

2010 REFUGEE WEEK LAUNCH, VICTORIA

The Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser, former Prime Minister of Australia

Speech for Refugee Week launch, Victorian Parliament House, 21 June 2010

Thank you. It is a privilege to be here at the opening of Refugee Week and thank you for the invitation. Australia in the post World War II years has largely been built on refugees: political refugees and economic migrants. If the attitudes that prevail today had prevailed in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the great migration would not have been possible. Before the war, Australia was pretty narrow, largely Anglo-Saxon (with a significant Irish Catholic population). A largely narrow group. It was Anglo-Saxon in its outlook and Anglo-Saxon in its orientation. An Australian Government minister was at a meeting in Helsinki in 1938 that was designed to do something about the growing issue of refugees in Europe because of Hitler's actions. The Australian minister said that Australia was not really a part of the conference because Australia had no racism and Australia did not intend to import it. That was Australia before the World War. During that war, we'd so nearly been invaded, we had so few people, we'd rested for independence or support if we needed it on Britain. But Britain was beleaguered and support from them was just not possible. We realised that we had to do much more on our own account if we were to build a viable, a strong and a decent nation.

It was Labor's Arthur Calwell that began the great migration program. He persuaded the union movement to support it. He persuaded the Australian community to support it. In the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s until the mid to late 1980s, both major political parties made it quite clear they were not going to play politics with race or religion. If that had been done in the late 1940s, then the migration program would not have been possible. Australians would have been driven apart, and there would have been no agreement about the future of the country. But the politicians of those days had understood what had happened in the Depression, what led to it, and what led to the Second World War within twenty years of the First World War. And they knew that we had to do better. That Australia had to do better. So the migration program was allowed to go on. People did a great deal to ensure that the program had wide public support. There was a Population Planning Committee and an Immigration Advisory Council, both composed of eminent citizens and designed to achieve support for Australia's future. The future of hundreds of thousands of people who ended up coming here and making this a much better, broader, wiser and more tolerant society.

During this time, the White Australia Policy withered on the vine and ultimately died. It was Menzies who signed on to the Refugee Convention in 1954 and accepted the obligations inherent in that convention. It was Hubert Opperman who effectively ended the White Australia Policy in a parliamentary speech and then Gough Whitlam who got rid of its legal remnants in 1972. In 1975-76, as a result of wars in Indochina, there was a great refugee movement out of Indochina. Many people left in not much more than river boats, totally unsuited to survival at sea or for the long journey to Australia. Because of regional cooperation in Indonesian and Malaysia, holding centres were established that would have saved tens of thousands of lives. Initially, Malaysia pushed boats back out to sea, and many thousands probably did die, but many tens of thousands more would have perished if they had continued that policy. It is important to have a regional approach. It wasn't just the regional approach of people from the region. Malaysian cooperation in particular was possible because Australia, the USA, and Canada (all refugee-recipient countries) said that they would take a very large number of people who are fleeing out of Indochina. In the end, about 220,000 Vietnamese came to Australia (not all initially as refugees). The refugee intake then was around 20,000 for two to three years in a row. The Australian people accepted it. The Vietnamese

remember and recall the generosity with which they were treated. They were placed in some centres but not with barbed wire. They could still go and buy a cup of coffee. They were not in Immigration Department jails; rather, there might be clothes and toys for their children that people from Adelaide had collected so that their welcome to this country would be a warm one. With the acceptance of refugees from Indochina, I really thought that the battle against discrimination, against racism, against that old narrow Australia was finally over. That it had been won.

I made a mistake in 1980 (I might have made others, but this was one): I made a speech that spoke about multiculturalism and how we could gain strength from diversity. That this was something to be proud of and that we were a better, a broader, and hopefully a wiser country as a consequence. I said in that speech – and this was the mistake – “we’ve won that battle”, meaning for all time. But it wasn’t won for all time. It took the establishment of Immigration Detention Centres, which had been a proposal before my Government from the Department and rejected. Not once, but rejected five or six times. Rejected absolutely. It took Pauline Hanson, who was not condemned as she should have been condemned by John Howard, the Government of the day. This was noticed around the world. And then there was Tampa. I was at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University for a conference shortly after Tampa, and a few Australian students there asked for a private meeting with me. They asked, “How long are we going to have to pretend that we are not Australians as a result of Tampa?” This did Australia’s reputation worldwide enormous harm. It was noticed in the United States. It was noticed in Asia, in Beijing, in Latvia, in Helsinki. Wherever you went, it was noticed. We were told by our government that this was our own affair and it was not affecting Australia’s reputation. But it was. And dramatically for the worse.

In all the years up to this time, we’ve had a bipartisan policy. And politicians of those days need a great deal of credit for recognising that bipartisan policy in relation to refugees and immigration was essential to the harmony and to the development of Australia. But it was Hanson, Howard, Tampa, and the new attitude of playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people. In the search for votes, politicians are accused of doing all sorts of things, not all of them entirely honourable. But I believe that playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people, seeking votes out of their misfortune, is about the worst thing any politician can do in any country, in any part of the world.

When the Rudd government was elected, we hoped for something better. Some of the sharper edges of the Howard policy were removed. But then when the Government was accused of losing of control of Australia’s borders – which was never true, it was always a lie – the Government tried to have a two-headed policy. On the one hand, they were more humane than the Howard government had been. But then they started to say, “but we’re as tough as Howard was”. Today’s government can’t have it both ways. They can be humane if they seek to be, but they have turned away from that. In different ways, they have shown that they are fully prepared to compete with what happened in the Howard era.

This again is noticed around the world. That boat in Indonesian waters, where the Prime Minister is said to have negotiated with the Indonesian president. The people on that boat in Indonesia would not disembark for weeks and weeks. That was close to becoming Rudd’s Tampa. There wasn’t much difference. Different methods, different techniques, but there was not a great deal of difference. The allegation that the Government has lost control of our borders is, of course, always totally false. Even now when there has been a sort of spike in boat people coming here, it represents maybe 2,000 of 13,000 refugees of the Australian Refugee Program. If you take that over twenty years, that is maybe 1,000 per year. Can anyone say that 1,000 people a year can offer a threat to the values, to the hopes, to those things that we believe are important to

Australia: to a peaceful and a constructive society, where we can make the place a better one for our children and for the future?

The policies are totally hypocritical over these issues. Because there are many more arrivals that come by air and then claim refugee status after they arrive here. But of that group, probably 80% are demonstrated not to be refugees. But those that come by boat, over 80% (closer to 95%) are shown to be genuine refugees. So policy, rhetoric, language, condemnation penalises those who seek our help.

What can we do about it?

Reestablishment of bipartisanship in relation to refugee and immigration policy is not only important for Australia, but also, in the medium term, it is an absolute necessity. You can even say it is an absolute necessity right now. But who is going to pursue it from either party? I know that there are people in both parties who would, but they don't have the weight, they don't have the strength, they don't have the determination to say, "enough of this". And they don't have the power to turn around their leaders to make sure that bipartisanship can be reestablished. And for bipartisanship, both parties need to agree. And I do not believe that the Liberal Party would even seek it as a possibility in today's circumstances.

There needs to be a regional approach, and that has been spoken of. But not just a regional approach that involves South East Asia. A regional approach, if it is to be effective, needs also to embrace countries that are prepared to accept refugees. New Zealand, Canada, the USA all would be an essential part of a regional approach if it were to be pursued by an Australian Government. It is trite to say that much more needs to be done (and much more effectively) in countries from which people flee. We've known for a very long while about the persecution of the Tamils. But what has any country done about that? It has been allowed to go on and now we don't like it because people come from Sri Lanka to Australia. And despite the end of the war, I'm told that much of the persecution continues.

In Australia, bipartisanship is perhaps the most important thing. But bipartisanship not behind narrow, introspective, inhumane policies, but bipartisanship behind the basic principles of the Refugee Convention first established in 1954. We need to end the demeaning debates: "I'm tougher than you!" "No, you're not! I'm just as tough!". It really is a most terrible debate and this is not only a debate in Australia. It is not only reported in Australian newspapers. It is noticed in countries around the world. Because what happens to refugees is noticed by people around the world.

The people that have come here have been able to establish themselves, their families, businesses, opportunities and compared to previous times, they've done well. There have been prosperous years in Australia. But I really would like to ask all of those people that have come here from other places to do more than they have done up to this point to maintain the kind of Australia that made it possible for them to come here. It is not good enough leaving it to the Abbotts and the Rudds. We are not going to get that Australia out of either of them. That is very clear. We are not going to get it out of the Howards. We are not going to get it out of anyone who will play politics with people's lives. But people who come here, settle themselves, work with refugees, they can help create the Australia we want. Helping individuals is one thing. But helping Australia return to a decent, compassionate society in relation to these issues is vastly important for Australia's future. Thank you ladies and gentlemen.