

Seeking Asylum in Australia: 1995–2005 Experiences and Policies



Proceedings

Compiled by Susan Aykut and Jessie Taylor

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Introduction

The publication of these twelve papers from the Monash University Conference *Seeking Asylum in Australia 1995-2005: Experiences and Policies* could not be more timely.

The conference itself was held over the last weekend in November 2005 – a fleeting moment of peace and quiet in the recent history of Australia’s refugee policy, during which the harshest aspects of the law had been relaxed. Following the scandals of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez Solon, and Petro Georgiou’s Private Members Bill in 2005, the Howard Government had softened its line. It had quietly admitted that it was not morally sustainable to detain children, and it had rolled back the ‘Pacific Solution’ to the point of mothballing the offshore detention facilities.

These papers are locked in time at the moment of the conference. In late November 2005, the greatest obstacles to be conquered by refugee advocates, activists, lobbyists and interested members of the legal fraternity were the harsh conditions of Bridging Visa E, and the ongoing sagas of the two young Iraqi men left on Nauru, and the remaining ninety-something asylum seekers being detained at Australia’s behest on the Indonesian island of Lombok since 2001. These were the dregs, the rough edges, the hangover of a policy left in tatters by criticism, ridicule and loss of face.

However, as these papers come to publication in August 2006, the Howard Government has tabled the *Migration Amendment (Designated Unauthorised Arrivals) Bill*, taking a violently retrograde step, thrusting Australia’s refugee policy back by years, into the darkest recesses of the post-*Tampa*, post-September 11 era, from the ‘change of culture’ and ‘softer approach to asylum seekers’ to the attitude of ‘sending a strong message to people smugglers’ and other extremely harsh ideas that resulted in the 2001 Howard election victory.

We stand on the edge of a precipice. Based on the decisions made at Parliament House in the next few weeks, Australia may be about to enter a phase of its history that will cause immeasurable additional hardship to asylum seekers, and a great deal of shame to the present generation.

This collection of papers is a retrospective of the past decade as a phase in Australia’s immigration history. We can only hope that the reflections, observations and lessons found herein will inform the future direction of Australia’s immigration policy, tending towards alignment with international obligations, and a domestic policy characterised by strength, compassion and integrity.

Jessie Taylor

