

Victims of war

Major changes in the patterns of Australian immigration began in the 1970s. They started with the Whitlam government's ending of the White Australia Policy. The flow of immigrants from Asia and other non-European areas grew steadily. The government was committed to developing a culturally diverse but cohesive society.

From 1962 to 1972 Australia maintained a military presence in South Vietnam. The commitment peaked in the second half of the 1960s with combat troops as well as air force and navy units. This was done largely to show support for the USA. All were withdrawn by early 1973.

In 1975 the Communist forces from North Vietnam overran the hopelessly corrupt south. The USA rapidly withdrew, leaving many of its Vietnamese employees and suppliers behind. They were prime targets for persecution by the new government of unified Vietnam. Similar situations developed in neighbouring Cambodia and Laos.

Refugees streamed overland into Thailand to be placed in ever-growing holding camps. Others paid huge amounts of money for near-derelect fishing boats. They sailed into the South China Sea, heading for Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines or Hong Kong. Some were attacked and killed by pirates. Others made it to the new refugee camps being established across the region.



A Royal Australian Navy crew member gives medical aid to a refugee



Vietnamese boat people about to be rescued by a passing ship

After an epic voyage, on 26 April 1976 one of these boats sailed into the harbour at Darwin carrying five Vietnamese. Thus began the modern immigration phenomenon of the 'boat people'. Another two boats arrived later in the year, having navigated all the way from the coast of Vietnam to northern Australia. A further twenty-four boats arrived in 1977.

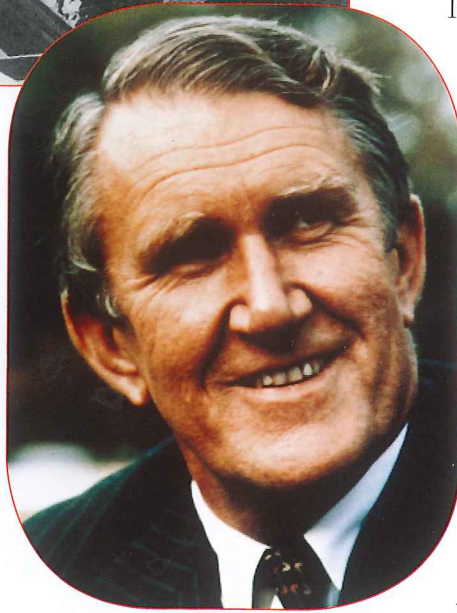
More than 137 000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians eventually would come to call Australia home. While the fishing boat arrivals captured media and public attention, most came by other means. Only about 2000 arrived by boat — the remainder were processed in the holding camps of Malaysia and Thailand.



A boat carrying Vietnamese refugees arrives at Darwin

Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser refused the Department of Immigration's request to place the boat arrivals in detention. He was determined to uphold Australia's international obligation and was supported by the Labor opposition.

The sudden arrival of large numbers of Vietnamese generated controversy, as many in the community still believed in the White Australia Policy. There were widespread calls to reject any refugees from Indo-China. Fraser went ahead with the refugee program anyway. The new arrivals were integrated into the community as quickly as possible.



Prime Minister
Malcolm Fraser

Blainey was branded as racist in the course of a divisive debate.

The Asianisation argument was reignited in 1988 by Opposition Leader John Howard. When launching the Liberal Party's One Australia policy, he called for the rate of Asian immigration to be slowed down. He believed this was necessary to maintain social cohesion.

End of decency

By the 1990s the era of decency, generosity and inclusiveness in Australia's immigration policy had ended. From 1990 the Labor Party Minister for Immigration was Gerry Hand. It was during his term that the Department of Immigration finally had its way on the handling of asylum-seekers.

Asianisation

By the 1980s there was a substantial flow of immigrants from Asian countries. Many conservative Australians opposed this development. But immigrants from Asia were a minority in the overall immigration statistics; the largest numbers continued to be from Britain and other European countries.

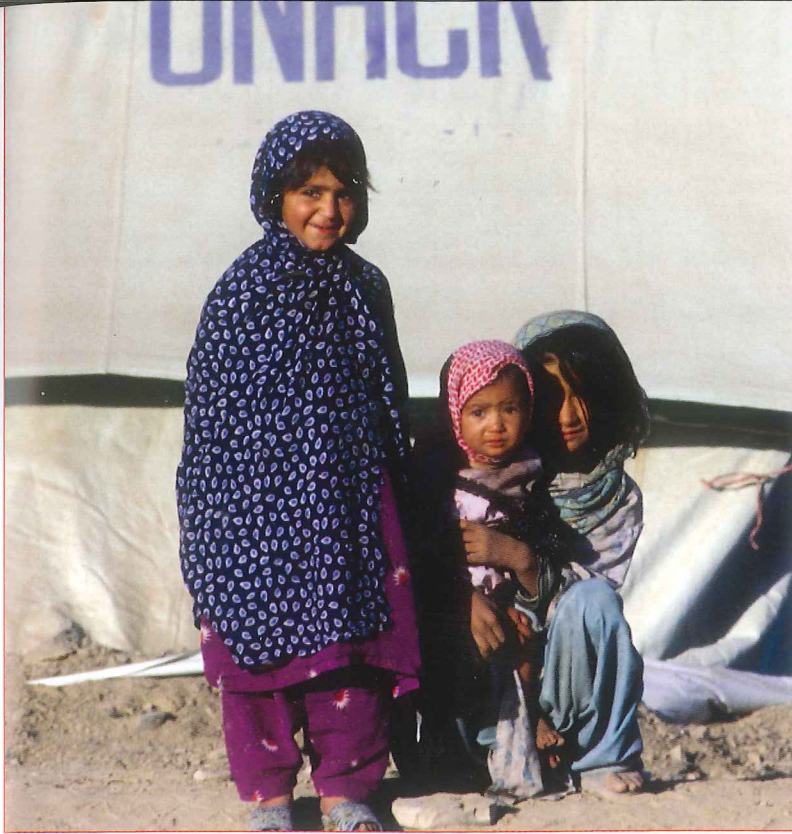
Historian Geoffrey Blainey generated great controversy in 1984 when he claimed that the government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke was promoting an Asian Australia.

Ending assisted passages

After operating since the late 1940s, the assisted-passage scheme was officially ended in 1981. The only people who would receive assistance were genuine refugees and people with special, in-demand skills. Anyone else had to pay their own fare once they were approved for permanent residence.

This was part of a raft of reforms to immigration policy. New immigrants would have to possess qualities of benefit to Australia, or have skills that were needed, or have relatives already in the country.

The Special Humanitarian Program was established to cater for people who suffered discrimination or oppression but did not fit into the existing refugee programs.



In the 1990s refugees streamed out of Afghanistan to escape the war being waged for control by the Taliban. Most were accommodated in camps in adjoining countries.

On their recommendation, Hand agreed to the opening of the first of Australia's now notorious detention centres. It was located at Port Hedland, where it would attract less attention from the media and the public.

This was a reaction to the arrival of small numbers of Cambodian refugees by boat and other means. The government claimed they were not refugees as they were no longer in danger in their homeland. The bloodthirsty Pol Pot regime had been overthrown. All were placed in the detention centre. Eventually almost all were allowed to remain in Australia.

This was in marked contrast to the generous treatment given to Chinese students in Australia after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Prime Minister Bob Hawke personally intervened to allow them to remain in Australia as long as they wished.

'Jumping queues'

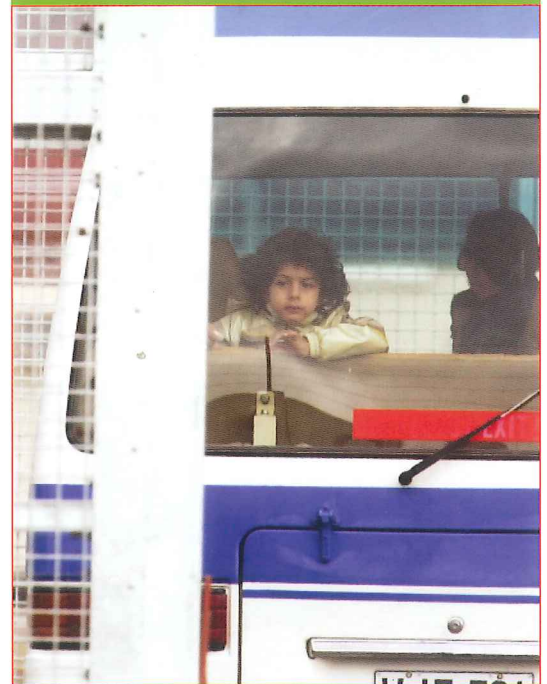
There was a large increase in arrivals of asylum-seekers by boat after the government of Prime Minister John Howard was elected in 1996. This caused a panic that led to the establishment of more detention centres around the country.

What is an asylum-seeker?

When a person seeks asylum they are asking for protection against something that has happened to them in their homeland. Usually this is persecution because of their religious, cultural or political beliefs. Australia has signed various international agreements and treaties spelling out our responsibilities to asylum-seekers.

Some asylum-seekers arrive in unseaworthy boats, usually from Indonesia. Most are intercepted and taken to Christmas Island. In recent times the government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott has used Royal Australian Navy ships to force asylum-seeker boats back to Indonesia.

Most asylum-seekers fly into Australia on commercial air services, holding a tourist visa. Once they have entered the country they apply for asylum. Many are Chinese nationals, members of the Falun Gong organisation. They are fleeing religious persecution in their homeland.



Children are driven into the Baxter Detention Centre in South Australia

Amid the hysteria these asylum-seekers were branded 'queue-jumpers'. It was claimed they should have waited in their homelands to be assessed by Australian immigration officials. Most had been waiting for years without any result. This had driven them to take direct action and risk everything to secure a new life in Australia.

After 1999, if approved for release from a detention centre, an asylum-seeker would be given a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), issued for three years. TPV holders could not accept employment or apply for unemployment benefits or bring family members to Australia.

Previously it had been usual for the father of a family to seek asylum and, when granted, he would send for the rest of his people. When the TPV made this impossible whole families began arriving by boat, making the problem much worse.

The Tampa affair

Under the government of Prime Minister John Howard the issue of boat people had been simmering for five years. Nothing the government did made any difference to the flow of asylum-seekers arriving by boat.

Then, on 26 August 2001, the issue exploded. The Norwegian container ship *MV Tampa* answered a distress call from a sinking Indonesian ferry in the Indian Ocean. After rescuing 438 asylum-seekers, the captain set course for Christmas Island. In doing so

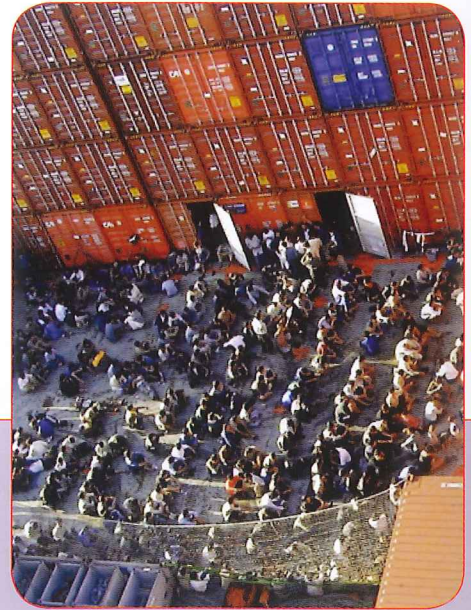


SIEV-X

The most controversial of all the boat people incidents is that of Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel 10 (SIEV-X). It sank in a storm on 18 October 2001 within the Christmas Island border protection zone. Of the 421 people on board, Indonesian fishing boats rescued 45. At least 376 men, women and children drowned during the night.

Australian authorities claimed to have been unaware of the sinking for three days. The government said the nearest Navy ship was hundreds of kilometres away. Survivors, however, claimed that Australian warships had shone searchlights on them. No claims have ever been verified.

MV Tampa (bottom).
Rescued refugees on the ship's
container deck (below).



he was obeying the international law of the sea.

The Howard government panicked, threatening to prosecute the ship's captain for people smuggling. Captain Arne Rinnan ignored this. He declared an emergency and remained on course for Christmas Island.

In a wild overreaction the government sent SAS troops to board the ship, provoking outrage around the world. Australia was accused of evading its humanitarian duties.

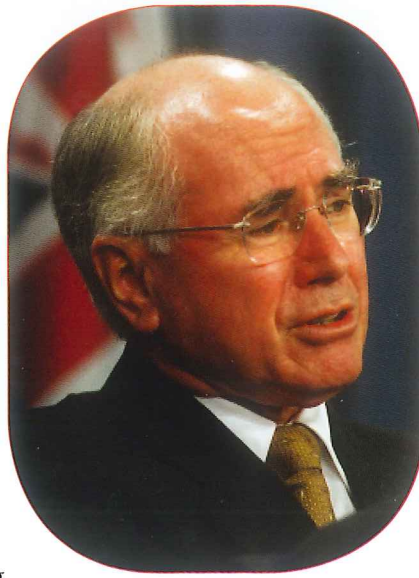
The *Tampa* remained at anchor off Christmas Island as the Howard government desperately tried to get another country to accept the asylum-seekers. Other than New Zealand, which agreed to take 131, everyone refused.



The 'children overboard' boat just before it sank

The other survivors were transferred in a Royal Australian Navy ship to Nauru in the Pacific Ocean. The Nauru government had agreed to establish a refugee detention centre on the small island. In return it received a substantial increase in Australian foreign aid.

The *Tampa* affair was a disaster for Australia's image around the world. Captain Rinnan was hailed as a hero, and received the United Nations Nansen Refugee Award.



Prime Minister
John Howard

Children overboard

The other infamous event prior to the 2001 general election was the 'Children Overboard' affair. The navy ship HMAS *Adelaide* intercepted a boatload of asylum-seekers 190 kilometres from Christmas Island on 6 October. The boat broke up and sank soon afterwards.

Liberal Party Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock announced that adult asylum-seekers had thrown children into the ocean. Supposedly, this was to force the navy crew to rescue them. The claim was repeated by John Howard and Defence Minister Peter Reith. They said the navy had pictures of the event. Once again the world expressed its disbelief.

Three years later the truth emerged. Michael Scafton, a former adviser to Peter Reith, revealed he had advised Prime Minister Howard in November 2001 that the claims may be untrue. It is now accepted that no child was thrown overboard.

HMAS *Adelaide*



Seeking solutions

At the end of 2007 the Howard government was swept out of office. The new Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, presided over a softening of the asylum-seeker policy. Offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island were wound down and eventually closed.

The flow of asylum-seekers arriving by boat continued over the next three years. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott aggressively promoted the idea that the Labor Party was 'soft' on asylum-seekers. At the 2010 general election he used the slogan 'Stop the Boats' to appeal to a racist minority in the community.

New solutions were sought under the government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Agreement was reached with Malaysia in May 2011 to transfer 800 asylum-seekers there from Christmas Island. In return, Australia would accept 4000 refugees then waiting in Malaysia.

The arrangement was halted by a ruling of the High Court of Australia in August 2011. It said the deal was in breach of Australia's Immigration Act. Malaysia had not signed international agreements covering refugees and asylum-seekers. Anyone sent there would not have proper legal protection.

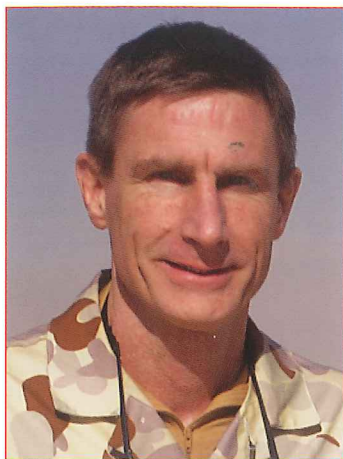
The Gillard government was left with limited options: either allow asylum-seekers into Australia or reopen the offshore detention centres. Five hundred asylum-seekers were transferred to Nauru in August 2012.



**Prime Minister
Julia Gillard**



**Prime Minister
Tony Abbott**



**Lieutenant General
Angus Campbell**

Julia Gillard was deposed in June 2013 and replaced as Prime Minister by Kevin Rudd. A new Regional Resettlement Agreement was signed with Papua New Guinea. Almost immediately the Manus Island detention centre was reactivated.

A media campaign targeting asylum-seekers was launched. They were warned they had no chance of being accepted by Australia if they arrived by boat. By the time of the general election on 7 September 2013, the rate of boat arrivals had dropped by 40 per cent.

Sovereign borders

The new coalition government was led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott. One of its first actions was to launch Operation Sovereign Borders. This military operation was headed by the army's highly experienced Lieutenant General Angus Campbell.

An aggressive new policy imposed total secrecy on all matters relating to asylum-seekers. Almost no information was released about them, particularly if they came by boat. The detention arrangements put in place by the Gillard and Rudd governments were expanded.

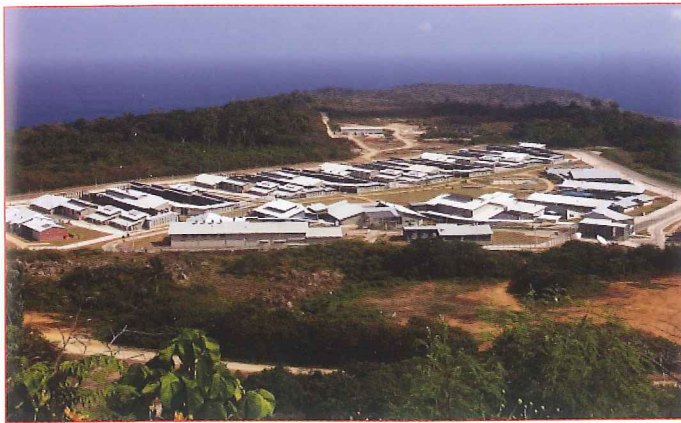
A key to the success of the new campaign was Indonesia's cooperation. The majority of asylum-seeker boats departed from Indonesia. At first the Indonesian government quietly cooperated — boats halted by the Royal Australian Navy were handed over to Indonesian Navy ships to be returned to their point of departure.

When the arrangement became known by the media the Indonesians began



Manus Island Detention Centre just after it was re-established in 2013

withdrawing cooperation. Matters were not helped when it was revealed that Australian security services had been tapping the telephones of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his wife.



Christmas Island Detention Centre



Canteen facilities at Nauru Detention Centre damaged by rioting in 2013

Immigration today

'Stop the boats' campaigns draw most of the attention given to immigration today. The treatment of asylum-seekers on Nauru and Manus Island continues to attract worldwide criticism. It is likely Australia's asylum-seeker policies will eventually be seen in the same negative light as the White Australia Policy.

Compared to mainstream immigration, asylum-seeker arrivals by boat or air are small. In global terms the numbers of asylum-seekers coming to Australia are tiny. Southern European countries such as Italy receive many more boat arrivals than Australia. Asylum applications in France are eight times those in Australia.

Meanwhile mainstream immigration goes on as it always has. There are no longer assisted passages, but this has not had any major effect. International travel is much cheaper than it was after World War II. Since 2000 there have been about 1.3 million new arrivals. The majority of these come from Britain, New Zealand, India and China.

Immigration concentrates on two main streams: skilled and family. Skilled is for people who have qualifications, expertise or experience that is in demand in Australia. The list of skills changes regularly, depending on economic demand. Family is a program for

reuniting people with relatives already resident in Australia.

Refugees are accommodated under the Refugee Program or the Special Humanitarian Program. The Refugee Program is for people being persecuted in their homelands. Most are referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The Special Humanitarian Program caters for those who have left their countries because of violations of their human rights. They must have an Australian supporter and meet certain health and character tests.