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Refugees on Our Doorstep: West Papuan Refugees in Papua and New Guinea, 1962–69

*Public lecture presented at the National Archives of Australia by
Frederick Watson Fellow Klaus Neumann*

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What follows is part of a larger project about the history of Australian refugee policies before the arrival of the first Indochinese boat people in 1976. I believe such a project is important and timely for two reasons: first, an appreciation of the history of Australian immigration is crucial for a proper understanding of Australians' sense of themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century – a comprehensive analysis of Australian refugee policies, which is an indispensable part of such a history, has never been done; second, the current controversy about asylum seekers is largely devoid of a historical perspective. This is true for the debates voiced in the letters and opinion pages of the major newspapers. It is also true for the debates in Parliament.

Among politicians and others participating in the public debate about asylum seekers, there seems to be little awareness of the fact that the Australian government developed an asylum seeker policy as early as 1956. There seems to be little awareness of the fact that the Australian government dealt with hundreds of non-European asylum seekers during the 1960s. Would the Department of the Parliamentary Library, which provides information to members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, perhaps be interested in a research paper detailing the history of Australian responses to asylum seekers up to the mid-1970s, I enquired a couple of months ago. 'Your topic is not relevant to client's needs', I learnt. 'The historical analysis of policy surrounding asylum seekers ... does not bear significant impact on asylum seeker issues today'. It was this assessment, of course, which had prompted me to approach the Parliamentary Library in the first place. What I find startling is the implicit assumption that, since the current debate about asylum seeker issues is not influenced by historical analysis, members of Parliament do not need to have access to such an analysis.

Before providing you with a brief historical analysis of policy surrounding asylum seekers, let me dwell for a few minutes on the use value of historical analysis and, more specifically, on the kinds of history that I believe we need. Why do we need history? The most common answer to this question is that we need to know about the past in order to understand the present. Many histories that are trying to provide such an understanding are approaching the past from the perspective of

particular outcomes. Such histories are genealogical in the sense that they try to establish the genealogy of a given state of affairs. A genealogical history of Federation, for example, would try to write a history of the nineteenth century as a history of developments that eventually led to Federation. Genealogical histories are important in gaining an understanding of historical processes. But a genealogical history of Federation could easily become a teleological history of the nineteenth century, that is, a history that is inevitably progressing towards one telos, one goal: Federation. A teleological history would pay scant attention to developments that did not culminate in Federation.

I have always been particularly interested in the dead ends of history; that is, in historical developments that seemingly ended in cul-de-sacs. Such histories do not necessarily tell us how we have become what we are. They do not necessarily give meaning to the present. But they can greatly enhance our understanding of today's issues by reminding us that there have been choices in the past (as there are in the present), that there were alternatives to developments which may seem inevitable with the (sometimes questionable) benefit of hindsight. Such non-teleological histories can throw light on the present by making us blink – by making us, for a split second, close our eyes to the present while we take note of a past which seemingly went nowhere, and then open them again to see today's developments in a new light. What I am advocating here are histories that are open to possibilities: a curious, probing engagement with the past, which is not unduly constrained by what we know about historical outcomes. Such histories can establish links between the past and the present. These are associative links or what Goethe called *Wahlverwandtschaften*, elective affinities, rather than genealogical links. (Or if they are genealogical links, then they are more often like those invoked by Melanesian genealogists rather than like those established by Australian family historians.)

Every historian has ideas about how he or she is or should be approaching the job of writing history. These ideas are not always made explicit. I rarely think about them. I did think about them last Monday, sitting at my desk, re-reading the letter from the Parliamentary Library and trying to put my mind to writing this public lecture. The thoughts I had then – some of which I just shared with you – were idle thoughts. They were removed from the past I wanted to talk about, and removed from any particular present. And as such idle thoughts did not get me any closer to devising a suitable structure for this lecture, I took a break and had a look at the morning paper. In a page-long feature article, Melbourne *Age* reporter Russell Skelton wrote about the Woomera Detention Centre:

Last week, the mother of a seven-year-old girl was admitted to the Adelaide hospital in a critical condition after trying to hang herself; another woman was admitted after setting herself on fire. Other detainees hung themselves from the razor wire in a 'cruxifix' demonstration and were admitted to the medical centre with severe cuts. On Tuesday, when decisions on asylum claims are often announced, there was another wave of slashing among detainees who did not get a response. In the middle of all this wander 120 traumatised children, often unsupervised because their parents are acutely depressed.

The present can be distracting, if not deeply troubling. While I may not write teleological histories, that is histories interested only in those aspects of the past that have had a bearing on how the present has become what it is, my curiosity about the past is informed by my response to current events.

But let's leave Woomera, and the events of March 2002, and turn to the island of New Guinea and to the period from about 1962 to about 1968. First some background: in 1961, the island of New Guinea was divided into a northeastern part, which was part of the Australian Trust Territory of New Guinea (former German New Guinea), a southeastern part, the Australian colony of Papua, and a western part, Dutch New Guinea. The 800-kilometre border between the Dutch and Australian territories was mainly defined by a meridian, 141° longitude east. It was not demarcated, and Dutch and Australian government officials didn't always know for sure whether a particular village belonged to this or to that side of the border.

In 1949, the Dutch had retained West New Guinea when they formally relinquished control over the remainder of their former colonial empire in Southeast Asia, which then became the Republic of Indonesia. During the 1950s, the Indonesian government repeatedly demanded that West New Guinea also become part of Indonesia. In response to these demands, the Dutch made significant investments in New Guinea, improving its infrastructure and upgrading the education system to create an indigenous elite capable of eventually taking charge of an independent West New Guinea. But Indonesian pressure, the support of the United Nations General Assembly for decolonisation, and the interests of United States foreign policy meant that the Dutch were increasingly isolated and in 1962 had to agree to hand over control of their territory to a United Nations interim administration. This administration was formally in control of West New Guinea from 1 October 1962 to 30 April 1963, whereafter the former Dutch territory became part of Indonesia.

Almost as soon as the Dutch decided to withdraw from West New Guinea, the Australian government began making contingency plans for an anticipated influx of refugees. It was thought that Dutch citizens and others who had supported the Dutch administration and had openly argued against an Indonesian takeover during the stand-off between the Dutch and the Indonesians would feel compelled to leave West New Guinea after October 1962. Following a request from the Dutch government to accommodate a limited number of political refugees from former Dutch New Guinea, Cabinet decided in August 1962 that in the case of Dutch-sponsored civilian refugees of Papuan extraction who wished to remain as residents in Papua and New Guinea 'each case be decided upon its merits by the Minister for Territories in consultation in view of the political aspects with the Minister for External Affairs'. It was Cabinet's understanding that the Dutch would bear the costs incurred in accommodating these refugees and that there would be approximately 1200 Indonesian and Papuan refugees, 150 of whom were thought to want to remain in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

In 1962, Australia had had a lot of recent experience with European refugees, very little experience with non-European refugees, and very little experience with asylum seekers. After the Second World War, Australia had accepted large

numbers of European refugees. But they had not just landed on Australia's doorstep; instead, they had been carefully selected by officers of the Department of Immigration before they were permitted to enter Australia. Before 1962, Australia had never had to deal with a large number of refugees arriving in Australia or its territories uninvited. In the second half of the 1930s, there had been a few hundred refugees from Germany, Austria and Poland who came to Australia without first having been allowed to settle in Australia; most of them arrived as tourists and then simply forfeited their return tickets, others jumped ship. But none of these people declared themselves to be refugees upon arrival or applied for political asylum. Nearly all of them were allowed to remain in Australia, but many of them were interned as enemy aliens after 1939.

In anticipation of requests for political asylum during the Melbourne Olympics, the government developed a policy on how to respond to such requests in 1956. This policy was still valid in 1962. It also provided for the case of non-European applicants for political asylum. In 1956 Cabinet decided that

asylum and refuge granted to Asians in whatever category should not automatically confer the right of permanent residence in Australia but that asylum and refuge should be controlled by the grant of certificates of exemption, renewable if and when necessary.

Many members of the Hungarian Olympic team and some other Eastern bloc athletes successfully applied for political asylum in 1956.

Between 1957 and 1961, there were very few requests for political asylum. The latest came in December 1961, when three sailors deserted a Portuguese naval vessel in Darwin and applied for political asylum. The Australian government at no stage contemplated granting their request. Sir Garfield Barwick and the Department of External Affairs, in particular, were strongly in favour of meeting the Portuguese government's demand to deport the deserters to Portuguese East Timor. Appeals to the courts to force the government to let the men stay in Australia were unsuccessful. But eventually, the three asylum seekers were issued with Australian residence permits. How can this decision be explained? The cause of the three sailors had attracted a lot of public support, particularly in Darwin, but also in the cities in the south and southeast. Newspaper editorials called on the government not to return the men to Portugal, where they were likely to be severely punished for their desertion. Public and published opinion swayed the government's stance. Its announcement that the men were allowed to stay would be 'the only sure protection of the Government from all sorts of emotional and illogical Press exhortation and criticism', Peter Heydon, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration, advised his minister. A compromise solution favoured by Sir Garfield Barwick, the deportation of the men to Brazil or some other Latin American country, was also rejected because the government was worried about its reputation overseas, as such action would have, to quote Heydon again, 'put us in a ridiculous light in many countries' on account of Australia's relative size and population density. Brazil was deemed a possible alternative, but when the Brazilian government did not want the sailors, Heydon argued that 'no other "respectable" country would receive them' and that 'we cannot ask the Dominican Republic or San Salvador [sic] to receive Europeans whom Australia

will not allow to stay’.

After the Dutch withdrawal from West New Guinea, several West Papuans, whom the Indonesians had harassed because they considered them to be collaborators of the Dutch, applied to the Australian representative in Hollandia to be allowed to settle in Papua and New Guinea as refugees; in many of these cases, permission was granted. For several years, the Dutch government supported these refugees financially. A small number of Dutch-sponsored West Papuan tertiary students in Port Moresby asked for political asylum; they were allowed to remain in Papua and New Guinea. In none of these cases did the Australian government formally grant the request for political asylum; rather, the asylum seekers were provided with temporary visas that allowed them to remain in the Territory. Those visas were only issued once their holders signed undertakings that they would refrain from anti-Indonesian political activity.

But from late 1962, significant numbers of West Papuans crossed into Papua and New Guinea without first seeking Australian permission to do so. These people could perhaps be compared to the boat people of 1976 and 2001. It should be remembered, however, that there was no recognisable physical border between Papua and New Guinea and West Irian until 1967, when the border was surveyed and demarcated in a joint Australian-Indonesian effort. Leaving aside a small number of Dutch-sponsored refugees, the Australian authorities distinguished between three different types of border crossers:

- (a) ‘ordinary inland village people, still fairly primitive, who cross the border for purposes such as hunting, subsistence agriculture or visiting people of their clan’;
- (b) ‘unskilled, semi-sophisticates generally with limited primary school education who are half-heartedly looking for employment and a higher standard of living’ (that is, in today’s parlance, economic refugees); and
- (c) ‘genuine refugees’.

In the first year after the Indonesians took control of West New Guinea, that is from June 1963 to May 1964, 377 ‘non-political native refugees’ crossed the border without a valid visa – according to the Department of Territories mainly for either of two reasons: ‘general dislike of [the] Indonesian administration’, or ‘avoidance of conscription’. All these people were turned back.

Not counted among those 377 were 323 people from the southeast of West Irian, who crossed into Papua after at least one village had been pillaged by Indonesian troops. As Papuan villagers in the border region offered them land and invited them to stay, and as attempts by Australian and Indonesian patrols to persuade them to return across the border failed, the Australian administration treated these refugees as locals who had crossed the border for social reasons.

In March 1964, the Minister for Territories reviewed the issue and decided that the 1962 Cabinet ruling was still applicable:

The fact is that by an international decision to which Australia was party, West New Guinea is under Indonesian Administration and the people of

West New Guinea and the Administration of Papua and New Guinea alike have to learn to live with that situation. To allow permanent movement across the border for dissidents to settle in the Australian territory could start migration of such numbers as might burden the people receiving them and create administrative and other problems in our own Territory and at the same time give grounds for suspicion on the part of the Indonesian Administration that this was deliberate and ill-meant thereby impairing neighbourly relations.

The first border crossers after the formal commencement of Indonesian rule who were allowed to remain in the Australian territory were members of a family originally from the Moluccas and a West Papuan accompanying them: In September 1964, Benjamin Nikijuluw, his wife, their six children, and their West Papuan servant Djoni Jakedewa crossed the border and applied for political asylum. Nikijuluw's family was associated with the South Moluccan rebels. He and his party were initially allowed to remain in TPNG because the Australian government hoped that the Dutch would accept them. When the Dutch weren't willing to accommodate the Nikijuluws, they were nevertheless issued with residence permits – in spite of Indonesian protests, Indonesian claims that Nikijuluw had embezzled public money and slept with his uncle's stepdaughter, and Indonesian demands that Nikijuluw be deported to West Irian to face criminal charges. Nikijuluw's claims to have been persecuted were not as strong as those of some of the West Papuans who had been returned to West Irian in 1963 and 1964. Interestingly, the Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which was involved in assessing the claims of applicants for political asylum, was not worried that Nikijuluw's fear of persecution may have been difficult to prove; he felt that Nikijuluw was a genuine refugee because he had left considerable assets behind without any hope of recovering them once he entered the Australian territory.

From 1965, small numbers of refugees who were able to convince the Australian authorities that they had been politically active in West Irian and had been persecuted by the Indonesians were allowed to remain in TPNG. According to Australian government statistics, between 1963 and 1966, 573 people crossed the border illegally. There were 866 illegal border crossings in 1967, and 801 in 1968. These numbers did not include people living in the border region who crossed the border for social reasons. At the same time, Australia allowed about seventy-five West Irianese and their families to stay in Papua and New Guinea on five-year permissive residence visas.

Throughout the first years of Indonesian rule in West New Guinea, the Australian government maintained publicly that its response to the influx of refugees was guided by humanitarian considerations. In 1962, the Minister for External Affairs declared in Parliament: 'If any requests are received under the heading of political asylum, they will be entertained and decided on their political merits from a very high humanitarian point of view in accordance with traditional British principles.' But on another occasion, also in 1962, Garfield Barwick remarked that 'very often to ask for political asylum is to ask for more, really, than the facts will warrant.' In a directive to his department, the minister was more explicit, saying that '[we]

should not be too infected with the British notion of being a home for the oppressed'. The Minister for Territories, too, had a rather narrow understanding of the humanitarian considerations involved. A summary of the Department of Territories' policy in 1964 stated with regard to refugees who were sent back to West Irian:

The Ministerial decision was that when [the refugees] are required to return, their return should be managed humanely. The consideration of humanity does not come into the decision whether they should be allowed to stay or return if they are not political refugees; it only comes into the execution of the decision that they should return.

While the government cited humanitarian considerations, its response was in fact shaped by other factors. Most importantly, the government was afraid of a large influx of refugees from Indonesia, and anxious not to encourage the movement of people across the border lest word got around that illegal border crossers were welcome in Papua and New Guinea.

The government was also anxious to retain or establish a harmonious relationship with Australia's northern neighbour. The Australian government went to great lengths to accommodate Indonesian interests. The Indonesian government received very detailed briefings about refugee issues – far more detailed than the rather vague answers provided in question time to members of the Australian House of Representatives and Senate. In order to placate the Indonesians, Australia granted permissive residence to West Papuans only if they committed themselves to not becoming politically active during their stay in Papua and New Guinea.

The Australian government did not want to burden a future independent Papua New Guinea with either a large number of refugees or with a strained relationship with Indonesia. (To allow refugees to cross into Papua and New Guinea and then resettle them on the Australian mainland, was never a realistic option because of the White Australia policy.)

While the fears of being swamped by West Papuan refugees and of offending the Indonesians were strong arguments against accepting any refugees from West Papua, the government was also concerned about the repercussions of its policy both in Australia and in Papua and New Guinea. The government did not want to give the impression that West Papuans who were persecuted by the Indonesian authorities were forced back across the border, or that the government was cold-hearted in its approach to refugees.

In Papua and New Guinea, the plight of West Papuan asylum seekers met with a sympathetic response from many expatriates, from members of the indigenous elite, and from people living in the border region, particularly those in the Sepik District. In Australia, the government's critics were not so much comprised of left-wing trade unionists (as had been the case with the three Portuguese sailors in 1961–62). In 1965, the Mount Gambier Voters' Policy Association, a group of self-professed 'Liberal Party RSL men', expressed concern over press reports that West Papuan refugees had been returned to West Irian. 'Do you not think it appalling that we return these refugees for execution?', the Association asked Paul Hasluck. 'To say they are illegal immigrants is deplorable, and to force their return for

health reasons is no excuse for us being a party to their murder [sic]! These unfortunates could be quarantined or inoculated [sic] the same as any other human.' The fact that the Liberal Party voters from Mount Gambier were also returned soldiers was not accidental. In another letter to the Minister for External Affairs in 1965, a correspondent demanded that West Papuan refugees be allowed to stay in TPNG, for 'many of our soldiers during the war owed their lives to the care, and help, and carrying on stretchers over rough mountain ranges by these natives'. But these letters of protest need to be put into perspective: between 1963 and 1968, there were no public demonstrations of solidarity with West Papuan refugees in Australia, and their plight attracted not nearly as much attention as that of the Afghani and Iraqi refugees in 2002, or that of the Hungarian refugees in 1956. Even in comparison with the outcry provoked by the government's decision to deport the three Portuguese sailors who sought political asylum in 1961, public declarations of support for the West Papuans were rather muted. The government's sensitivity to domestic criticism is therefore the more remarkable.

In the light of more recent events, it is interesting that a humanitarian approach was regarded to be the correct way of dealing with refugees; that is, the government did not publicly dispute the right of West Papuans persecuted by the Indonesians to seek refuge in Papua and New Guinea. Rather than defending its approach, the government attempted to keep it secret as much as that was possible. Ideally, the events at the border were to receive no public attention at all. In 1965, an External Affairs memorandum pointed out that 'The Government is willing to consider on their merits applications from genuine political refugees ... but this is more easily done quietly and without publicity.' The authorities were particularly anxious that the reasons why particular refugees were granted asylum not be publicly known. Niki Juluw's West Papuan servant, the first West Papuan who was not sponsored by the Dutch, but was accepted as a refugee by the Australians, 'was permitted to stay on the basis of his claim that his family had been killed by the Indonesians'. 'These grounds', the Department of External Affairs advised all diplomatic posts, 'should not be quoted, any questions being met with the reply that the man concerned was regarded as having a genuine case for admission'.

The last two considerations, the desire not to offend the Indonesians and the desire not to offend public opinion in Australia and Papua and New Guinea were not unrelated. In January 1963, the Minister for External Affairs summoned the Indonesian ambassador to let him know that he, the Minister,

was greatly concerned by the Papuans who were presenting themselves at the border in considerable numbers – some complaining of ill-treatment by Indonesian officials – others merely apprehensive because of what they had heard of Indonesian conduct. His present thinking was that these Papuans should be returned to West New Guinea, but the situation was difficult. It was to the interest of both sides to avoid a mass movement of population. But if the numbers and circumstances of the people seeking political asylum evoked humanitarian considerations public opinion in Australia would react sharply and the Australian government could not take a rigid or seemingly harsh line. It was therefore important that the apprehensions of the West Papuans should not be aroused.

In 1964, while the government was contemplating whether or not to grant political asylum to Nikijuluw, a senior External Affairs officer pointed out that 'if we do not give him asylum, the matter will arouse considerable press and public attention with attendant complications for relations with Indonesia'.

The Australian government was worried about its own image, and about that of the Indonesians. In a sense, the Australian government took it upon itself to act as a public relations agency for the Indonesians. External Affairs often favoured the granting of requests for admission to the Territory of Papua and New Guinea with the argument that a refusal could provoke criticism in the Australian media and draw attention to the conditions in West Irian that had necessitated the movement across the border. The government was concerned it would be compelled to take a tougher stand against Indonesia to placate public opinion in Australia.

Other considerations were of little or no relevance. First, at a time when the White Australia policy was still applied to immigration generally, race was not an issue – provided successful asylum seekers remained in Papua and New Guinea. In 1969, eight West Papuans fled directly to the Torres Strait Islands – they were told that they would be sent back to West Irian unless they agreed to have their claims processed in Papua. Second, while there were some concerns, particularly before the 1965 coup, about possible communist infiltrators, these concerns about Australia's security hardly influenced the government's stance vis-à-vis border crossers. Third, the government made no attempt at influencing public opinion in Australia or Papua New Guinea by suggesting that the admission of West Papuan refugees was undesirable on account of their religion, political beliefs, or approach to parenting. Fourth, the government did not distinguish between the asylum seekers who came in 1962 and early 1963, and those who came later, on the grounds that the former were able to apply for visas, whereas the latter crossed the border illegally. The idea that people who fled persecution had to stand in a queue had not yet been invented. Fifth, the government's stance was not informed by a particular sense of empathy towards the refugees (as had been the case in 1956 with its response to the Hungarian refugee crisis). And finally, the government's stance does not seem to have been informed by concerns about what was actually happening in West Irian after 1963.

One of the main differences between the current events, and the situation in the 1960s, is that now the government is arguably in breach of its international obligations. The same could not have been said in the 1960s, even if Australia had effectively closed its borders to West Papuan refugees. Australia was a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, but the convention applied only to persons who had become refugees as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951. In the mid-1960s, the United Nations debated a protocol to the 1951 Convention, which removed that time limitation. The protocol was passed in 1967, but Australia did not sign until 1973, not least because of concerns by the Department of Territories about its implications for the situation in New Guinea.

Morally, however, Australia was bound by international conventions. In 1948, Australia had voted for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1966, the Australian delegation supported the Draft Declaration on Territorial Asylum – despite serious concerns by the Department of Territories. But senior officials in

the departments of External Affairs, Territories and Immigration noted the discrepancy between Australia's response to West Papuan refugees and the rhetoric of its representatives in the UN General Assembly. In its 1966 version, the Draft Declaration stated:

No one seeking or enjoying asylum in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should, except for overriding reasons of national security or safeguarding of the population, be subjected to measures such as rejection at the frontier, return or expulsion which would result in compelling him to return to or remain in a territory if there is well-founded fear of persecution endangering his life, physical integrity or liberty in that territory.

Australia's relationship with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) then was also very different from its relationship with the UNHCR now. The UNHCR only became interested in West Papuan refugees in 1965. He was then briefed by the Australian government. These briefings – first of Felix Schnyder, and then of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan – continued throughout the second half of the 1960s. And throughout the second half of the 1960s, the High Commissioner handled the West Papuan refugee issue on a 'personal and confidential' basis. When first requesting a briefing, Schnyder assured the Australian government that 'any information you might give [me] would be treated as entirely confidential, that it would not be distributed either within or outside [my] headquarters'. The governments of Australia and Indonesia were both anxious to avoid getting the UNHCR involved, and the UNHCR was prepared to let Australia handle the issue as long as he was kept informed. The UNHCR had, however, serious misgivings about some aspects of the Australian response, such as the fact that decisions about whether or not border crossers were genuine refugees were often made by patrol officers on the spot, and that those who were not deemed to be genuine refugees had no right of appeal.

Let me now return to my initial question: what could be gained from providing an historical analysis of Australian refugee policies and practices? I said earlier, that such an analysis could make us blink and enhance our understanding of current issues. I hope that this lecture has made some of you blink. A re-examination of the present could be the outcome of the realisation that there are intriguing parallels between the past and the present situation – think, for example, of the role played by humanitarian considerations in determining policy. It could also be the result of the recognition of differences between current and past events. Earlier, I mentioned Woomera. I could also have mentioned Port Hedland. Or Curtin. Or Manus, where several hundred boat people are held in a detention centre that is funded by Australia. Manus, where refugees are housed 'as a temporary answer to an uncomfortable problem'. Manus, where refugees are 'isolated by security and disconsolately viewing an impossible future'. These quotes could have come from a recent newspaper article about the Manus detention centre, but I took them from an article that was published in 1969 and concerns fifty-nine refugees from West Irian, who fled to Papua and New Guinea between 1966 and 1968.

In late 1968, the Territory's administration moved these refugees to Manus to prevent them from participating in anti-Indonesian politics in Papua and New

Guinea. They were required to live in the accommodation provided for them, but they were not housed behind barbed wire. They lived in houses rather than in shipping containers. They were allowed to seek employment. Their children attended government or mission schools. Their situation was far from ideal, but one can only wonder what the author of the 1969 newspaper article I just quoted would have made of the circumstances of the Iraqi refugees currently accommodated on Manus. The government's response to asylum seekers in 1963 or 1965 does not explain the government's response in 1976 or in 2002, but a historical analysis of issues to do with West Papuan border crossers could suggest interesting links. (To return once more to the Department of the Parliamentary Library – I was intrigued to find that a recent Parliamentary Library report on West Papua concludes by saying that the Australian government would be well advised to 'de-link' the situation in West New Guinea and East Timor in the public's mind.)

Earlier I mentioned my interest in histories that have no immediate bearing on subsequent events. Adrian Dedda's story provides material for one such history. Dedda was one of the West New Guinean medical students who were sponsored by the Dutch to study in Port Moresby and who subsequently refused to return home. Dedda was politically active in Port Moresby; he edited an anti-Indonesian newsletter, and had obvious reason to fear the Indonesian authorities. Dedda graduated in 1965. Subsequently, he became mentally ill. He claimed that he was the illegitimate son of General MacArthur, was suspended by the Director of Public Health, and admitted to a mental institution. The administration in Port Moresby was anxious to get him out of the Territory. The Director of Public Health considered Dedda certifiable (it was, however, not considered advisable to certify him except in the event that he contacted the media to draw attention to his case).

In 1967, the Department of External Affairs informed the Indonesian government that Dedda 'has expressed a wish to return to West Irian and our Embassy is seeking the assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs in returning him to Sukarnapura where we understand there are good facilities for the treatment of mental illness'. Whether or not Dedda did request his repatriation, is irrelevant, as the Australian authorities themselves were convinced that Dedda had simply gone mad. When representing the case to the Australian media, however, a letter from Dedda was a convenient excuse, and the Department of Territories was anxious not to delay the repatriation 'in case Dedda writes again in a different vein'. On 4 December 1967, Dedda and another refugee were flown back to West Irian, accompanied by Superintendent Purcell from the Corrective Institutions Branch. A subsequent report noted

that the party was met at the Sentani airport by a group of 12 West Irian officials comprised of 6 Police Inspectors ... 2 Indonesian Migration officials and 2 Indonesian civilian officials who were probably medical authorities but may have been security personnel ... Dr. Dedda was taken outside the reception building and Superintendent Purcell was under the impression that he was to be vaccinated ... No indication as to [his] future was given by the Indonesian officials.

I could not find any indication in the official records which would suggest that the

Australian government seriously attempted to ascertain what happened to Dedda (or to any other repatriated refugee, for that matter) after his return.

I would like to conclude with two observations. If the government's action is not guided by humanitarian considerations, then it may be futile to appeal to the government to respect humanitarian values. A couple of months ago, former Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti suggested that opponents of the Australian government's asylum seeker policy needed to win over ordinary Australians rather than the Prime Minister. And maybe the debate should not so much centre on what the government should or should not do or say, as on what each citizen does or says. Maybe it should centre on the responsibility of individual citizens. (In the 1960s, the sum total of individual protests did sometimes influence the government's response.)

The story of Adrian Dedda could remind us that at issue are not so much 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' or 'illegal immigrants' or whatever you want to call people who have fled to Australia without holding a valid visa. At issue are individual cases: the mother of a seven-year old girl at Woomera who tried to hang herself; the West Papuan medical doctor and political activist who was flown back to West Irian.

Klaus Neumann was the National Archives' 2001 Frederick Watson Fellow. He is an independent historian who has written about cultures and histories in Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand and Germany. His latest book, Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New Germany, was published by University of Michigan Press.

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