

The Pacific ‘non solution’

A worrying feature of the *Tampa* crisis was that talkback radio and sections of the press often uncritically accepted statements from senior political leaders, without checking their truth. The most obvious example was the “children overboard” crisis.

By NIC MACLELLAN

TODAY, around the world there are over twenty million refugees - people who have fled their homes because of war, disaster or human rights abuses. In the Pacific region, there are thousands of refugees and internally displaced people arising from crises in West Papua, Bougainville, the Solomon Islands and Fiji. But recent media attention on asylum seekers has focussed on Australia’s so-called Pacific solution.

Over the last decade, successive Australian governments have toughened their attitude to people paying people smugglers to transport them to Australia. The method of arrival is crucial, as Radio Australia journalist Peter Mares explains:

Asylum seekers who enter Australia unlawfully (that is, without a valid visa) are detained in privately run immigration detention centres. Those who enter lawfully (for example, on a tourist or student visa) are usually not detained and can live freely in the community.¹

Since the *Tampa* crisis in August 2001, the Australian community has been wracked with debate over the Australian government’s policy towards refugees. In the midst of the election campaign leading to the November 2001 Federal elections, the Howard government introduced significant changes to Australia’s refugee policy, especially for people fleeing from conflict and human rights

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abuses in central Asia and the Middle East. This political and humanitarian crisis first erupted when Australian SAS troops were sent aboard the Norwegian vessel *MV Tampa*, to stop the captain sailing to the Australian territory of Christmas Island with 433 asylum seekers rescued from an Indonesian boat.

On 28 August 2001, Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock told Parliament that new legislation was necessary because “generous interpretations” of Australia’s obligations under the 1951 Convention were “adding to perceptions that Australia is a soft touch”. Along with changes to Australia’s immigration boundaries, the new legislation also allows for people who arrive in an “excised offshore place” to be taken to a “declared country”.²

Rather than land the asylum seekers on Australian territory, the government sought out countries in the Pacific willing to establish detention camps to hold the asylum seekers while their applications for refugee status are processed by Australian immigration officials. Thus, asylum seekers reaching Australian territory such as Ashmore Reef or Christmas Island can now be relocated to another “declared country”, to be held in an overseas detention camp while their application for refugee status is processed, rather than be sent to the Australian mainland. This is why more than 1500 asylum seekers are currently held in detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, even though they were seeking refuge in Australia.

Aotearoa/New Zealand, Nauru and Papua New Guinea agreed to take the Tampa refugees and others who arrived in Australian waters in subsequent weeks. Nauru and Papua New Guinea agreed to establish detention camps to hold the asylum seekers while their applications for refugee status were processed. Other island countries including East Timor, Fiji, Palau and Kiribati were also approached to take asylum seekers, but have not done so.

There are more than 1500 people currently held in detention centres in the Pacific: 1155 asylum seekers are in detention in two camps on Nauru, with a further 356 on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Another 131 people were sent via Nauru to Aotearoa/New Zealand, where they have been declared as refugees and have obtained residency in the community. Official government figures state the cost of setting up and running the detention centres in the Pacific at A\$114 million in 2001-02 (\$72 million for the two camps in Nauru, and \$42 million for the detention centre in Papua New Guinea). The Royal Australian Navy has spent further millions on transporting the asylum seekers, and there are numerous other costs. Nauru has been pledged a further \$30 million for taking the asylum seekers, which is being spent on a range of development

programmes and Papua New Guinea another \$1 million.

One striking feature about the post-September 11 climate of fear is that Australia currently has troops serving in Afghanistan and naval forces maintaining sanctions against Iraq. The former Taliban regime and Saddam Hussein's government are denounced as murderous terrorists who commit human rights abuses against their own citizens, yet the tough new refugee policy is directed against Afghanis and Iraqis refugees who are fleeing those regimes!

By playing on deeply held popular emotions, government ministers have fanned this fear. Then Defence Minister Peter Reith warned that unauthorised arrival of boats on Australian territory "can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities."³

What is the role for journalists reporting in this climate of fear? Radio Australia journalist Peter Mares argues:

Media reporting can shape public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. Compassionate and sympathetic coverage can help to promote public understanding and encourage generous assistance to refugees and others in need. Negative reporting can generate and intensify feelings of fear.⁴

A worrying feature of the *Tampa* crisis was that talkback radio and sections of the press often uncritically accepted statements from senior political leaders, without checking their truth.

The most obvious example was the "children overboard" crisis. Senior government ministers claimed that refugees had thrown their children into the sea, supposedly to blackmail the Navy into halting its efforts to return their boat to Indonesian waters.⁵ On October 10, then Defence Minister Peter Reith released photographs of children in the sea wearing life jackets, supposed to be evidence of the criminal behaviour of the refugees. Prime Minister John Howard declared on radio: "I certainly don't want people of that type in Australia, I really don't."

In spite of a few media challenges to this story, the "children overboard" story was maintained right through the 2001 election campaign. Subsequently, it was proven that the government statements were a lie, and that Royal Australian Navy officers had informed senior ministers and their staff within days of the story first being released by Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock.⁶ The so-called evidence — photos of children in the water, supposedly thrown

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in by their evil parents — were in fact taken the next day after the boat had sunk and everyone was in the water.

A Senate Committee is about to bring down its report on this “certain maritime incident”, detailing exactly who knew what and when. But it’s clear that senior government ministers and their staff — including former Defence Minister Peter Reith — knew the story was a lie or didn’t want to listen to the truth when contrary information was sent up the chain of command from the military through the public service bureaucracy.

In the midst of this Senate inquiry into the “children overboard” fiasco, government members have continued to make allegations which damage the reputation of the asylum seekers now detained in Nauru and Manus Island.

One government senator accused refugees of a “particular evil” to stop Royal Australian Navy sailors from the *HMAS Arunta* from boarding their ship and returning them to Indonesian waters. He claimed that there was documentary evidence that refugees had threatened to strangle their own children. Naturally, these sensational claims made front page headlines — the Australian stated: BOAT PEOPLE TRIED TO KILL CHILD: LIBS. The reports were repeated on talk back radio as a defence of the government’s tough stand and the “evil nature” of the asylum seekers. Days later, however, the Navy admitted that documents about the alleged incident could not be found, with an admiral admitting that the *Arunta*’s commander “has advised me that those documents do not exist.”⁷

Government censorship

Beyond such headline grabbing statements, there were attempts to censor information and images of the refugees’ plight that might weaken public support for the government’s hard-line stand.

One reporter, Mike Bowers, got a photo of the refugees huddled on the deck of the *Tampa* when he chartered a plane from Jakarta. The Howard Government then imposed a no-fly zone over the ship. According to the ABC’s *Media Watch* programme: “planes taking photographers out from Christmas Island were stopped on the runway and journalists who tried to get there by boat were threatened with arrest.”⁸

Journalists were frustrated in trying to get information about the Tampa crisis, after the Defence Public Relations Unit were ordered that all questions on the asylum seeker operation were to be referred to the Defence Minister’s office.⁹ Defence information officials were not happy, as Tim Bloomfield told

The Defence media adviser ordered that Navy photographers not take pictures of the asylum seekers. The military were given guidelines for 'no personalising' images. *Media Watch* noted: 'Australians were not to see the suffering... the despair.'

the Senate Select Committee on April 17: "Under the meaning of what censorship is then yes, it would be a form of censorship. ...Had Defence been responsible for making the comment through to the media, most definitely the misinformation would have been terminated immediately."

The Defence Minister's media adviser ordered that Navy photographers not take pictures of the asylum seekers. The military were given guidelines to ensure "no personalising or humanising" images were to be taken.¹⁰ As the ABC's *Media Watch* programme has noted: "Australians were not to see the suffering, the hope, the despair of these people. They were to remain faceless, and at times violent 'queue jumpers'."

The level of control exerted by senior ministers and their staff worried senior Canberra journalists. In an unprecedented move, press gallery journalists from rival media organisations banded together to put in a submission to the 'children overboard' Senate

hearings, complaining of "censorship and misinformation", "deliberate deception" and "government falsehoods."¹¹

The government has also been sensitive to criticism from media organisations about the asylum policy, with Liberal Party President Shane Stone criticising journalists in an April 2002 speech, and Prime Minister John Howard complaining that programs on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) such as *Lateline* were running a "strong campaign against the government" on asylum seekers, and objecting to the "emphasis" put on this issue (The complaint came after *Lateline* broadcast a harrowing video of asylum seekers protesting in despair at Curtin detention centre, and other ABC programmes had criticised the "Pacific solution").¹²

Weaknesses in journalism

However, journalists can't simply blame government censorship as an excuse

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for a failure to do the job properly. Some journalists uncritically accept government press statements, without doing any homework or even using some basic mathematics.

One example: media headlines misstated that that only seven Afghans had been found to be refugees from the hundreds on the Tampa. One headline even said that: "Only seven on Nauru found to be refugees."¹³ Not true. When you do the mathematics for the "Pacific solution" applications processed by April 2002 in New Zealand, Nauru and Papua New Guinea, 442 out of 569 have been accepted as refugees — over 77 percent.

In misstating the number of successful applications, reporters seem to have fallen prey to the Australian government's spin doctors. In testimony to the current Senate Inquiry, senior journalist Geoffrey Barker from the *Australian Financial Review* has reflected:

I think we are probably open to criticism that there were times when too much was accepted too uncritically. This comes about partly because of the attempted manipulation by the government and partly because of the rush with which newspapers are put together and printed every day. Journalists themselves are flawed and imperfect people. I think at times we do go for the quick "good story" without pausing long enough to think critically about what we might do. There is enough blame to go around in all this, but I do think that on these particular issues, the primary reason for what went wrong was the campaign, which was sustained right through the period, to hide and misinform.¹⁴

I would argue that a key responsibility for journalists is not simply to report the news, but to develop stories that analyse the events of the day. While we should accurately report statements by government officials, NGOs or the asylum seekers themselves, they should not be accepted uncritically. This may be a truism for the experienced reporters in the room, but it's surprising how a climate of censorship or government intimidation can allow the most outrageous statements to be issued without correction or critique.

Another responsibility is to give background information and context, so that readers, viewers and listeners can make sense of fast breaking news. One interesting example is Radio Australia's Internet website "Unfinished Journeys."¹⁵ It provides up to date news reports on refugees and migration in the Asia-Pacific region. It also has background articles, opinion pieces, definitions

of unfamiliar legal terms and copies of international conventions relating to refugees, written in accessible language.

Scoops and ethics

Media coverage of the Australian government's "Pacific solution" has sparked a complex debate over ethics and secrecy.¹⁶

The debate was raised by an Australian television journalist, who says the Papua New Guinea government has deliberately denied foreign journalists visas, to avoid scrutiny of the asylum-seeker detention centre on Manus Island.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television journalist Evan Williams says he was forced to visit Papua New Guinea "clandestinely" to obtain pictures of the Manus Island detention centre. However PNG Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta attacked the ABC reporter for entering the country without a journalist visa. The television report, aired on the ABC's *Foreign Correspondent* programme, has also attracted criticism from some journalists in Papua New Guinea, who fear the illegal entry into the country could lead to a government backlash. An editorial in the PNG newspaper *The National* criticised the Australian reporter's action:

Why enter PNG clandestinely when visas are readily available, and having done so why boast about breaking the laws of a friendly, independent neighbour? PNG enjoys press and information freedoms that are the envy of the region. Foreign journalists who can't be bothered applying for the appropriate visas and enter our country illegally are putting those freedoms at risk.

Foreign Correspondent's Evan Williams defended his decision to visit Papua New Guinea without a journalist visa:

My case is that for the past 18 months or almost two years, we've been applying to get a journalist visa for Papua New Guinea. I believe that Papua New Guinea is running a black-ban on visiting journalists, particularly from Australia. If you look at how many Australian journalists have visited over there in the last two years — particularly since the first military uprising last year — you'll notice that nobody's gone up there. We consider that this is a matter of such importance for both Australia and Papua New Guinea, that the secrecy surrounding the detention centres, and the secrecy to maintain them, over-rode what we are being told by one

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journalist in one newspaper so far, is likely to, or could, limit people's access in the future.

A similar problem arose when Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock and Opposition counterpart Julia Gillard flew to Nauru to visit the detention camps in February 2002. Journalists were refused seats on the plane, and when they tried to travel to Nauru on commercial flights, they were unable to obtain visas from the government of Nauru to report the story.

Unpacking the language

The media shorthand of "Pacific solution" doesn't accurately describe the current policy for asylum seekers in Nauru and Manus. It's not a sustainable solution to a major global crisis!

That's just one example of the way that spin-doctors can distort a sensible discussion about refugee issues. For journalists reporting the statements of government officials, it's important to unpack the language used, especially terms that demonise asylum seekers as "illegal refugees", "queue jumpers" or even "terrorists".

The Howard government has suggested that people arriving by boat are "jumping the queue", taking places from people who are waiting patiently for one of the 12,000 places in Australia granted to refugees each year. However in a world where there are 20 million people facing danger and persecution, and only 100,000 places a year for refugee resettlement in the developed world, it's a pretty long queue! Australia does not even maintain consular staff in Afghanistan or Iraq, so it's difficult to see how refugees can join a queue to apply for a visa.

Many asylum seekers who have applied formally to come to Australia are waiting more than three years to be processed by immigration officials. In Pakistan, 75 per cent of cases take 149 weeks to be processed. In Iran, the wait is 148 weeks. One estimate suggests 60,000 people are waiting for the 12,000 places that Australia grants each year.¹⁷

The focus on boat people arriving on Australia's northern shores also ignores the fact that most asylum seekers arrive in Australia by air! In 1999-2000, two thirds of asylum seekers arrived by plane with a valid visa, claiming asylum after they had cleared customs. These people, who may not succeed in their asylum claims, are not detained like the boat people, and their presence in the community is not a source for banner headlines or talk back radio.

It's also important to keep a sense of perspective about people who are illegally in Australia. According to the Immigration Department, 4174 people arrived by boat in 2000-2001. However each year about 20,000 people illegally overstay their visas. Because most are tourists and the greatest number are from the United Kingdom and United States, there is not a media outcry against them, as has occurred against Muslims fleeing from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The very idea that people arriving by boat are "illegal" entrants to Australia goes against provisions of many international human rights instruments to which Australia is a signatory. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution". Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention says states: "States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened" as long as "they present themselves without delay to the authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence."

Notes:

¹ Peter Mares: *Borderline — Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers* (UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001). I am indebted to Peter for his advice and knowledge on Australian refugee policy, as this paper shows.

² A "declared country" is a country that the Minister declares in writing under s198A of the Migration Act 1958.

³ Peter Mares in "A Pacific solution: reflections on the Tampa affair and September 11", *Eureka Street*, October 2001.

⁴ Peter Mares: "Distance Makes the Heart Grow Fonder: media images of refugees and asylum seekers" (forthcoming)

⁵ The sorry saga is detailed in Mungo MacCallum: "Girt by sea — Australia, the refugees and the politics of fear", *Quarterly Essay*, No.5 2002.

⁶ "Overboard lie exposed", *The Australian*, 14 February 2002.

⁷ Mark Forbes: "Admiral denies 'strangle' claims", *The Age*, 6 April 2002; Matt Price: "Strangling claim papers go missing", *The Weekend Australian*, 30-31 March 2002; Matt Price: "Navy admits no 'strangle' witnesses", *The Weekend Australian*, 6-7 April 2002

⁸ "Tampering With Defence PR", *Media Watch*, ABC TV, 22 April 2002

⁹ "No human face for boat people", *The Age*, 18 April 2002.

¹⁰ "Defence Staff told: no photos", *The Australian*, 18 April 2002.

¹¹ Submissions can be found on the internet at <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/maritime_incident_ctte/submissions/sublist.htm>

¹² For details of the government complaints, see Gerard Henderson: "A thin skin on PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW 8 2002 153

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matters of opinion”, *The Age*, 30 April 2002.

¹³ For example, “Only seven on Nauru found to be refugees” ,*The Australian*, 9 April 2002.

¹⁴ Senate Select Committee into a Certain Maritime Incident, Senate Committee Hansard, 1 May 2002, p.CMI 1319.

¹⁵ “Unfinished Journeys” can be found at <<http://goasiapacific.com/specials/journeys/default.htm>>

¹⁶ “Taking pictures of refugees”, Radio Australia’s *GoAsiaPacific* website, 18 April 2002, found at: <http://abc.net.au/asiapacific/focus/pacific/GoAsiaPacificFocusPacific_534400.htm>

¹⁷ Megan Saunders: “Asylum seekers waiting more than three years”, *The Australian*, 1 May 2002.

□ *Nic Maclellan has worked as a journalist, researcher and community development worker in the Pacific islands. Between 1997-2000, he lived in Fiji, working with the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC) in Suva. Nic has written widely on development, human rights and environment in the South Pacific, and is co-author of three books on Pacific issues. This paper is excerpted from his keynote speech to the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) seminar on “Refugees Rights to Information and Communication”, held in May 2002 in Nadi, Fiji.*

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