

The key role of Myth in Australian Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy

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1. Introduction

In the 1970s, hospitality to Vietnamese refugees, as governed by the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention, was the public and politically accepted stance in Australia. Even so, at that time a residual ‘white Australia’ fear of Asian boat people invading the Great South Land was definitely a subtext bubbling away within Anglo-European Australian society. This fear was shamed by government schools, forbidden by anti-racist legislation, and was not validated by the mainstream of Australian politics, or even by most of the mass media. As a result, anti-Asian and anti-refugee sentiments remained, more or less, within the realm of private and disreputable prejudice. In the 1970s, racist and anti-humanitarian xenophobic subtexts were given very little oxygen in public, political and policy forming contexts.

Yet, for some time now, disdain for the dangerous ‘illegal’ plots of ‘people smugglers’¹ and a fear of ‘illegal’ invasion by Islamic boat people – suspiciously eyed as economic opportunists or potential terrorist threats – has become the accepted dominant stance in Australia, and has dramatically shaped our “border protection” policies. Now, a sense of moral responsibility towards refugees on the high seas, a sense of compassion and humanity towards the asylum seekers who find themselves in our hands, and adherence to the obvious intentions of the 1951 Refugee Convention that our nation is a signatory to, has become the suppressed subtext in Australian public life. Indeed, to oppose the tough “no entry” message that our governments have sent North in order to “stop the boats” is now almost “un-Australian”, almost shameful, almost limited to the realm of private and disreputable prejudice. Clearly, those Australians still hankering after a 1970s styled asylum seeker friendly Australia have very little political or policy forming currency now.

¹ On the sweeping and irrational hatred of “people smugglers” in 21st century Australian political rhetoric, see Robin de Crespigny, *The People Smuggler*, Melbourne: Viking Australia, 2012.

In the light of the above extraordinary evolution of Australian refugee and asylum seeker policy objectives over the past 40 years, I wish to ask two questions. What is it that gives any given collective stance political currency? What accounts for shifts in that currency?

The first thesis of this paper is that it is powerful mythic narratives embedded in the collective assumptions of the polity that are the primary drivers of policy agendas. Hence, the radical shift in emphasis and objectives in Australian refugee policy over the past 40 years can only be adequately understood by reference to myth.

The second thesis of this paper is that today's refugee and asylum seeker policies exemplify a serious moral degradation in Australia's political and humanitarian consciousness when compared with the 1970s. If my first thesis is correct then any overall evaluation of the moral quality of the evolution of Australian asylum seeker policy over the past 40 years cannot be argued in some merely evidence based rational manner, as the grounds of what counts as significant evidence,² the ends that imply rational means, and the nature of substantive moral commitments that undergird what the polity will see as just and valid are all *derived* from the mythic assumptions that shape collective meaning. So no evaluation of the evolution of policy objectives in this area can avoid entanglement with mythic narratives, and I will not try and avoid entanglement when I make my case.

Before starting, though, I must attempt a quick functional definition of myth.

Thinkers like Paul Ricoeur have made it clear that myths are powerfully sociologically operative in all cultural contexts.³ A myth is a primal collectively assumed narrative that has the power to generate and shape cultural meanings. In particular, myths orientate and define common conceptions of good and evil, and validate the operational norms of any given life-form as a genuine reflection of right cosmic order. Mythic meanings are read into world changing historical events, and remain integral with the political dynamics of the world-order which is established by key historical events, until a new set of events needing collective interpretation arises. With this definition in mind we will now very briefly examine the

² Evidence is never simply data. (See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.) In a governmental context, evidence is always *significant* data where the parameters of significance are defined by the political agendas which set policy goals. Further, when it comes to welcoming or excluding foreigners, powerful mythic narratives within the polity deeply shape the prevailing political agendas.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

mythos integral with three world-shaping events that have defined post-war asylum seeker policy in Australia: the Holocaust, the collapse of the gold standard, and the destruction of the World Trade Towers.

2.1 We are not Nazis

The defeat of the Third Reich is still understood by the decedents of the Allies as a moral victory of goodness over evil, and as a cosmic victory of right order and just power over tyranny and atrocity. Within this narrative it is the Holocaust that most centrally defines the evil which the Allies stood against. Thus, a mythic self-understanding embedded in the moral difference between ‘us’ and ‘the Nazis’ deeply shaped the war generation in Australia.

After World War Two, the Geneva Convention, the Refugee Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the establishment of the state of Israel were often seen as moral monuments erected to protect human life and dignity so that the evil of the Holocaust would not be repeated. Moral realism – where good and evil are seen as primary realities – was largely assumed in the general populace who lived through World War Two.

In Australia, the anti-Nazi resonance of the Allied victory had a very tangible impact on immigration. In the 1940s and 50s we were deeply afraid of Asia and Communism, so because we needed labourers to build our public infrastructure and work our factories, and we needed a larger population to defend ourselves from the ‘Asian hordes’, we threw our doors open to the displaced peoples of war ruined Europe. And, of course, we took in large numbers of Jews. The British Isles insularity of Australian ethnicity was changed forever.

After the cultural upheavals of the 1960s a new, more racially egalitarian post-war ethos finally dismantled the White Australia Policy in 1973. After the Vietnam war was lost, South Vietnamese people fleeing the new Communist government for their lives were naturally seen as cold war allies by the US and Australia. To the Fraser government, our commitment to the Refugee Convention was integral with a post-war humanitarian moral vision of who we as a nation were, so Fraser opened Australia to Vietnamese refugees, a considerable numbers of whom arrived by boat.

The Fraser government was committed to upholding a genuinely hospitable reading of our responsibilities to asylum seekers, as signatories to the UNHCR Refugee Convention of 1951. This commitment was grounded in the post-war mythic self-understanding that produced international protocols of a universal and humanitarian nature. But that mythos was already fading in its culture forming power in the 1970s. This fading was tied to a little understood, yet enormously significant, historical event.

2.2 The demise of the gold standard – the financialization of politics

The next world changing event to shape asylum seeker policy was the demise of the Bretton Woods system with the collapse of the convertibility of one ounce of gold to \$US35 under the Nixon administration in 1971.

1971 signalled the end of the post-war boom and began a period of global financial turbulence that settled down into a new equilibrium by the mid-1980s. During this time the US switched from being the key surplus nation at the heart of post-war global reconstruction, to being the key deficit nation at the heart of what we now call the global economy.⁴ Significant signatures of Regan/Thatcherite political ideology were imported into Australia in the Hawke-Keating era, keeping us firmly in step with the new imperatives of global economic viability.⁵

The 1980s was a fundamental rupture with the entire ideological landscape of Australian politics to that time. The egalitarian social welfare agendas of the political left, the conservative moral agendas of the political right, and the transparency and power limiting agendas of the political liberals all became – and remain – sidelined within Australian politics. In the new political landscape that emerged, protection for local industry was removed, public assets built up in the post-war period were sold off, and the firm desire to integrate the Australian economy with the big league of global corporate power became our new guiding star.

⁴ Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global Minotaur*, London: Zed Books, 2013, 90–112.

⁵ Dean Jaensch, *The Hawke-Keating Hijack*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, 152–177.

Manning Clark describes the period from 1969 to 1986 as the era when the nation lost its moral commitments to an egalitarian and humanitarian Australia.⁶ The post-war trend in whole-of-society financial betterment with a relatively small differential between rich and poor gave way to the squeezing of the middle class and increasing disparities in wealth between the rich and the poor.⁷ Key government departments became ideologically captive to positivistic economic reductionism, producing a shift within the high mechanisms of government from the politics of morally framed values directed towards building the common wealth of a good society, to the priority of economically framed necessities directed towards the advancement of private wealth.⁸ This process was largely complete by 1990.⁹

In mythic terms, the public framing of good and evil became limited to personal economic advancement. We simply left behind a collective vision of ourselves that was unswervingly and sacrificially committed to the requirements of moral decency, as befitted the courageous opponents of Nazi evil. This was an era where we had few boat arrival asylum seekers, so the change in the undergirding moral and ideological commitments of the populace in relation to asylum seeker policy went largely unnoticed, and largely without any policy impact. In reality, the moral realism that undergirded the Refugee Convention faded to a fuzzy and ill-defined grey. Yet the return of black and white, in a very different political landscape, was not far away.

⁶ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, London: Penguin Books, 2006, 322–351.

⁷ Michael Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁸ See Michael Pusey, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 for a close historical analysis of how ideological change presented as positive economic realism was pushed forward within Treasury, Finance and the Prime Minister's office in the 1980s. A number of Australian economists have also pointed out that the economic theory characteristic of the 1980s and 90s was dogmatically reductive to a distortive degree, fraught with philosophical incoherence, and a carrier of a hyper-capitalist political ideology which strongly favoured policy objectives that promoted private financial power at the expense of government commitments to the flourishing of the public's common wealth. See Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics*, London: Pluto Press, 2001; Hugh Stretton, *Economics, A New Introduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2000; Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global Minotaur*, London: Zed Books, 2013.

⁹ I remember hearing Nick Greiner, the then premier of New South Wales, deliver the 1990 Alfred Deakin Lecture, titled "Australian Liberalism in a Post-Ideological Age." I recall it as a watershed moment signalling that the ideological re-framing work of the 1980s was complete. Greiner claimed that "the Australian people have never had much time for political theory" and then went on to tell us how wonderful it is that Australian politics is simply about winning office, and mixing and matching whatever ideas and techniques works to make the economy prosper. We are all mature post-ideological economic pragmatists now.

2.3 September 11 – the politics of fear

9/11 gave good and evil back to Australian politics. After two decades of econometric politics, with little if any moral realist idealism, we were now able to ‘ennoble’ the politics of greed with the politics of fear and righteous wrath.

To the Howard, Rudd, Gillard and Abbott governments, the political agenda framed as defending Australia’s territorial sovereignty now defines our asylum seeker policy. For, apparently, we too are under threat, just as the US is under threat, from the plans of evil terrorists. In this context, data concerning the incompatibility of tough border protection objectives with our obligations under the Refugee Convention has no significance to our policy setters. Indeed, it is consistent with the Abbott government’s “border protection” policy objectives that Australia gains an international reputation for *refusing* to honour its Refugee Convention obligations to boat arrival asylum seekers. For the Abbott government has made it clear that asylum seekers entering Australian waters by “unauthorized maritime” means will now be indefinitely detained in degrading and unsafe conditions without any hope of being able to realize an asylum claim in Australia.¹⁰

In this climate of invasion fear, the plight of non-standard arrival asylum seekers has lost its humanitarian significance for all Australian governments since 9/11.

How should we evaluate this loss?

¹⁰ After the February 2014 riots on Manus Island that resulted in 60 detainees being beaten up and one detainee being murdered, Scott Morrison explained that this riot would not have occurred “had there been no protests.” So though the detention facility was crowded; though detainees had only basic access to essential facilities; though detainees were subjected to undetermined time horizons in having their claims to asylum even assessed and were relentlessly pressured to claim that they were not legitimate refugees; though detainees had just been told that even if they were found to be genuine refugees, they would never be settled in Australia; though policing and many of the services were not provided by Australians, but by locals who were not keen on having the detention facility on their island anyway; though the wanton and indiscriminate violence of the local response to detainee unrest astonishingly out-stripped the level of disorder demonstrated by detainees: none of that – according to Scott Morrison – had anything to do with the cause of the riot. Hence, Scott Morrison took no responsibility for the injury and death which resulted. Indeed, when the riot occurred, this provided MP Morrison with a dual opportunity to internationally advertise how horrible and hopeless conditions were in Australian instigated off shore detention facilities, at the same time as claiming that he had nothing to do with the bad behaviour of either local thugs or frustrated detainees. The riot was – if not overtly promoted by Australian refugee and asylum seeker policy – a welcome means of proclaiming the Abbott government’s “strong message” to would be boat arrival asylum seekers, making it crystal clear that they would be met with nothing but unmoving callous sternness if they broke our rules of authorized arrival.

3 Is this shift in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy a degradation of political morality or simply a pragmatic adaptation to a different historical context?

In today's political climate there is moral sounding rhetoric, but there is no objective moral reality. Morals are cultural constructs which we generate and use in order to get what we want. In this context political rhetoric is a screen concealing the personal career interests of politicians, as situated within the realities of party and electoral necessity. Here, any media release or policy statement is – in the end – a tool for advancing the vested interests upon which that politician and party relies in order to hold power.

In this climate, let us be frank concerning the real nature of the Abbott government's refugee and asylum seeker policy. To the prevailing policy, Australia's international obligations to unauthorized boat arrival asylum seekers under the Refugee Convention have no moral realist significance. The rhetoric the Abbott government gives us about protecting our borders and ensuring fairness to 'legitimate' asylum seekers has no genuine moral content either but is essentially about the manipulation of public fear in the cause of advancing the Abbott government's own political interests.¹¹

The interests being advanced here are a function of our government's uncompromising support for both US global military hegemony, and the global economic order US military power polices. Within Australia's defence policy commitments to strategic dependence on the US, our leaders have naturally responded to 9/11 as if our own freedom is under threat.¹² We see ourselves as threatened by diabolically violent terrorists who are foreign religious extremists, either covertly within our own ranks, or seeking to invade our borders from Asia. Hence, no 'un-Australian' outsider that is or looks Islamic can be trusted, and no infringement of the rules of legitimate territorial movement (which we control) will be permitted, for *any* reason. This mythos of the invading alien is situated within a vision of

¹¹ See Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012.

¹² It is interesting to note that Malcolm Fraser was a firm supporter of the Australia/USA alliance in the post-war 20th century era, but has now come to see the relationship as deeply problematic for Australia. See Malcolm Fraser, *Dangerous Allies*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014. In terms of my analysis, Fraser had strong sympathy with the moral framing of the post-war reconstruction era, which was, indeed, undergirded by American economic and military power. However, after winning the cold war, and then engaging in the War on Terror, the US decisively shifted its mythic narrative of good and evil away from human rights, transparent democracy and a global lifting of humanity. Fraser found that he no longer had any moral empathy with the driving values of the new politics of fear and ruthless self-preservation which the world's dominant superpower now embodies.

reality which is starkly survivalistic, which is amorally pragmatic in terms of the use of power, which has no humanitarian concern for people fleeing for their lives from the fall out of US global military imperialism, and which is determined to preserve our dominance within our own territorial sphere at any cost.

It is not clear that the Australian polity really appreciates the implications of the above myths.

If moral reality does not exist and political realism is valid, then at least four things follow. Firstly, the distinction between terrorism and legitimate power is arbitrary.¹³ Secondly, the humanitarian motivations of the human soul are sentimental illusions. Thirdly, we are all suckers if we believe any moral sounding rhetoric our politicians construct. Fourthly, liberal democratic governance in itself offers us no protection from the dark wraiths of hyper-racism, total surveillance, non-accountable financial and military power, and the cults of martial nationalism which now, as in the 1930s, stalk our political landscapes.¹⁴ Remember, Hitler rose to power within a democratic parliamentary structure.

Liberal democratic government not undergirded by substantive moral commitments is a merely procedural form of government that cannot resist the rise tyrants.¹⁵ Given the now prevailing myths of cosmic conflict¹⁶ we find that the fostering of genuinely moral

¹³ Indeed, the manner in which the US now uses violent power to cause terror and destruction – at any location in the globe – is unrivalled. See P.W. Singer, *Wired for War*, London: Penguin, 2009; Michael Otterman, *American Torture*, London: Pluto Press, 2007; Michael Otterman & Richard Hil, *Erasing Iraq*, London: Pluto Press, 2010; Robert Fisk, *The Age of the Warrior*, London: Harper Perennial, 2009.

¹⁴ The rise of racist ultra-right movements in economically traumatized post-2008 Europe, the growing obsession with public surveillance (the mascot for the London Olympics was a security camera), the symbiotic rise of martial nationalism at home (see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *What's Wrong with ANZAC?*, Sydney: New South, 2010) and movements like IS abroad, and relentless narratives of violence and destruction in the media all bode ill for our future. In this context Richard Koenigsberg's *Nations have a Right to Kill* (New York: Library of Social Science, 2009) is a stark warning to us that the ritual mythic undertow of human affairs is a lot more powerful than any rationalist Realist vision of logical and calculative self-interest. If Koenigsberg is correct – and his case is carefully documented and powerful reasoned – then over 200 million people were quite literally sacrificed in violent rituals of devotion to the civic religions of their Nation in the 20th century. Thus Modern Man makes the Aztecs look like armatures in the art of ritual killing.

¹⁵ See Malcolm Fraser, "Manus Island: so many questions, one simple answer." Sydney Morning Herald, February 21, 2014; <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/manus-island-so-many-questions-one-simple-solution-20140220-333sn.html>. Transparency facilitating the accountability of power to the people, and the use of power to uphold humanitarian values are integral with Malcolm Fraser's understanding of democratic government, because, on these matters, he is a moral realist.

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur in *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 175–198) famously recounted how deeply ingrained in the power dynamics of imperial civilizations the myth of redemptive violence is. The dynamics of the overcoming of the evil of chaos by the good of uncompromising violent power so powerfully articulated in

commitments in the polity is increasingly difficult. For there is an unavoidable incompatibility between upholding universal human rights and protecting national self-interest at all costs. This abandonment of a firm commitment to universal morality, coupled with the spiritual superficiality promoted by the crass materialism of consumerism, makes our polity ill equipped to combat calculative political realism within our party machines and our politicians, and this dynamic degrades the vitality of the moral claims which are necessary to undergird humane and transparent democratic politics.

Yet, the obvious *reality* is that most people do not live as if morality is a merely instrumental social construct. Nor could we actually live as if political realism were true, for human sociality would be destroyed if we all merely appeared to be moral and compassionate people but were really ruthless self-interested power freaks.¹⁷

It is clear to me that the movement of refugee and asylum seeker policy over the past 40 years towards a merely instrumental and realist approach to power signals a true degradation of the moral calibre of our politics. As a result of this degradation our policy setters now see no moral significance in evidence regarding our systemic mal-treatment of boat arrival asylum seekers. This is seriously bad. Protecting the human rights of all asylum seekers entering our territory, processing their claims rapidly and humanely, and re-affirming our universal humanitarian responsibilities under the Refugee Convention should be most strenuously revived. Otherwise, not only will we be guilty of abusing the most vulnerable people of the globe, but we are fostering neo-fascists attitudes in our own polity that threaten the humanity and freedoms of Australian society at large.

It is not true that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing, for a good person does not do nothing in the face of evil. The triumph of evil is not a function of the political impotence of moral people; it is a function of the political power of moral delusion. Those who govern power – key politicians, key mass media operators, key corporate, financial and military power centres – have persuaded us that the evil that they do in our name is good. Our desires, fears, collective identity narratives, and assumed cosmic,

the ancient Babylonian cult of Marduk, has as much appeal today amongst political realists as it had in the civic cultus of ancient Babylonian times.

¹⁷ See Jon Ronson, *The Psychopathy Test*, London: Picador, 2011. Fortunately amoral self-seeking pragmatic psychopaths are a small minority in society. Unfortunately, Ronson discovered, far too many of them end up as CEOs, on Director's Boards, in senior management, in politics, and being just generally attracted to power.

metaphysical and epistemic assumptions are the bricks by which the engineers and overseers of our life-world build collective moral delusions in order to keep us compliant to their interests. We are easily bent by the grand images of collective mythos because we have a powerful desire to see ourselves – collectively – as *good*. Further, the status quo has an interest in manufacturing narratives of *moral validity* which support the prevailing power and opportunity norms, out of world changing events. Indeed, it is world-changing events that are actually functions of the failure and moral unsustainability of the prevailing status quo that, in particular, must be given a collective meaning that upholds the status quo. Thus, we must be persuaded that we justly benefit from the ‘necessary’ ruthless power actions taken by our leaders that sustain the threatened status quo, and that their actions are morally valid.

All it takes for evil to triumph is for the Australian people to remain delusionally complicit in the anti-humanitarian, soul-destroying, inhospitality to asylum seekers promoted by our politicians, *by doing nothing because* we do not see the actions of our governments as evil. Our government wants us to think that we are good people *as* we erode and reject our international obligations to asylum seekers. Our political class wants to manufacture and manipulate public fear in order to promote their own electoral success in a polity that is conditioned to willingly upholding the prevailing status quo in international financial and military power, whatever the humanitarian cost. But should we allow this to happen then the lesson of the Holocaust will be lost on us and its horror will recur; it will happen again and we will be the Nazis this time.

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