are not viable. He probably thought that, if the Indonesian operations were quick, Indonesian incorporation of East Timor would help stabilize the region. In fairness to Whitlam, he could not have foreseen that the military occupation would be so bloody, with perhaps 70,000-100,000 Timorese killed. He also seems to have expected some form of free consent by the Timorese to the Indonesian occupation.

The situation in Australia was clouded by the claim that the controlling Timorese party, Fretilin, was Communist. This charge was echoed by the politicians of the recently elected conservative government, which possibly encouraged Indonesia further. Many Australians thought the charge that Fretilin was Communist was a little too convenient and were not convinced.

The core of support for East Timor in Australia was formed by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), which includes many relief agencies and church groups. In February, 1978, an ACFOA conference in Tasmania attacked the Australian Government for recognizing Indonesian control over East Timor a few days earlier. Because fighting in Timor continued it seemed to the ACFOA conference a little hasty for the Australian Government to do this, even in the interests of maintaining friendly relations with Indonesia.

Some 1,900 refugees from Timor are still in Australia. A few others have recently come directly from East Timor. According to Jim Dunn, former Australian consul in East Timor, 95 per cent of the approximately 1,400 Timorese refugees in Portugal would like to come to Australia.

The official government response to the refugee question was spelled out in a policy statement in May, 1977, by the minister for immigration and ethnic affairs, Mr. MacKellar. He related Australia’s capacity to take refugees to prevailing economic

conditions, unemployment, and the background and skills of the migrants. These place some real constraints on Australia. Government spending has been cut to beat down inflation, and unemployment is running at a post-Depression record of 445,000, or 7.2 per cent of the 6.2 million work force, and is still rising.

As a result, the authorities are accused of neglecting essential services to the refugees in Australia. These services are extremely important when the cultural dislocation is so great. However, in a further statement on November 29, 1977, MacKellar committed Australia to accepting "a regular flow of refugees from Indo-China, giving priority to refugees who meet normal migrant criteria, and always in line with our capacity to absorb them." Critics of the government maintain that Australia's capacity to absorb refugees is much greater than the government has been willing to admit.

MacKellar rejected decisively a suggestion by another government minister, Mr. Nixon, that Australia send the boat refugees back to discourage others from coming. MacKellar said that such action against genuine refugees would be "utterly inhuman." Since it is now likely that the Australian Government will announce a target for migration of 100,000 this year, twice as many as the 1975-76 total, and 30,000 more than the 1976-77 figure, it is possible that larger numbers of Asian refugees will be allowed into the country.

While the response of the Australian Government has been cautious, others in the Australian community have been trying to face the issues more squarely. The authors of *Australia and the Non-White Migrant*, edited by Professor Kenneth Rivett for the Immigration Reform Group (Melbourne University Press, 1975), tried to balance the problems of racial conflict against the political and economic realities of Southeast Asia.

The book proposes as a guide for Australia's immigration policy the "principle of occupational balance." This means that immigrants from any one country or ethnic group would be spread across the occupational

spectrum so they are not confined to one economic or social level. This could avoid the specter of "cheap labor" undermining wages and working conditions in Australia, and the formation of racially distinctive economic subgroups.

To overcome problems associated with the "brain drain" from Asian countries to Australia, the Immigration Reform Group proposes that Asian governments issue guidelines on who can emigrate and on what conditions. This sensible proposal could prevent misunderstandings by Asians of Australia's immigration program.

The Immigration Reform Group advocates an intake of part-Europeans and non-Europeans of 20,000 a year, provided conditions are favorable. This is a considerable increase from the 9,000-10,000 part-European and non-European intake of the early Seventies, but they cite opinion polls to argue that such a target is politically real. So far only some of the proposals of this group have been accepted.

In sum, then, the arrival of the "boat people" has prompted some deep rethinking about Australia's immigration program. In the long term this may mark a major shift toward a multiracial society that includes significant and growing numbers of Asians. Curiously, if the Australian press is any indication, Australians have shown only mild interest in Vietnam since the fall of the South. The Australian public seems to consider its involvement in Vietnam as an embarrassing mistake that it wants to forget. Thus, while there is considerable sympathy for the refugees, the less said about them the better. Pushing memories of the Vietnam war to the back of their minds, Australians see the refugees against a whole new scenario: as Asians knocking on the northern door of Australia and asking Australians to reconsider their future in the light of their geography. The issues are suddenly new, and the politicized groups from the Vietnam war days are oddly irrelevant. The question is: Can the "lucky country" become the successful multiracial society?

Editor's Note

At the end of March President Carter approved a program to admit 25,000 additional Indochinese refugees to the United States. The administration is also reported to be seeking new long-term legislation to increase by 25,000 the number of refugees admitted annually, with provisions to permit open-ended additional refugee admissions in emergencies. Representative Joshua Eilberg (D-Pa.), chairman of the House Immigration Subcommittee, has favored a more restrictive approach, and for that reason his subcommittee will play a crucial role in framing future U.S. policy on admitting Indochinese refugees.

A major impetus toward a more generous immigration policy occurred within recent months when the Catholic Relief Services, the Lutheran Immigration and Relief Service, and Church World Service—which have been responsible for settling thousands of Indochinese refugees—publicly declared their guarantee that they would assume responsibility for settling as many refugees as the U.S. Government would admit. More recently the leadership of the AFL-CIO, and an ad hoc group of ninety of the nation's most prominent blacks, spearheaded by civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, have issued public statements calling for an open immigration policy for Indochinese refugees. Rustin also coordinated an appeal for "immediate, compassionate action" to relieve the plight of Indochinese refugees that was signed by 135 distinguished American leaders, including Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Arthur Schlesinger, Hans Morgenthau, James T. Farrell, Diana Trilling, Senator Daniel Moynihan, and Monsignor George Higgins of the U.S. Catholic Conference.