Waves of Indifference

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Robert Manne (with David Corlett)
SENDING THEM HOME: REFUGEES AND THE NEW POLITICS OF INDIFFERENCE
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SOME TIME BEFORE the sun set on the British empire, ‘British justice’ took on an ironic meaning. In the colonies, we knew it was a charade, like that doled out to ‘Breaker’ Morant during the Boer War. The dice are loaded in favour of a prosecution that nevertheless insists on carrying out its cold-blooded retribution in an apparently value-free legalese, thus preserving the self-righteousness of the empire and tormenting the condemned. Yet, as Robert Manne and David Corlett make clear in this latest Quarterly Essay, the larrkin land of Australia can now, through its treatment of asylum seekers, fairly be said to lead the world in the practice of traditional British justice.

Manne and Corlett present an historically informed, detailed and comprehensive account of the arrival between 1999 and 2002 of a ‘fourth wave’ of asylum seekers — mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran — and the administrative, legal, political and public relations response to these people by the Howard government. Numbering some 9500, this ‘wave’ followed earlier ones, between 1976 and 1997, of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese. The authors speculate that popular support for Howard’s treatment of asylum seekers, ‘incomparably the harshest in the Western world’, suggests the emergence of a new politics of indifference. Though their account is carefully factual and cognisant of the issue’s complexity, the authors’ purpose is also unashamedly emotional and political: ‘to allow readers to understand better what these asylum seekers and refugees have already endured and to help convince as many Australian citizens as possible that both the continued detention of asylum seekers and the planned program of repatriation of refugees are wrong.’

It is refreshing to find liberal intellectuals raising the possibility that public perceptions can be manipulated by powerful figures, and attempting to combat this situation directly through their work. Greatest credit for this direct approach seems due to former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock, a man for whom, like Conrad’s Kurtz, we can only feel a fascinated abomination. However, while the authors’ documentation is new and valuable, the accompanying cultural, political and economic analysis is less strong. The ‘great Orwellian principle of common decency’ seems, in the end, an unlikely vanquisher of indifference and inhumanity.

‘For the Australian asylum seeker system’, write Manne and Corlett, the arrival of a comparatively large number of
asylum seekers during 1999 represented ‘a kind of crisis ... precisely because the overwhelming majority of them were [bona fide refugees]’. The crisis was resolved by the prime minister’s response to the Tampa affair in the lead-up to the 2001 election: ‘Over the next fortnight or so the Australian asylum seeker system for dealing with boat arrivals was radicalized.’ The ‘logical conclusion’ of this was reached at Nauru: ‘the military repulsion of asylum seekers followed by their detention in offshore detention centres until such time as their refugee status was determined.’

The network of immigration detention centres already constituted, in the authors’ opinion, ‘the most inhumane and destructive quasi-penal institutions in Australia’s post-federation history’. Most of the research on the effects of incarceration on the asylum seekers and on their understanding of this incarceration — revealing major depressive disorders, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder, separation anxiety disorder and self-harm — is shown to support this claim, strengthened further by the story of Shayan Bedraie and his family. ‘There are things the Howard government has done which are almost impossible to believe,’ conclude Manne and Corlett. The separation of a dangerously ill six-year-old boy from his family is certainly one.

As with the case of the Bedraies, ‘virtually all fourth-wave asylum seekers were offered only temporary protection if found to be genuine refugees’. Given minimal support, these asylum seekers also had no security as to their residency status in Australia, and no possibility of applying to have family members join them. They continued to live in fear, often in lonely anguish. Due to their economic dependence, ‘both Nauru and Papua New Guinea were (in regard to the creation and administration of the detention camps) willing to behave like client states’. Inmate correspondence from Nauru reveals a common picture: ‘Hell is by far the most common metaphor used by detainees to describe the experience.’ The most significant eyewitness accounts of the camps come from a Dutch psychiatrist. ‘Australia,’ he summarises, ‘is doing its dirty laundry in a small island that, for all practical purposes is its vassal state.’

The authors relate the often devious and dishonest attempts to repatriate the asylum seekers: ‘Canberra’s description of contemporary Afghanistan as “safe and secure” for the return of asylum seekers is ignorant at best and at worst an outright lie.’ Almost all the asylum seekers ‘claim in their correspondence to have been told repeatedly by immigration department and IOM officials that their cases would never be re-opened’. A leaked minute from the immigration department reveals that: ‘For all hardcore detainees the key to ensuring voluntary departure lies in the creation of a credible threat of involuntary removal.’ As the situation now stands, ‘in two years’ time, thousands of Afghan or Iraqi refugees, who have spent five or six years in Australia, may either be in detention once more or have been successfully dispatched to the new perils and chaos of the countries from which once they fled.’

Manne and Corlett reflect that ‘there is now no Western country whose behaviour is consistent with the spirit which animated the UN [Refugee] Convention at the time of its creation’ in 1951. This is the result, they suggest, of the end of the Cold War, and thus of the need for Western governments to be seen as humane, and of an increasing gap between First and Third World living conditions, creating increased demand for, and resentment toward, migration to the West. Australia has become ‘the pioneer of an anti-asylum seeker system whose replication by other countries would destroy one of the finest achievements of post-war liberal civilisation — the offer of protection for those who are fleeing from tyranny’. The authors offer an alternative approach, based on the ‘ethics of proximity’: we should help those refugees in our region. The remaining asylum seekers, they conclude, should not be repatriated: ‘Have these people not already suffered enough? Has the word mercy lost its resonance in Australia?’

To ask for mercy towards asylum seekers is to remind us of their powerlessness; that they constitute no threat. But history is filled with ‘decent’ people unselfconsciously treating the powerless — slaves, prisoners, servants, employees, women, children, foreigners — with a degree of ‘mercy’ that can now only appear shameful. Correspondence in this very Quarterly Essay critically addresses David Malouf’s handling of such cultural shifts in Made in England: Australia’s British Inheritance (the previous, and twelfth, Quarterly Essay). As Manne and Corlett’s own account suggests, the powerful are often able to control perceptions of the weak. The Howard government carefully limited access to the asylum seekers, and deliberately portrayed these people as threatening. And in a world of increasing inequality, political and economic refugees will inevitably threaten affluent Australian ways of living, because they are in part created by them. A more merciful treatment of future asylum seekers would seem to require a broader recognition of the fundamental injustice of the dire poverty and hubristic consumption of contemporary free-market globalisation.