

Foreword

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This collection is a useful contribution to the debate on the vexed question of Indigenous rights but more particularly on the complex issues concerning immigration, refugee and asylum-seeker policy.

If the attitudes and the tenor of public debate that prevailed in Australia during the Howard years and which appear to be continuing had been dominant in the late 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, mass immigration, which has contributed so much to Australia's cultural and physical wealth and to its development generally, could never have occurred. Political parties would have competed on the issue of race, appealing to the worst, rather than the best, of our natures.

We underestimate the restraint that was shown in 1954 when the Menzies Government acceded to the Refugee Convention, and during the years in which the White Australia Policy was slowly being whittled away and ultimately abolished.

Certainly a majority, but not all, of the new citizens coming to Australia in those years were from Europe but the original promise of concentrating on people from Britain and Ireland was never capable of achievement.

The debate now has been given an added significance because many of the world's refugees are Muslims and from countries that have not been natural sources of immigration for Australia. These changes have made it both easier and more dangerous for the issues to be politicised. It became possible to play on fears of the unknown, of people alleged to be different, and to suggest that such people would not make a positive contribution to Australia.

When we accepted a large number of refugees from Indochina at the end of the Vietnam War—a decision that was warmly and generously accepted by a great many Australians—I thought we had reached a turning point for the better. I believed we would never go back to the narrow, introspective days when our population was overwhelmingly of British origins, that we would now accept people for what they were, for what they could contribute to this country. Unfortunately, the way in which the refugee issues have been handled in the past dozen or so years has dashed those hopes.

In the Howard years, there were even attempts to ban the use of the term 'multicultural', but no other word was offered in its place. They came to nought because the debate over the benefits of multiculturalism had passed its time. One only needs to walk down the streets of Sydney or Melbourne to know that this is a multicultural society, with people from many different countries settling

here. The evidence overwhelmingly, so far, has suggested that Australians support these developments and also that Australia's new citizens over the past half-century have overwhelmingly contributed very strongly to the country's physical and cultural development.

The debate over Australia's response to refugees has involved many falsehoods. The previous government defamed refugees from Afghanistan who were fleeing the Taliban. It said that such people were different, they would become criminals, drug runners, prostitutes and would obviously be a very bad influence on Australian society. The government could much more accurately have said that such people had shown initiative in trying to find a better future for their children. Many refugees are from countries that have become archaic and quite impossible. For example, young girls would not have anything like a reasonable life in Afghanistan and many tried to flee to find a country where they also could be normal citizens. People who are prepared to pull up stakes and go to a new land—that is clearly going to be different for them—are resourceful and enterprising and will make good citizens for their new country.

The debates about these issues showed how easy it was to cause concern, even fear, among a great many Australians. They show how easy it is to attract the red-necked element in our society—an element that exists in every country in the world. In earlier times, our objective as a nation was to sideline such people, to make as many as possible, and the group themselves, believe that their views were indeed disreputable. Such views, which had been regarded as disreputable, narrow or racist, were made respectable.

While the current government has made some welcome changes, it has not done enough to reverse earlier damage.

We are often told that we live in a globalised world where everything we do has an implication for other people or other countries. This is certainly true in economics; it is perhaps even more true in relation to the environment. If we do live in one world in these senses, we need to understand that our attitudes to people must also grow and change and develop productively.

While people come from widely differing backgrounds and circumstances, they have similar aspirations: they want to be able to look after their families, to feed and educate their children and to give them an opportunity for a better life than they themselves had. The values embraced in such desires are not particular to Australia or any other country; they are universal. These issues should be more widely recognised.

I hope the chapters in this book and the academic analyses involved will promote a wider understanding of the reality that we do in fact live in one world. Where there is disadvantage, there is an obligation on the wealthy and the powerful to

help and to assist. How we act on these issues will be the ultimate determinant of what kind of nation we in Australia are and what kind of nation we become.