

Taking Responsibility

Klaus Neumann

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and many of his detractors seem to agree on one issue: in the past: Australia's responses to refugees were generous.

Between 1 July 1949 and 30 June 1950, Australia admitted more than 90,000 refugees for resettlement – many more than in any other financial year in its history. An impressive achievement, indeed! Who were these people? All of them were Europeans. Nearly all of them were displaced persons who were resettled under the auspices of the International Refugee Organisation.

In 1949, only some of Europe's displaced persons were invited to join an orderly queue to gain admission to Australia. Australia was interested in able-bodied and educated young men and women, and accepted then only 30 dependents for every 70 workers. Single men over the age of 45 and single women over the age of 40 needed not apply. The Australian selection teams were instructed to turn down applicants likely to require medical care even for minor complaints (such as varicose veins).

Even at a time when Australia admitted a comparatively large number of refugees, its generosity was self-interested. In the late 1940s, the government was anxious to significantly increase Australia's population. Only when it could not procure a sufficient number of British immigrants did it turn to refugees.

The idea that Australia's responses to suffering in faraway places were traditionally guided by compassion may have arisen due to two factors: previous governments, while not letting their policies be driven by humanitarian concerns, nevertheless validated these concerns (rather than belittling those voicing them as bleeding hearts); and Australians like to believe that to give others a fair go is quintessentially Australian.

Some of Philip Ruddock's critics stress pragmatic arguments. Seemingly the most powerful of these is the claim that refugees make good immigrants. But taken on its own, this argument makes little sense. If a nation merely sought to increase its population, then it would recruit immigrants on the basis of their skills, education, state of health, gender and age (if not cultural background), regardless of whether or not they had to flee their homes.

Notwithstanding the fact that Australians who are supporting the current refugee and asylum seeker policies won't be won over easily to ethics that appear no longer endorsed by the government, the humanitarian argument is still the obvious alternative to the pragmatic line of reasoning. Admittedly, it is essentially fundamentalist and non-negotiable. It says, to give one example, that the enforced deportation of somebody who is likely to suffer harm when returned to his home country (as happened recently in the case of the Iranian stowaway Nadar Sayadi-Estahbanati) is fundamentally wrong. (It is not a little bit wrong, or perhaps somewhat not quite right, as the Labor Party might put it.) The humanitarian argument does not require pragmatic reasoning. Whether or not Sayadi-Estahbanati would have made a good immigrant should not have come into the equation.

But why not appeal to Australians' patriotic pride by suggesting that their government used to give a fair go to refugees and respond generously to their plight? Not only would such an

appeal be based on, at best, a very selective, if not inaccurate, reading of the past, but it would also perpetuate the idea that the reputation of the nation mattered more than anything else, and that responsibility could easily be delegated to a higher authority.

Rather than harking back to a purportedly better past, critics of the current inhumane asylum seeker policies could point to a present that is moving towards more rather than less globalisation, in which forced migration is on the increase, and in which the world's citizens are called upon to act responsibly towards their fellow human beings regardless of countries of origin, race or religion, and regardless of what their own governments deem lawful or unlawful, right or wrong.

kneumann@netspace.net.au

Klaus Neumann is an independent historian whose research on refugee policies has been supported by the National Archives of Australia and Swinburne University's Institute of Social Research.

Broadcast on the 'Perspective' program on Radio National, 22 July.