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Words Excusing Exclusion

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Abstract

The 'war against terror' with its ill-defined enemy has unleashed a new kind of exclusionary discourse which allows people to imagine an enemy among the unknown and strange. This paper focuses on the discourse on asylum seekers employed by Australian politicians from main parties and sections of the media. It shows how the terms 'illegal', 'queue jumper' and 'border protection' and assessments of unrespectable behaviour are used to generate antagonism against asylum seekers and support for government treatment of them. This is contrasted with earlier examples of discourse excluding new arrivals, such as the early versions of Advance Australia Fair and with more recent instances of overt racist discourse. Some comparisons are made with European discourse.

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Exclusionary discourse has made a comeback in mainstream Australia in recent years. The ‘war against terror’ has unleashed the latest episode in the historical tension in Australia between the forces of inclusion, openness and tolerance of diversity and those of exclusion and xenophobia. This time an ill-defined notion allows the hearer/reader to imagine an enemy among the unknown and the ‘other’. This includes not only prejudice against all Muslims, especially easily identifiable Muslim women, but also against Asians and Africans. Note the overt and unashamedly racist discourse of Andrew Fraser against Australians of Sudanese and Chinese background in his letter (26 July 2005) to the *Parramatta Sun*. Two other recent instances of exclusionary discourse have been Pauline Hanson’s overt racist discourse and the public debate on asylum seekers. This paper focuses on the latter, drawing on statements of politicians from the contemporary European discourse on refugees. I will focus on the choice of vocabulary in the representation of asylum seekers in some public discourse in 2001 and put the exclusionary discourse in historical context. cursory comparisons will be made with the public discourse in Europe.

Two incidents provide the occasion for the discourse – the Tampa affair (August 2001) and the ‘Children Overboard’ affair (October 2001). As both are well known, I do not have to provide details. Both incidents provided the Howard Government with an opportunity to demonstrate its strong ‘leadership’ in the face of what it projected as a national threat.

Initially the asylum seekers in the leaky boats were excluded through dehumanization – being described by the media as ‘boatloads’ and ‘cargo’. When more attention was given to them, they began to be demonized. I would like to concentrate on the field of words around ‘refugee’ and the items ‘queue-jumper’ and ‘border protection’.

A refugee is a person who flees (religious or political) persecution. In Australia this word tends to have positive connotations, especially once the people are settled in Australia. Refugees are basically nice people who are worthy of compassion and will usually make a positive contribution to the Australian nation. Most Australians can give examples from their own circle of friends or among well-known personalities. So if the government wanted people to approve of their treatment of asylum seekers, they would have to find another label, one that does not have positive connotations. The contrast is very blatant in the Prime Minister’s statement on 8 October 2001 during the ‘Children Overboard’ affair:

‘Genuine refugees don’t do that.’¹

He was in effect passing judgment on the asylum seekers before their case had been heard by any refugee tribunal on grounds other than whether they were fleeing from persecution. But more importantly, he was ‘leading’ public opinion with the follow-up words:

‘I don’t want people like that in Australia.’

This exclusionary statement echoes ones from Pauline Hanson and David Etheridge of One Nation on ‘unassimilated’ Asian migrants:

‘We don’t want people like that in Australia.’

They professed to speak on behalf of ‘ordinary Australians’ whereas the Prime Minister gave leadership in the opinions of ordinary Australians.

The projection of these harmless people constituting a threat to the nation’s moral standards was continued by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer the same day:

‘Any civilized person wouldn’t dream of treating their own children that way.’²

There are parallels here with discourse on refugees in Europe – the differentiation between real and bogus refugees has been reported in parliamentary debates in Austria, Britain and the Netherlands.³ There is also a European precedent, in Austria, Britain and France, of conservative governments taking over the discourse on refugees of right-wing fringe groups.⁴

The *Herald-Sun* of 8 October, conducted a poll on the topic:

‘Should boat-people who threw their children overboard be accepted into Australia *as refugees*?’⁵

Unsurprisingly 95.67% of those responding voted no.

1.. *Herald-Sun*, 8 October, 2001.

2. *The Age*, 8 October, 2001.

3. Lena Jones, ‘Immigration and Parliamentary Discourse in Great Britain: An Analysis of the debates related to the 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act’, in Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk eds, *Racism at the Top: Parliamentary Discourses on Ethnic Issues in Six European States* (Klagenfurt, 2002), 79-106; Maria Sedlak, ‘You really do make an unrespectable foreigner policy: Discourse on ethnic issues in the Austrian Parliament’, in Wodak and Van Dijk, 107-168; Ineke Van der Valk, ‘Parliamentary discourse on illegal immigrants, sylum and integration: the case of Holland’, in Wodak and Van Dijk, 261-282.

4. Eva Vetter, ‘Rassismus – ein internationaler Vergleich’, *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* 51/52 (1994): 40-63.

5. My italics.

If these people were not refugees, what were they? Parliamentarians from both major parties taking part in the debate on 29 August had no difficulty finding the right vocabulary: ‘illegals’, ‘illegal refugees’, ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘illegal arrivals’, and even ‘occasional tourists’. I am not sure that a person can be illegal, but what these terms do is to declare the unauthorized arrivals as ‘non-people’ which enables them and their children to be treated accordingly – detained without trial, under sub-human conditions. (This has parallels with President Bush’s use of ‘illegal combattants’, referring to those imprisoned as terrorists at Guantanamo Bay.)

On 15 June 2004, a guideline from the Australian Press Council cautioned the media against ‘such unqualified terms’ as illegals.

We have mentioned that the behaviour of the asylum seekers was deemed to be contrary to the national family values. In fact they were sometimes depicted as bullies and criminals:

‘We will not let people force their way into this country by undesirable behaviour’⁶

Because they were brought to Australia by people smugglers, they were linked to criminality. This came out in Opposition Leader Kim Beazley’s ambiguous statement, defending his party’s failure to adopt a different policy from that of the government:

‘It is *not unhumanitarian* to try to deter criminals’.⁷

The Prime Minister collocated ‘boat people, drug runners and other illegals’. This link also came up in the election campaign:

‘Our nation must be protected from the activities of people smugglers, drug traffickers and the introduction of diseases and dangerous goods’.⁸

So asylum seekers were the result of the activities of people smugglers in the same way as dangerous goods resulted from the activities of drug traffickers.

Another negative level for the asylum seekers was ‘queue jumpers’, or as government senator Kay Ellison put it in Parliament on 29 August 2001:

‘queue jumpers over the many *genuine refugees*’.⁹

6. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, ABC, 8 October, 2001.

7. *The Age*, 8 October 2001.

8. Prime Minister’s Action Plan for the Future, Election Campaign, November 2001.

9. *Hansard*, 29 August 2001.

This widely employed term directed public antagonism towards the asylum seekers in three ways:

1. It appealed to the Australian mythical national value of fairness.
2. It appealed to migrants and earlier refugees from non-English-speaking countries who have been trying to get their relatives to Australia under the family reunion scheme or their friends in from refugee camps under the humanitarian scheme.
3. It was based on the British dominance of the straight line as a basis of order in society as well as in academic discourse, sport, and the conduct of meetings.

It should be noted that the admission of refugees does not affect the numbers of migrants admitted and that people wishing to flee Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran or the Palestinian Territories do not have a queue in front of an Australian legation to stand in.

Also, according to an exit poll at the 2001 election, 73% of voters from non-English-speaking backgrounds agreed with the government's policies on asylum seekers. In this way the government was able to juggle a position against the asylum seekers which was not blatantly opposed to cultural diversity.

The term 'border protection', suggesting that asylum seekers are a threat to Australia's national sovereignty, needs to be seen in relation to the terrorist attack which had recently occurred in the U.S. The use of the term during the election campaign cannot be freed from association with terrorism even though most of the asylum seekers were claiming to be fleeing from regimes harbouring terrorists. The 2001 election saw strong competition between the major parties as to who can protect Australia's borders best. The first of the following examples actually implies a link encouraged between terrorism and asylum seekers:

'The tragic events of 11 September *and* the challenges to the integrity of our borders will require more resources – and stronger decisions.'¹⁰

'We will protect our borders and our nation's sovereignty.'¹¹

'Only Labor is committed to...provid[ing] the best protection of our national borders.'¹²

The Prime Minister is very attached to 'traditional Australian values' which he contrasts with 'political correctness'. Is the recent treatment of asylum seekers consistent with our 'traditional values'? Keeping

10. PM's letter to voters, November 2001.

11. Ros Clowes, Liberal candidate for Chisholm, November 2001.

12. Anna Burke, sitting Labor member for Chisholm, November 2001

some people out has been part of Australia's discourse for most of its history as a federated state. We only have to think of the White Australia Policy and the dictation test. Recurrent themes in the British colonial history of Australia were the threat of hordes of unwanted people invading Australia from the north, also known as the 'yellow peril'. (These were the days before Islamophobia.)

The recent past has been characterized by the use of inclusive language. This is symbolized in the national anthem *Advance Australia Fair*:

'For *those who've come* across the seas
We've boundless plains to share.'

However, the issues about the time of Federation were a boatload of Chinese from Hong Kong wanting to land on Australian shores, the annexation of New Guinea by Germany, the annexation of New Caledonia by France, and Russian ships seen in the region. The original 'politically incorrect' version of *Advance Australia Fair* ran:

'For *loyal sons* across the seas
We've boundless plains to share.'

'Loyal sons' are defined in another verse as those 'from England, Scotia, Erin's isle'.

Early paranoia about border protection is abundantly evident in a lesser known verse:

'Should foreign foe e'er sight our coast
Or dare a foot to land,
We'll rouse to arms like siers of yore
To guard our native strand;
Brittania then shall surely know,
Beyond wide oceans roll
Her sons in fair Australia's land
Still keep a British soul,
In joyful strains then let us sing
Advance Australia Fair.'

This all underlines the historical tension between open cosmopolitan and narrow isolationist strands in our history. It also demonstrates the manipulation of language and choice of vocabulary to emphasize and generate fear.

Asylum seekers are not the only people who are the object of the language of exclusion. To give just one other example, academics whose research has led them to disagree with the government are another target, as is seen in Industrial Relations Minister Kevin Andrew's retort on 17 November 2005:

‘A group of academics is no substitute for commonsense’¹³

In these days of wedge politics, we need to be aware and make the community more aware of the abuse and power of language.

¹³Interview on *AM*, 17 November 2005.