Introduction

The recent television program on Channel 9 called, “Shafted”, continually asked the question: “To share or to shaft?” This seems an appropriate way for us to begin to address the issue of how we are currently treating (or maltreating) asylum seekers who come to this country. Should we welcome them (to share) or continue to drive them away (to shaft)?

Some of us – including me - are increasingly concerned about how our Government and the public seem to be approaching this matter. Apart from how we deal with asylum seekers themselves, we are also concerned about what this says about us as a people and what signal this sends to the international community about us as a nation.

This article draws briefly upon the discipline of philosophy to make a case for our being a more civil and a more compassionate society.

Some Recent Events Triggering this Article

We note a number of recent issues in the land ‘down under’:

?? The rise of racism (Pauline Hanson’s ‘One Nation’ party) since the mid 1990’s
?? The mean-spirited attitude to both asylum seekers and reconciliation by the current Government since 1996 - despite the recent budgets increases in the numbers allowed
?? The Federal Labour party’s cynical support for the coalition’s position on asylum seekers during the Federal election campaign in late 2001
?? The Government’s refusal to process within Australia’s territorial waters those asylum seekers picked up by the cargo vessel, Tampa in late 2001
?? The current Governor-General’s questionable response to child sexual abuse claims while he was Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane between 1990 and 2001 – and the silence since then on this issue
?? The Government’s manipulation of the ‘children overboard’ affair and their vilification of asylum parents by claiming they threw their children overboard and sewed their children’s lips together – especially during an election campaign.

This article will primarily address the issue of asylum seekers.
Defining a Civil Society

It is interesting that the word ‘civil’ forms part of the word ‘civilisation’. How a nation treats people – especially strangers - has long been an indicator of how civilised that nation is. The ancient Greeks (1) and the Hebrews (2) expected their citizens to welcome strangers and to treat them well.

In the New Testament, Jesus regards the litmus test for his followers as follows (3):

“I was hungry and you gave me food; thirsty and you gave me to drink; a stranger and you made me welcome, naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to visit me.”

Leisure could be regarded as the basis of culture (4). If we are too busy hunting, gathering and fighting, there is no creative space left to be together for conversation and connectedness. Are we so frenetic as a nation, so focussed on enterprise and activity that we have no time and energy left over to build a more civilised society?

Within these recent events, we seem to have forgotten that we are part of the commonwealth – that is, “the common good”. Further, Australia is a signatory to the United Nations protocol on the requirement to welcome refugees. Is it not tragically ironic that the same Australian government which was so ready to assist America in its (understandable) war on terrorism should be so reluctant to welcome the same refugees from Afghanistan – who were victims of terror? Now Australia drives them from our shores and is paying more for the so-called “Pacific Solution” which is no solution at all. Offering cash incentives for refugees to return to their country where there is no food or sources of income is cynical in the extreme.

What this seems to reflect is not justice but a misplaced vengeance. The argument seems to go this way - your illegitimate Government (the Taliban) harboured Osama Bin Laden, who masterminded the bombing of America on 11th September 2001, therefore we will not welcome you as a refugee from that country. Where is the logic – let alone the justice in this attitude?

We suggest a pathway to a more welcoming attitude to refugees and asylum seekers – from Afghanistan protocol or wherever - is an ancient one. In his famous text The Politics, Aristotle wondered about the basic nature of human life. In particular, Aristotle was interested in understanding the workings of ‘the polis’, the Greek city-state of his own day. After thinking long and hard about the polis, he concluded that the “The city ... is a partnership for living well” (5). The whole point of a city is human flourishing, human excellence: one could also argue, that the whole purpose of a nation is to structure a society that helps people live well together.

The argument in favour of a more welcoming attitude is that it is in our best interests to do so! We seem to have forgotten that Australian society is richer
not poorer as a result of having people from other countries, nations and religions come live with us. How much poorer would we be in art, literature, language, and culinary pursuits if we did not have people of British, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian - and many other - ethnic backgrounds? Witness how strongly motivated these people are ‘to make a go of it’ in another land – to pay a people smuggler, get on a leaky boat, risk everything and sail over the horizon. Maybe that is why at the recent ‘Festival of Ideas’, some Tasmanian citizens said they would willingly take Afghans and other refugees into their homes! As the Australian newspaper recently noted (6):

“Genuine refugees who make their lives in Australia are a national asset. These people, who have sacrificed and taken risks to make a better life for their families, free from persecution, are a self-selected aspirational class. They set up businesses, put a high value on education, and make an invaluable contribution to our economic, social and cultural life”

Of course, this is not to suggest that we should ‘go soft’ on criminals or on terrorists. Surely, Australia’s intelligence organisations can accurately screen those who arrive at our shores or at our airports and still adopt a more welcoming attitude to genuine refugees? It is also sad how selective we are here – we recall that Prime Minister Howard was keen to be seen welcoming some of the refugees from the Balkans. One suspects that we are more welcoming of Christian refugees that those whom we automatically dismiss as ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ or worse, as ‘towel heads’.

In a perceptive article in *The Sydney Papers* last year, Dorothy Rowe (7), reminds us that:

“[Racial attitudes and prejudices] ... are based on dividing the seamless whole of all that exists into rigid and absolute divisions. Such divisions prevent us from recognising that all human beings are much the same, not just genetically, but in our needs, desires, hopes and fears. If we could see that the divisions we create are ideas that exist in our head and not in reality, and that as we created these ideas we are free to change them, then it would be possible for us to diminish our suffering simply coming to tolerate one another.”(Page 42)

In addition to this, is the appalling situation of the detention centres in this country. Detainees are treated worse than prisoners of war. In a visit to the Villawood Detention Centre, Jacquie Pryor (8) in a recent edition of the magazine for *Eremos*, laments that Australia is now giving the impression that [to parody our national anthem] – “Our Land is Girt by Razor Wire”. The recent release of some detainees during the protest also produced questionable outcomes – these people were released into the wider community without support.

We must close these detention centres and find a more expeditious and humane way of processing asylum seekers. A recent editorial in our national
newspaper, *The Australian* (9) offered a range of strategies to deal more effectively with this issue, such as:

1. treat detainees with dignity and decency
2. devote more resources to assessing asylum claims
3. release genuine claimants into community housing
4. identify rorters and troublemakers more efficiently
5. review the appeals system
6. limit detention to three months
7. regular reporting of asylum seekers to authorities

Socrates offered a significant question that underpins an ethical life – “How are we to live?” Ethics is about...”living a worthwhile (or fulfilled) life.” (10). Ethics could be defined as (11): “Spiritually healthy people in socially harmonious relationships”. Where is the harmony in the community regarding the asylum seekers? All we seem to see is disharmony, self-centredness and a fearful xenophobia.

**Fostering Generosity of Spirit**

Where is the generosity of spirit that once was so common among us Aussies? We rightly and proudly recall the ANZAC heroism and are grateful for our many ‘Aussie’ volunteers and caregivers. Let us not forget the brave fire fighters of December 2001. Why can’t some of that generosity and selflessness be applied to other issues? Maybe we could teach what a civil society means in Australian schools. At least the next generation might adopt a more curious, open and positive attitude to what is unfamiliar.

Maybe we need a revival in our very understanding of the nature of character. James Hillman (12) claims that the task in old age is to confirm and complete one’s character. We could well begin before old age sets in! The Greek philosophers argued that character is made up of wisdom and virtue – where is the wisdom and virtue on this issue? To foster character development perhaps we could think about spending more time with wise elders, taking care of the little things, and cultivating a perceptive imagination (13) about what can be done to address problems like the asylum seekers.

**The Need to Create Community**

One also suspects – at the risk of appearing to be a ‘luddite’ – that the rise of electronic communication has actually reduced the quality of communication. People send emails to colleagues at the next desk. Why don’t we talk face-to-face more - or at least pick up the telephone? One suspects that we cannot hold racist attitudes for long once we start actually talking and listening to people who are different from us.

Some researchers even suggests that ‘virtuality” and ‘volatility’ actually reduce social capital (14). In other words, the existence of virtual teams and electronic communication actually prevents the formation of strong viable relationships. We have no real, human context in which to develop trust and
to learn co-operation. The other thing that prevents community is the increasing turbulence and mobility of modern workers – we just don’t have the time or the opportunity to form lasting relationships any more. And why is ‘social capital’ important anyway? Social capital consistently lowers crime rates and increases self-esteem, as the eminent social ecologist, Robert Putman reasons (15).

Putnam argues that people today are not ‘joiners’ unlike our predecessors in the generation after the Second World War. While not suggesting a nostalgic recreation of social and sporting clubs, he does assert the need to create community now in appropriate ways that suit us in the new millennium – simply because we need to.

We suggest that the current attitude to asylum seekers and a widespread suspicion of other cultures and religions, is as much a function of our loss of community. How can we re-build community? How can we see this as a civic responsibility? Apparently, suburban crime, homelessness and youth suicide are also symptoms of this loss of community? After all, as the old African says, “It takes a village to raise a child.”

Perhaps we could increase the level of philanthropy, pro bono work and volunteerism that is conducted throughout Australia. We commend the establishment by Phillip Adams of ‘Australians for Just Refugee Programs’ (AJRP) (16). We suspect the sentence of a few hours of community work does nothing to present community development as a social good – it is purely seen as a punishment for a crime. Australians are some of the stingiest contributors to such endeavours in the developed world – although we do have some success in say, the annual ‘Clean Up Australia’ campaign.

Our Final Appeals

We would hope that as Australians living in the new millennium, we might raise the level of debate in the media about such issues as asylum seekers. We seem to have lost the art of good questioning and fruitful conversation. Reasoned and passionate discourse seems lost to the ten-second sound bite for a bored viewing public. Perhaps we should teach journalists and political leaders the art of philosophical enquiry. As concerned citizens, we ought express our views more persistently and passionately to our elected representatives.

We ask those informed about asylum seekers to appear on TV and ring ‘talk-back’ radio stations to educate us about the truth – such as Julian Burnside, the Melbourne barrister who appeared for the Victorian Council of Civil Liberties in the Tampa asylum seeker case. Julian suggested not detention but a pension with reporting requirements for asylum seekers – not unlike our current parole system (17).

We suggest that policy makers and community experts explore new strategies for community building. The “Population Summit” convened by Steve Vizard and held in Melbourne on the 25th February 2002, is one such example,
where the impact of population numbers upon education, immigration and the
environment was debated. Arguably, we need more immigrants not fewer to
enrich our public infrastructure.

We ought establish public reward programs to recognise people who welcome
strangers, and who display true generosity of spirit – such as foster parents
and those who adopt children from war-torn countries.

Religious leaders could educate us about compassion. One writer, Matthew
Fox (18) even argues that the very nature of spirituality is found in
compassion. Are we suffering from compassion fatigue? Is that why we close
our doors and our hearts to people desperate for a home, and why we have
little time, energy and disposable income left over?

Community and religious advocates ought take a more active and vocal role
on such issues. Accordingly, we endorse the Australian Catholic Social
Justice Council’s (ACSJC) call for the Government to apologise to asylum
seekers over their claims that refugee children were thrown into the sea by
their parents. All of us as Australians should study information about these
events carefully, examine our consciences and demand a review of asylum
seeker policy (19).

Management educators and university teachers could work harder to develop
leaders with vision and values. While strategic effectiveness is certainly about
providing shareholder value and customer service, we also need to add value
to the wider society in which enterprise operates.

Conclusion

This article was not meant to be merely a polemic against our current coalition
Government or the Federal opposition. It was written as an exhortation to the
society in which our members of Parliament operate.

Our politicians are simply reflecting and following the current popular attitude
be suspicious of asylum seekers, and to demonise them as ‘queue jumpers’,
and as unwelcome ‘illegal immigrants’. We can do better than that as a nation
– and we need to.

This paper urged us all to create community, to restore tolerance, to display
compassion and the ‘fair go’, and to raise the quality of conversation about the
kind of society we are co-creating.

Maybe then, we shall more willingly decide “To share” and not “To shaft”.

"To Share or To Shaft?" Greg Latemore
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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END NOTES


(2) “You must not molest the stranger or oppress him because you once were strangers.” (Exodus 22/20)

(3) Matthew 25/35

(4) Josef Pieper (1965) *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (The Fontana Library, Great Britain)


(7) Dorothy Rowe (2001) “People and Nations: Their Need to Love and Hate”, *The Sydney Papers*, Volume 13, Number 2, Pages 35 – 44


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