

# Populist refugee bashing has no place in a proud Australia

Amanda Vanstone

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**The dispossessed and persecuted must always find a welcome here.**

Recent incidents of violence from some African refugees in Melbourne have encouraged another ugly bout of populist refugee bashing.

The refugees who go through the United Nations system - who wait in camps and come in with a visa - come in our front door. And I welcome them, from Africa, from wherever they come.

Even without UN involvement, if we are the country of first asylum we have an obligation. We are good international citizens and signatories to the UN refugee convention.

It is just so easy to claim that you understand most African refugees are law abiding and peaceful - and then spend all your remaining time raising examples of the ones that are not. When people are unaware of all the facts, fear is easy to ignite. Planting the seed of doubt takes little effort.

If I listed here a dozen or more examples of recent violent acts where the offenders were described as being of African appearance, it would certainly set some minds thinking anxiously about African migration to Australia. But it would be unfair, biased and a cheap shot.

It is unfair to judge everyone in a group by the misdeeds of a few. We don't think all Italo Australians are connected to the Mafia, do we? Are Guy Grossi, Sir James Gobbo and Carla Zampatti under suspicion? Of course not. They've made a fantastic contribution to Australia.

Do we imagine that every Asian is a part of some triad or drug gang? Dr Charlie Teo is busy saving lives, not destroying them as drug dealers do.

We might get a clearer picture of the state of African refugees in Australia if we look beyond the criminal activities of some.

What would we think if we were given examples of the African refugees who are now in tertiary study? Or those who have completed it and are now working as doctors or academics?

How about looking at the refugees who are buying their own home, working hard, taking what jobs they can get in order to get ahead and give their kids a chance?

Has anyone visited an aged-care facility lately and noticed the make-up of the workforce?

Why don't we tell these stories with pride?

It was no surprise for me to be told as immigration minister that the US, Canada and Australia were the top three countries in terms of offering permanent resettlement to refugees. Maybe we still are. Commonsense tells us that the three countries for whom immigration is an essential characteristic of population will be countries that understand the needs of those displaced by war and persecution.

It is one thing for grand pronouncements to be made around the world by various countries about refugees. It is quite another to step up and be a key player in doing something. We do that - we put our money where our mouth is.

We, along with just 18 other countries, set aside a part of our immigration intake for refugees. Money for programs is always scarce, but nonetheless we fund excellent (and expensive) resettlement services. This is a testament to our commitment.

Australians should be very proud that we are up there in the front line doing our share as good international citizens.

Our refugee intake each year is sourced from a variety of countries. We take into account what the UN refugee agency tells us is the pressing need, and we balance that against local considerations.

The atrocities perpetrated on fellow humans in Africa - the persecution, indignity and dislocation so many have endured - are hard to properly describe. For too long the rest of the world stood by.

At least now, in part due to the efforts of former Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans, the UN accepts it has a "duty to protect". And it tries to help the resultant refugees find permanent resettlement.

We took some Africans under Liberal immigration minister Philip Ruddock. When I was minister the numbers at first increased, then fell a little so as to enable us to take more people from our region.

That some refugees do the wrong thing is not denied. So do other Australians. They should be dealt with by the justice system. That some refugees find the cultural jump daunting and frustrating at first is understood and to be expected. We should always be looking for better ways to smooth their transition.

Some ask whether we do the right thing by ourselves and by refugees in bringing them here.

As for the refugees, ask yourself this: how you would handle years in a camp with poor healthcare, lousy food, appalling conditions and little opportunity for your kids?

To hang on for years, even decades, would be an enormous feat of determination and endurance. It would be an absolute triumph of hope.

It goes without saying that life here is better than in a refugee camp. It may be difficult, frustrating and confusing at first. But it offers hope and there is very little of that in refugee camps.

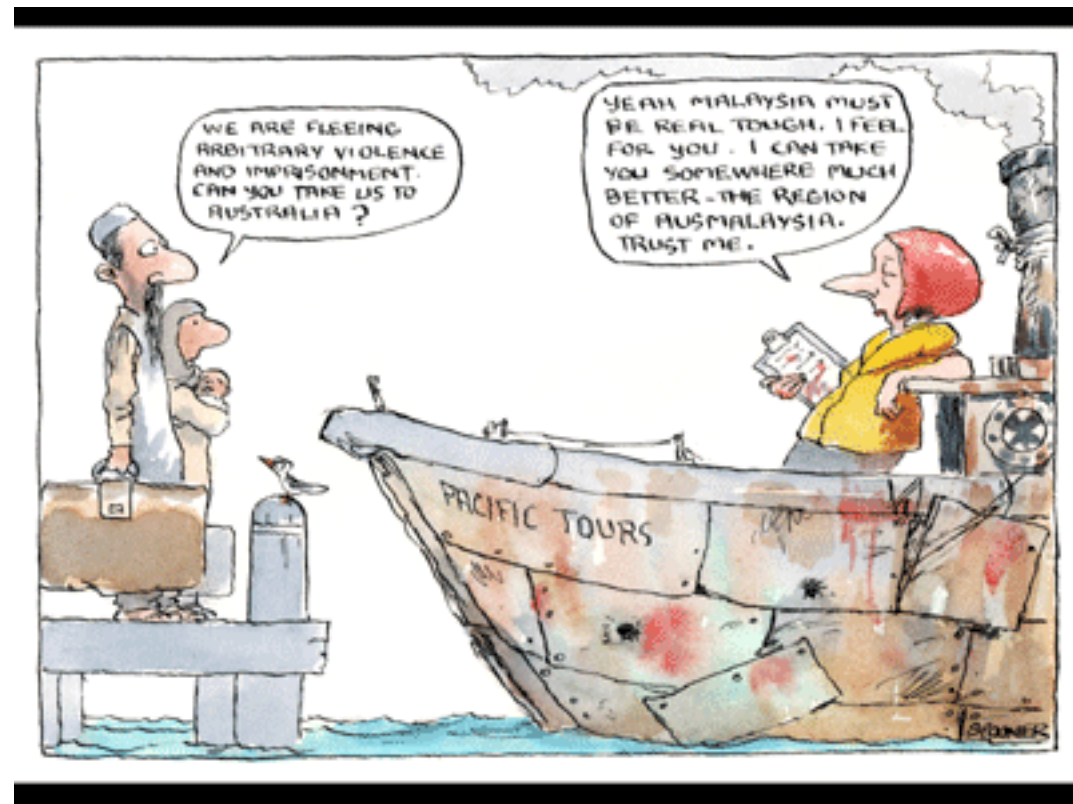
We are a nation that prides itself on our gritty determination and our capacity to endure. Hope for a better future is what we are all about.

As for ourselves, I say that whenever we behave as a good international citizen, whenever we step up and do our share, we can be very proud.

When we shirk that responsibility because it is awkward, when we look the other way because it is all too difficult, we belittle ourselves.

**Amanda Vanstone was minister for immigration in the Howard government.**

## The Pacific Solution



Spooner, The Age- May 15, 2011

# Numbers belie fear of asylum seekers

*The Age - May 14, 2011*

Wait a minute, what was it we were all talking about before the budget? Oh, that's right: asylum seekers. So, perhaps while we are temporarily distracted by the budget's outrageous assault on families eking out a living on \$150,000 a year, it might be a good time to have a quiet, sensible discussion about the true size of Australia's asylum seeker "problem". Let's try, anyway.

Fear, and misunderstanding of the figures, have long driven the recurring debate about the number of people seeking asylum on Australian shores, either by boat or plane.

I suspect that at the heart of some people's worst fears is the idea that if we let just one person in the door, we'll soon be overrun. Viewed in the extreme, there are 6 billion people crawling all over this Earth who could potentially decide to jump on a boat or plane and lodge a bid to live in your backyard. That would be scary indeed.

We are understandably proud of our living standards, political freedoms and way of life. Australians are also well aware that living conditions in many other countries are awful, plagued by war, genocide and oppression. Who wouldn't want to up sticks and live here?

So it is interesting to note the number of people seeking to flee their home countries to obtain asylum in the developed world has almost halved over the past decade.

According to a snapshot by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of people seeking asylum in 44 industrialised nations has fallen from 620,000 in 2001 to a little more than 350,000 last year - hardly a relentlessly rising tide of people seeking a short cut to a better way of life.

It's hard to know what is driving this. Perhaps rising standards of living across the developing world and the end of some wars have reduced the "push" factors. Alternatively, it could be stricter policies in the developed world have lessened the "pull" factor. Maybe it's just uprooting yourself from all you've ever known to flee to the other side of the world is not a decision most people take lightly.

Either way, "the global dynamics of asylum are changing", says the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres. "Asylum claims in the industrialised world are much lower than a decade ago, while year-on-year levels are up in only a handful of countries."

Australia is among the handful of countries where applications have increased, up about 33 per cent last year. About 8000 people lodged applications for asylum in Australia last year, a figure that has risen for six years in a row.

But the report notes that despite this, asylum levels in Australia remain not only below those observed in 2000 (13,100 claims) and 2001 (12,400 claims), but also below those recorded by many other industrialised and non-industrialised countries.

Indeed, Australia ranks below 13 other rich nations for the number of asylum-seeker applications lodged here. We rank even lower - 17th - for the number of applications per population. Australia receives one application for asylum for every 2500 people already living here. Sweden has the highest number of applications per population, with one application per 300 Swedes.

It helps to keep things in perspective.