

Comment on ‘The Human Tide’, *60 Minutes*: 25 October 2009

I am writing to comment on the *60 Minutes* segment, ‘The Human Tide’, aired on 25 October 2009. The plight of 10.5 million refugees and 26 million internally displaced persons worldwide is a notoriously complex and challenging problem.¹ While the Australian government has a right to maintain sovereignty of its borders, as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it also has a duty to humanely process the claims of those seeking our protection. The issue of refugees has already bitterly divided Australia during the Howard years and brought international condemnation for abuses of human rights. I argue that *60 Minutes* presented a polemic view. Within its broader focus on people smuggling, it used language which once again incites a climate of irrational hostility towards asylum seekers and perpetuates an ignorance of the plight of extremely vulnerable human beings.

Refugee movements worldwide

Inflammatory and misleading language used throughout the segment implied that Australia has a massive number of asylum seekers waiting to come to its shores. This included the title ‘The Human Tide’, and references to ‘a constant human tide heading southward’ and a ‘flood of refugees’.² This showed an appalling lack of broader contextual information, and a wilful disregard of the facts on the trends in refugee movements worldwide.

Australia is no exception in receiving claims. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported a rise in claims for asylum across 44 industrialized countries – not just Australia - in the last two years as a result of worsening conditions in countries such as Afghanistan. Moreover, the number seeking asylum in Australia is drastically lower than the number in other countries. America, Canada, France, Italy and the United Kingdom are the five industrialised countries which receive the most claims. A

¹ UNHCR, *Note on International Protection*, Standing Committee: 45th Meeting, <<http://www.unhcr.org/4a48d93a9.pdf>>, 5 June 2009, accessed 27 October 2009, p. 1.

² Michael Usher (reporter) & Shaun Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’, *60 Minutes*, Story transcripts, <<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/stories/919502/the-human-tide>>, 13 October 2009, accessed 27 October 2009.

provisional report by the UNHCR shows that approximately 383,000 asylum claims were made to industrialized countries in 2008.³

In further contrast, other countries, such as Iran, have long hosted disproportionately high numbers of refugees for many years. For example, from 1991-1992, Iran hosted over 4.5 million refugees out of a global refugee community of 9.7 million.⁴ It presently hosts almost 1 million, one of the largest refugee populations worldwide.⁵ Australia, however, at the time of writing has only received about 1,700 people by boat this year. In short, the number of claims in Australia is comparatively miniscule. Additionally, Australian Immigration statistics estimate that in July 2009, there were 48,500 people unlawfully in Australia. Most of this number are visa over-stayers.⁶ This is in stark contrast to the 1,700 unauthorised boat arrivals. *60 Minutes*, along with other media outlets, overlooks the large number of visa over-stayers in favour of waging fear campaigns against the fewer boat arrivals.

The cost to the Australian taxpayer

60 Minutes also raised concerns that people smuggling costs the Australian taxpayer ‘a lot of money’, a concern which was heartily picked up by those commenting on the blog.⁷ This echoed a theme promoted by the *Channel Nine News* report on 19 October 2009 which sensationally claimed that new refugees were incurring alarmingly high welfare costs. Centrelink has publicly refuted these claims, stating that it ‘cannot account for figures in the *Channel Nine News* report. The figures do not reflect the data Centrelink provided’.⁸ Channel Nine presented misleading and inaccurate information, arguably to appeal to a

³ UNHCR, *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialised Countries: First Half 2009*, 21 October 2009, pp. 2-6; UNHCR, *Conflicts in Afghanistan and Somalia Fuel Increase in Asylum Seekers*, <<http://www.unhcr.org/49c8a8d62.html>>, 24 March 2009, accessed 27 October 2009, pp. 1, 2.

⁴ Omid Vafa, *Refugees in Iran and international security* (abstract), Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, <<http://www.allacademic.com>>, March 2006, accessed 25 October 2009.

⁵ UNHCR, ‘2010 UNCHR country operations profile – Islamic Republic of Iran’, *UNHCR Global Appeal 2010-2011*, <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486f96>>, 2009, accessed 14 December 2009.

⁶ Radio Australia News, ‘Australia’s immigration debate’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, <<http://www.radioaustralianews.net.au/stories/2009>>, 16 October 2009, accessed 28 October 2009.

⁷ Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’; ‘Michael Usher: The Human Tide’, *60 Minutes Team Blog*, <<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/blog>>, October 2009, accessed 27 November 2009.

⁸ ‘Welfare and refugees’, *Media Watch*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts>>, 2009, accessed 28 October 2009, pp. 1-4.

specific audience which now continues to accept it as fact. It is of concern that *60 Minutes* added to this hysteria by continuing with a short-sighted theme of costs to the taxpayer.

We are a wealthy first-world nation, which has historically depended on and prospered from the arrival of newcomers. Our economy is also experiencing one of the most rapid upturns internationally, leaving us well equipped to assist what is a comparatively small number of refugees. Moreover, a scholarly comparison between the costs and benefits of resettling genuine refugees with the vast costs of turning boats back at sea and housing asylum seekers elsewhere, I suggest might well favour the former.

Inflammatory language

The use of language, such as ‘The Human Tide’, also draws on Australia’s century-old fear of an invasion by its Asian neighbours in the north. For example, in the late 1800s, William Lane developed the ‘swarming populations’ theory, in which he argued that as nations became over-populated, they would find the vastly unoccupied regions of Australia irresistible for invasion.⁹ A hundred and twenty years later, we are still drawing on this type of language - language which fosters an enduring racism and xenophobia. Australia’s geographical position and island status, in fact, provides a ready buffer against unauthorised arrivals which many other landlocked countries do not enjoy.

Michael Usher, on one hand, appeared to show empathy for the claustrophobic conditions the asylum seekers endured below the decks of the fishing vessels. He then likened the asylum seekers to ‘rats in a hole’. This metaphor is disturbingly reminiscent of the way Chinese newcomers in the nineteenth century were aligned with filth and likened to animals in racist slurs. In 1861, for example, the Chinese were referred to as a ‘swarm of Mongolian locusts’.¹⁰ The idea of ‘rats in a hole’ conjures up unspoken images of vermin, plague and disease commonly associated with rats. This part of the segment offered compassion on one hand, and an insidious denigration on the other.

⁹ William Lane, cited in Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia’s Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of the Tampa*, 2nd edn, Sydney, 2001, p. 28.

¹⁰ Prospectus of Miners’ Protective League, *Miner*, 6 Mar 1861.

The harrowing circumstances which force people to flee

Usher acknowledged that asylum seekers are ‘desperate people’. He also presented Australia as a ‘paradise’ for refugees ‘when compared to their strife-torn homelands’. He added that they ‘dare to come’ because ‘they know very well if they can prove they’re genuine refugees, *they’re in*’.¹¹ Again, on one hand, this offers a fleeting reference to the refugees’ suffering. However, it is then dominated by the simplistic idea that refugees are merely seeking better circumstances than their own country and that a refugee status is type of a manipulative ticket which can be used to get ‘in’ to a land of milk and honey.

This overlooks the harrowing circumstances from which refugees flee, factors so often forgotten. Refugees are not engaged in matters of comparison; refugees are fleeing persecution and seeking protection for their lives. Abdul Hassan Hussein was interviewed about his attempts to travel from Indonesia to Australia. Abdul is clearly an ethnic Hazara. Most of those coming on boats from Afghanistan are Hazaras and their history provides an example of such push factors.

After being brutally subjugated and dispossessed of lands during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman in the late 1880s in Afghanistan,¹² the Hazaras have invariably suffered over a century of marginalisation and persecution because of ethnic and religious differences. As Shiite Muslims among a largely Sunni Muslim population in Afghanistan, they are a minority and have long been considered by some to be ‘infidels’. They have been fleeing renewed persecution by the Taliban and other extremists. Their suffering has included numerous massacres, such as the 2001 Yakaolang massacre by Taliban soldiers and the 1993 Afshar massacre in which 700-750 Hazara civilians were slaughtered or remain missing.¹³ Like Abdul, many of those seeking asylum have personally had family members abducted, raped

¹¹ Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’.

¹² See Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, pp. 5, 38, 39.

¹³ Denise Phillips, Wounded memories of Hazara refugees: An analysis of remembering and forgetting persecution experiences through oral history narratives, Honours thesis, University of New England, Armidale, 2008; Also see Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, Richmond, 1998; and Peter Marsden, *Afghanistan: Minorities, Conflict and the Search for Peace*, London, 2001, p. 9; and The Afghanistan Justice Project, *Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity: 1978-2001*, <<http://afghanjusticeproject.org/warcrimesandcrimesagainsthumanity19792001.pdf>>, 2005, accessed 1 March 2008, pp. 82-88.

or killed. Usher gave only scant attention to Abdul having shared that his father and brother had been killed by the Taliban, and that Abdul feared for his life. Indeed, it was unclear whether Usher even believed him. When interviewing young men such as Abdul who are willing to engage people smugglers, *60 Minutes* would do well to place much greater emphasis on explaining the deeply harrowing circumstances which force people to take such desperate measures. Refugees are not simply looking for ‘paradise’ or the euphemistically termed ‘ticket to freedom’, but are seeking safety from truly horrific circumstances. The idea of an orderly ‘queue’ in this fuller context also becomes untenable.¹⁴

‘Illegal’ activity versus the right to seek asylum

Usher’s choice of language is not only inflammatory, but also erroneous. He refers to asylum seekers as engaging in ‘illegal’ activity.¹⁵ Australia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 14 states that everyone has the right to seek asylum from persecution.¹⁶ While the arrival of these boats is indeed unauthorised, to seek asylum is a lawful activity. Furthermore, at no point did *60 Minutes* mention that as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Australia has a moral and legal duty to process such claims.

The myth of ‘soft’ policies under Labor

60 Minutes promoted the idea that Australia’s refugee policies under the Rudd Labor government are now ‘soft’ on refugees and that this has attracted the rise in boat arrivals.¹⁷ I have mentioned above that asylum claims have risen across the globe. This supports the view that the rise in Australia is driven by worsening circumstances in countries of origin rather than policy changes. It should also be noted that after the introduction of Temporary Protection Visas in 1999 – a supposed deterrence policy – that the number of boat arrivals continued to rise. Furthermore, although Labor abolished Temporary Protection Visas and the Pacific Solution, little has actually changed. Labor continues to turn boats back at sea and process claims offshore. Moreover, its negotiations with Indonesia for it to intercept and process asylum seekers en route to Australia appears to echo elements of the Pacific Solution, a policy which arguably flouts humanitarian responsibilities. In public comments on 27 October 2009, Gerard Henderson also rightly notes that historically Labor has adopted hard-

¹⁴ See Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’.

¹⁵ Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’.

¹⁶ Article 14, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations, 2009, <<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>> accessed 28 October 2009.

¹⁷ Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), ‘The Human Tide’.

line policies on refugees. It was Labor, for example, which enforced mandatory detention in 1992. John Howard also echoed Bob Hawke's statements of 1977, in which Hawke stated that Australia should decide how it would exercise compassion and who would come to its shores.¹⁸

Interestingly, *60 Minutes* consulted no established experts who could have offered objective perspectives on various facets. These might have included Professor William Maley for expertise on Afghanistan, Mary Crock and David Manne on refugee law, or Hassan Ghulam on the plight of asylum seekers in Indonesia. Others, of course, could offer expertise on Sri Lanka. Yet, although presenting people smugglers as 'crooks' and as 'tricky' people who engage in an 'evil trade', *60 Minutes* considered the people smuggler Majid to be a credible authority on Australian policy to declare it as 'soft'.¹⁹

The human perspective

Finally, more important than the statistics and arguments are the human lives at stake. As an historian, I have had a close involvement with Hazara refugees from Afghanistan now for a number of years. In that time, I have seen their immense suffering, as a result of trauma and loss. Many suffer a heartbreaking longing for their homelands and their loved ones. If given an option, they would choose a safe Afghanistan, free from war, and to be with their family. However, continuing war and bloodshed makes this impossible.

Australia recently increased its troop commitment to Afghanistan. Yet, we struggle to extend our compassion to those who flee. One of the effects (at least evident among those making comments on the blog) of the *60 Minutes* segment is that hostility towards both people smugglers and asylum seekers has been further engendered.²⁰ Also from these comments, *60 Minutes* appears to have encouraged the tendency to sweep asylum seekers and people smugglers into the one category. Within this contentious debate over refugees, a desire to demonise appears evident. The Howard government demonised the refugees, and now others demonise the people smugglers. This continues to divert focus from reasoned debate and humane responses to our fellow human beings.

¹⁸ Gerard Henderson, 'Wielding the whip on asylum seekers: both sides have done it', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics>>, 27 October 2009.

¹⁹ Usher (reporter) & Devitt (producer), 'The Human Tide'.

²⁰ 'Michael Usher: The Human Tide', *60 Minutes Team Blog*.

Compassion is something which Australians have a great capacity for, particularly when guided by our leaders and given balanced information about crises. I urge our politicians and those with a voice within the media, such as Channel Nine, to encourage reasoned compassion rather than hostility towards asylum seekers. One of the greatest antidotes to the suspicions which Australians might feel is to encourage them to get to know some of the refugees who are already here. The Hazaras, for example, display in abundance qualities that are invaluable to the Australian community. They are hard-working, family-loving, honest and willing to lend a helping hand to anybody. Indeed, some of those who have made tremendous contributions to our country have been refugees, such as medical scientist Gustav Nossal. Given the chance, Australians would find the Hazaras, in spite of great suffering, to be among the most truly delightful, hospitable and loyal people you could find anywhere.

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