

# Introduction

On 15 April 2009, the Australian Navy intercepted a boat carrying some 50 suspected asylum-seekers near Ashmore Reef, a group of three small uninhabited islands about halfway between the Australian mainland and the Indonesian island of Roti. In accordance with the government's policy, the boat was to be escorted to Christmas Island where the asylum-seekers were to be detained while security and health checks were carried out and their asylum claims processed. The next day, an explosion sank the boat, killed six of its passengers and badly injured dozens of others. The explosion was apparently caused when fuel that had been poured onto the deck, possibly to compel the Navy to take the boat's passengers to Australia, was accidentally ignited. The boat was the sixth so-called suspected illegal entry vessel (SIEV) to arrive in Australian waters since the beginning of the year.<sup>1</sup>

For several days, questions arising from the tragedy preoccupied politicians, journalists and the Australian public. Many of these questions were about possible parallels with events in 2001 after the Australian Government's refusal to let the Norwegian container ship *Tampa* land more than 400 asylum-seekers on Christmas Island (see Chapter 5). The perspectives of politicians and commentators were influenced by memories and histories of the Tampa affair and its aftermath. For example, the government's information management strategy was informed by an analysis of the 'children overboard' affair of 2001, when the Liberal-National Coalition Government of John Howard claimed—wrongly, as it turned out—that asylum-seekers aboard SIEV 4 had thrown their children overboard in a callous attempt to force the Australian Navy to abandon its plan of towing the boat back to Indonesian waters.<sup>2</sup> The Opposition too was looking to 2001: several of its members—including former Howard Government ministers Kevin Andrews, Philip Ruddock and Alexander Downer—seemed to believe that a line that had won them an election eight years earlier could save them once again.<sup>3</sup> In editorials, journalists were asking how the situation in 2009 differed from that in 2001, with several commenting on the need to avoid a repeat of the hysteria that had beset the country eight years earlier.<sup>4</sup>

It is safe to assume that the government carefully analysed the events of 2001 also to gauge the potential of being perceived as weak on border protection. One day after the explosion aboard the SIEV, Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, identified those ultimately responsible for it: the people smugglers, 'the vilest form of human life' who 'should rot in jail, and in my own view, rot in hell'.<sup>5</sup> His shrill outburst was arguably both a ploy to deflect any criticism levelled at the government and to identify a party that could be held responsible not only for the tragic events of 16 April but for the arrival of 'boat people' more generally,

and an attempt to avoid doing what Howard and his government had done in 2001—namely, blaming refugees for embarking on perilous journeys to Australia.<sup>6</sup>

It is likely that Rudd and his ministers saw parallels between the response of the Liberals and Nationals in 2009 and Labor's response in 2001. In both cases, the Opposition was divided and its leadership indecisive. In both cases, the government pounced on this weakness. In both cases, the Leader of the Opposition was compelled to adopt a stance that appeared to be counterintuitive: in 2001, Labor leader, Kim Beazley, eventually sided with the government for fear that he would be seen as weak, while in 2009, Malcolm Turnbull let himself—at least temporarily—be drawn into the corner of Liberal Party hardliners who were barracking for a return to the asylum-seeker regime that had been introduced by Howard and his Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, and dismantled from 2005 onwards, initially at the urging of a small number of government backbenchers.<sup>7</sup>

While politicians and journalists turned to history to interpret the situation at hand, images of badly burnt victims arriving in hospitals in Perth and Darwin prompted memories that were seemingly unrelated: of the recent Victorian bushfires and, more significantly, of the 2002 Bali bombing when many of those injured in the blast had been evacuated to Darwin and from there transferred to burns units in other capital cities.<sup>8</sup> These memories also shaped the public's response to the tragedy: notwithstanding the suspicion that the explosion had been caused by those aboard the asylum-seeker boat, it was the Bali bombing that provided the most enduring prism through which the arrival of injured 'boat people' was interpreted.

How are history and memory implicated in policy making and political debate? What processes of remembering and forgetting do political leaders utilise when making or defending policy decisions? Does the use of history and public memory enhance or inhibit the policy making process? These are the central questions that have shaped the contributions to this volume.

The broad questions addressed here are not new. Political scientists and historians have paid close attention to the use of historical analogy in policy making.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, they have explored, for example, to what extent the international community's response to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was predetermined by the failed intervention in Somalia,<sup>10</sup> or how Ronald Reagan's response in the mid-1980s, when seven US citizens were taken hostage in Lebanon, was shaped by his reading of the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–81, which had paved the way for his emphatic election win in November 1980.<sup>11</sup> The case that has perhaps more than any other attracted political scientists interested in the use of historical analogies is the American response in the Cuban missile crisis, which relied heavily on particular readings of the past (see also Chapter 2).<sup>12</sup>

Most of the scholarship on the use of the past in policy making has focused on issues of crisis management and/or on foreign policy. In moments of crisis, policy makers act in a climate of uncertainty and are more likely to perceive the need for a *proven* solution. They cannot have recourse to making incremental changes to existing policy measures but are in need of a response that—in terms of its significance and momentum—corresponds to the dramatic departure from the norm they experience. Furthermore, during a crisis, policy making has to rely on a comparatively large degree of conjecture. That is particularly true for natural disasters and international crises. In both instances, there is a pronounced sense of unpredictability. The forces of nature and foreign actors (be they governments or terrorist groups) are perceived as capricious because of a lack of reliable intelligence about their behaviour. In such cases, policy makers turn to history, not least to be reassured.

Crises also present themselves as potential lessons. While, for example, the fight against the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria was informed by lessons learnt during, and from, the Black Friday fires in January 1939 or the Ash Wednesday fires in February 1983, the catastrophe was also perceived as an opportunity to gain knowledge that could be applied during similar emergencies in the future. Crises therefore prompt policy makers to look back, towards useful pasts, and to look ahead, towards a future when the present has itself become a useful past.<sup>13</sup>

The papers assembled in this book have a specific focus. Drawing on memory studies and policy studies, their authors reflect on the complex interrelationship between past and present issues and concerns and the political and policy dynamics it creates in immigration, refugee and asylum-seeker, and citizenship policy. They are concerned only peripherally with crisis management and explore domestic policy issues that usually do not feature in a literature that is preoccupied with foreign policy crises and natural disasters.

Scholars analysing the use of historical analogies have also neglected these areas of policy making because history does not seem to feature prominently in the deliberations of policy makers dealing with immigration, refugee or citizenship issues. Immigration policy, in particular, is an inherently contemporary and future-focused enterprise; policy makers determine the levels and types of entry on a year-by-year basis according to present circumstances (for example, the need to fill labour shortages or respond to a pressing refugee crisis) and/or future planning. This present/future focus extends to migration settlement policy. In Australia and in New Zealand, strongly integrationist—and, previously, assimilationist—cultural assumptions have encouraged a view among policy makers that migrants should abandon their old histories, identities and loyalties and begin their lives afresh. The histories and experiences of migrants up until their disembarkation in the new country are denuded of meaning or relevance.

At its most obvious, this enforced rupture between past and present circumstances is manifested in the official neglect of new settlers' prior skills and qualifications. It extends to the neglect of individual and collective migrant histories and their place in the national story.

In the areas that interest us here, policy making is also strongly influenced by political circumstances, further problematising any substantive attempt to deal with the past when determining policy. The political sensitivities surrounding immigration in Australia and New Zealand have generally been contained through the maintenance of political bipartisanship. The presentation of a united front by the major parties and the general support of major pressure groups have provided legitimacy to immigration decision making. At the same time, however, it might have had the effect of discouraging rigor in policy debates or the questioning of policy fundamentals. When this political consensus has been threatened (for example, by then Liberal leader John Howard in Australia or by New Zealand First leader, Winston Peters), the highly charged circumstances of these threats have not encouraged reasoned debate and analysis either.

Finally, immigration is formulated according to a bureaucratic structure and culture which demands transparency, consistency and adherence to rules, and in which a variety of political interests are constantly balanced. As Charles Lindblom points out, this tends to encourage an incremental, reactive and ad hoc approach whereby policy making is formulated and administered as a continuum, with only gradual change evident over specific time frames.<sup>14</sup> This incremental approach, combined with the practical and political concerns that surround immigration, deters policy makers from any substantive engagement with past practices and attitudes in determining solutions to present-day concerns.

Australia's Department of Immigration and the New Zealand Immigration Service (NZIS) have shown a remarkable lack of interest in their own pasts. Neither has commissioned or otherwise funded a substantial historical analysis of the development of immigration policy. The following anecdote illustrates the lack of interest that seems to prevail among those responsible for Australia's immigration policy. A few years ago, the Department of Immigration privatised its archives. In the rush to hand over to the private operator, the long-serving departmental archivists must have left without passing on their considerable institutional memory. One of the immediate consequences of that loss epitomises the consequences of the lack of interest evidenced by the new arrangements: while the majority of the department's policy files were deposited with the National Archives of Australia, the department retained the only copy of a subject index for those files—but, following the privatisation, had to be reminded of its existence and precise location in the basement of the department's head office.

Department of Immigration and NZIS policy files document incremental developments and dramatic policy shifts. New Zealand's and Australia's immigration histories contain several examples of decisive policy and paradigm changes that substantively changed the character, politics and public representation of immigration policy. Australian examples include the launch of the mass immigration program in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the decision to set up the Department of Immigration, the shift to continental European immigration in 1947, the end of the White Australia Policy between 1966 and 1973, the birth of multiculturalism during the 1970s, the introduction of mandatory detention for unauthorised boat arrivals in 1992 and the hardline approach to asylum-seekers adopted by the Howard Government between 1999 and 2001, which was encapsulated by temporary protection visas and the so-called 'Pacific Solution'. New Zealand's immigration history had fewer dramatic turns than Australia's, but there, too, the composition of the migrant intake changed significantly as a result of momentous policy decisions. New Zealand's refugee resettlement regime underwent a complete transformation: from a case-by-case admission of people who were sponsored by the churches, to a quota system that no longer relied on sponsorship. Dramatic changes too have tended to reinforce a view of complete rupture from past attitudes and practices. They have discouraged a search for policy analogies, the assumption being that the past offers nothing of relevance or value for dealing with new circumstances.

The neglect of history is evident in another aspect of immigration: the public political debates that surround it. This neglect partly reflects the broad marginalisation of immigration history in both countries. While immigration is acknowledged as fundamental to the creation of the two settler states, its history does not enjoy significant status or popularity because its importance is constrained by the cultural and ideological interests that surround immigration and ensure immigration history matters only in so far as it relates to the nation-state more broadly. Far less central to the national story are the individual and collective migrant histories and the history of the agencies administering immigration, of which the history of immigration is also constituted. The failure of Australians and New Zealanders to know this history except in superficial and statist-nationalist terms undoubtedly influences the tenor and dynamics of public political debate. Immigration debates—be they about the size and composition of the migrant intake or the admission or deportation of individuals—occur regularly in both countries but are generally characterised by the absence of informed opinion and of a tangible conceptual and historical framework for understanding contemporary issues and events. The political interests and practical concerns surrounding immigration that we have outlined above reinforce this historical vacuum.

There is a sense, however, in which history clearly does have a tangible presence in immigration discourse and is self-consciously used by politicians for practical, political and/or ideological purposes. This representational and strategic use of history has become more prevalent in recent years, facilitated by the historical vacuum that surrounds immigration, allowing political leaders to shape and create immigration narratives as they see fit. A range of narratives has developed in both countries in the past few decades and is used actively in public discourse. In both countries, it includes the claim that 'we' are a humanitarian nation with a long history of accommodating refugees. In Australia, there is the additional claim that 'we' are a multicultural nation with a long and successful record of welcoming and settling people from around the globe. Such stories are key ingredients of a unifying narrative for the nation-state—something that is common to all nations perhaps, but arguably has more relevance in a settler society where it offers reassurance of social cohesion, unity and identity despite the disparate histories and cultures of the population.

Patriotic narratives of 'our' generous welcome to newcomers rely on a highly selective process of remembering and forgetting the past. Governments variously fashion, employ and draw on them to explain and legitimate specific policy actions or to deflect attention and criticism from controversial decisions. Such narratives can provide short-term political advantages for politicians but they can have significant constraining effects. They discourage any substantive engagement with the complexity of historical process. They tend to reinforce the view of migrants' histories as beginning at disembarkation and having relevance only in so far as they fulfil specific contemporary statist-nationalist needs. The selective use of the past means policy makers forgo the opportunity to actively learn from the historical record.

The chapters presented in this volume provide insights into three dimensions of the relationship between immigration and citizenship policy on the one hand, and history on the other: policy making (Glenn Nicholls, Roderic Pitty, Klaus Neumann and Gwenda Tavan), public debate (Neumann, Amy Nethery and Olaf Kleist) and history making (Kleist, Ann Beaglehole and Tavan). All seven authors are directly or indirectly responding to a 2004 article by Annika Brändström, Fredrik Bynander and Paul 't Hart in which they developed a typology of historical analogies.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on two case studies—the decision by EU leaders in 2000 to impose sanctions against Austria after the party of the ring-wing populist Jörg Haider became the junior partner in a coalition government, and the so-called Hårsfjärden incident in 1982 when the Swedish Navy tried to hunt down a Soviet submarine that had supposedly entered Swedish territorial waters—Brändström et al. identify six mechanisms determining the use of historical analogies, which in turn result in six distinct enabling or constraining impacts.

In the papers assembled here, the focus is on the failure to employ historical analogies in the first place and on the constraining effects of history and memory. All contributors would respond with an emphatic ‘yes’ to the question ‘does history matter?’ and deplore the fact that policy making and public debate are rarely informed by a nuanced understanding of the past. The arguments put forward in the following chapters, however, go beyond such a critique and explore the reasons for and implications of the failure to harness and employ historical knowledge. While identifying a—sometimes surprising—disregard for detailed historical analysis, however, the authors of the following chapters agree that the past looms large when Australians and New Zealanders make and debate immigration, refugee and citizenship policy. It is one of the central aims of this book to draw attention to the presence the past has in the present.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Arup, Tom and Nicholson, Brendan 2009, ‘Sabotage fear on boat blast’, *Age*, 17 April 2009; Jackson, Andra and Arup, Tom 2009, ‘Blast warning revealed as Rudd declares war on “vile” people smugglers’, *Age*, 18 April 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Grattan, Michelle 2009, ‘Rudd must resist being spooked’, *Age*, 17 April 2009. For the events of 2001, see Marr, David and Wilkinson, Marian 2003, *Dark Victory*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.
- <sup>3</sup> Kerr, Christian 2009, ‘Pacific solution effective: Downer’, *Weekend Australian*, 17–18 April 2009; Grattan, Michelle 2009, ‘Return arrivals, says Andrews’, *Age*, 22 April 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, Grattan, Michelle 2009, ‘There and back again on refugees’, *Age*, 17 April 2009; Marr, David 2009, ‘Who’s afraid of the “r” word?’, *Age*, 18 April 2009; ‘Trickle of asylum seekers stirs old fears of flood’, Editorial, *Age*, 18 April 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Kerr, Christian 2009, ‘Rudd rhetoric blows Turnbull tirade to hell’, *Weekend Australian*, 18–19 April 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Craven, Peter 2009, ‘PM plays game of morality’, *Australian*, 24 April 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> For the dismantling of Ruddock and Howard’s asylum-seeker regime, see O’Neill, Margot 2008, *Blind Conscience*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- <sup>8</sup> Munro, Catherine and Liston, Gail 2009, ‘Bali experience helps hospitals swing into action’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 2009, <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/bali-experience-helps-hospitals-swing-into-action-20090416-a8x3.html>>; Miles, Janelle and Cavanagh, Rebekah 2009, ‘Boat blast victims to be treated in Brisbane’, *Courier-Mail*, 17 April 2009, <<http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,25345847-953,00.html>>
- <sup>9</sup> For detailed studies, see, for example, Neustadt, Richard E. and May, Ernest R. 1986, *Thinking in Time: The uses of history for decision makers*, Free Press, New York; Yuen Foong Khong 1992, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- <sup>10</sup> Brunk, Darren C. 2008, ‘Curing the Somalia syndrome: analogy, foreign policy decision making, and the Rwandan genocide’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 301–20.
- <sup>11</sup> Hemmer, Christopher 1999, ‘Historical analogies and the definition of interests: the Iranian hostage crisis and Ronald Reagan’s policy toward the hostages in Lebanon’, *Political Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 267–89.
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, most recently: Tierney, Dominic 2007, ‘“Pearl Harbor in reverse”: moral analogies in the Cuban missile crisis’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 49–77.
- <sup>13</sup> See Boin, Arjen, McConnell, Allen and ‘t Hart, Paul (eds) 2008, *Governing After Crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- <sup>14</sup> Lindblom, Charles E. 1959, ‘The science of muddling through’, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 79–88.
- <sup>15</sup> Brändström, Annika, Bynander, Frederik and ‘t Hart, Paul 2004, ‘Governing by looking back: historical analogies and crisis management’, *Public Administration*, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 191–210.