

COMMENTARY

Hilary McPhee

‘**P**OOOR AUSTRALIA,’ said the young woman who was teaching a class of music students. ‘My poor Australia has lost its way.’ She then broke into a few bars of a piercingly beautiful lament from the islands off Hai-phong, a song sung by women when their fishermen husbands fail to return.

This woman has only a dim memory of arriving here with her parents by boat from Vietnam. She was then three years old, but her parents told her often of the hardships they endured and the voyage that took many weeks. It was twenty-five years ago this year that they left their battered village and set out on a wooden fishing boat with thirty others, nine of whom were children under five.

They sailed first to Thailand, which refused them, then on to the Malaysian coast where they were intercepted before they could land, given food and water for a week, and sent back to sea. At each attempted landfall, the boat owner demanded more money, those who couldn’t pay borrowing from those who could.

They all somehow survived and arrived in Darwin in the summer of 1977, dehydrated and hungry. After questioning by Immigration, they were registered, checked by a medical officer, then taken to a hostel, given a meal and left to sleep for two days. It was the small acts of kindness the young woman’s parents still speak about — the man in the street who drew a map and showed them how to catch a bus, the priest who shook their hands outside his church, the mothers in the hostel from Cambodia and the Philippines who took the little girl to play with their children while her parents worked long hours.

There were small ugly acts of hostility and suspicion too, of course, and regular misunderstandings, but the family was safe and together, and slowly they built a new life. Later, in Melbourne, they started a large restaurant of their own and helped many others to settle here. Their three children went to university. Two are now doctors, one recently returned to work in Vietnam, and one teaches music, and writes songs about what happened to people like her parents.

Twenty-five years is the usual measure of a generation — and the times are no longer auspicious. If the family had arrived in recent years, they would still be in detention. Their two youngest children would have been born behind razor wire and branded ‘illegals’ like their desperate parents who have committed no offence by coming here — unless it is an offence to want to build, by whatever means they could,

better lives for themselves and their children. Now they would almost certainly face being sent back to where they came from.

Prime Minister Howard once said that the times would suit him, and they do. At great expense a few years ago, the navy was deployed to rescue a lone British sailor in the Southern Ocean. And the nation was transfixed by the drama. Now the government and our defence forces turn their backs on sinking boats crammed with people and, according to the polls, 70% of Australians on both sides of politics support them. So confident is it in its mandate, our government charges refugees for their years of detention. So certain is it of the nation’s state of denial, it returns damaged and despairing people to the very countries we accuse of harbouring terrorists.

I do not recognise my country any more.

Yet the signs in the census are good — at least as the census tells them. Now most Australians have encountered those of other faiths, other races, other cultures. Sectarian Christianity was common in my childhood, when there were many more declaring themselves Christian. Today there are more Buddhists than Baptists. Once, when Australians travelled, it was to the UK. The more adventurous toured Europe. Now our ‘short-term departures’ increase every year. Young Australians now celebrate Anzac Day in Turkey, and older ones are venturing to India and South-East Asia in larger numbers. Many more of us stay in education than we did twenty-five years ago. We buy more books and see more movies. We can, if we wish, put a human face to the Third World. We cannot claim not to know what is going on here or in other countries. We are arguably more cosmopolitan, more affluent, more of us overseas born. After English, Chinese is now the main language spoken at home. Even so, ‘the ancestries most commonly identified with’ are Australian 36%, English 34% and Irish 10%.

Possibly the census — like the polls — doesn’t hold the key to our change of heart. Is it, as some would have us believe, that so much we took for granted after Whitlam and Fraser was merely cosmetic change, a thin crust — easily ridiculed, easily ruptured — over a deep pool of resentment and xenophobia?

Or is it simpler and even more soul-destroying than this? That no political leader will stand up as Labor once did on Vietnam and say we won’t go there? That no one now will step forward and lead?