

Postcard from Australia Part 2: We can let in who we want?

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Greetings again from Melbourne in Australia, where I am currently undertaking comparative work on the gig economy with Australian colleagues, as Theresa May undergoes yet another ritual humiliation by losing a vote in Parliament. On that note, I am also doing the odd seminar on Brexit for anyone who cares to listen to such things; which frankly outside of academia – is rather few.

In Australia, preoccupation is with the weather, with severe flooding in the state of Queensland having affected the city of Townsville in particular, whilst elsewhere the majority of the countryside has been in the grip of very hot and dry weather conditions. Melbourne, in contrast, this week is displaying very ambient temperatures in the order of twenty-five degrees centigrade.

In the realm of politics though, storms of a different nature periodically break out. The current situation (which has interesting parallels with the situation in the UK) is that the Australian national (Federal) Government does not command a majority in the House of Representatives (the Australian House of Commons).

Having lost a bye-election late last year in what was previously the safe conservative seat of the former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, the conservative coalition (Liberal-National) government now relies on the votes of “cross-benchers” (i.e., independents, minor parties) to get votes through Australia’s Parliament.

The Australian Federal Government is due for an election by May this year and most polls suggest it will suffer a heavy defeat to the Labor^[1] opposition. In this context, the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Scott Morrison (he who devised those Australian tourism ads of “where the bloody hell are you?” in a previous life as a marketing executive) has sought to play on issues of asylum seekers and the “security” of Australia’s borders (all coastline in case you weren’t aware).

Mr Morrison (colloquially known as “Sco-Mo”), having lost a vote in the House of Representatives on a motion to give asylum seekers (unauthorised; arriving by boat, and so referred to colloquially as “boat people”) held in off-shore detention centres^[2] on islands in the Pacific Ocean access to medical treatment in Australia for those who urgently need it, is currently seeking to make political capital on the opposition Labor being soft on “national security”.

These centres have been criticised heavily for reports of “poor living conditions, riots, deaths and self-harm attempts... and the despair and resilience of the asylum seekers held in detention”^[3], and in the opinion of this author, if a personal view is to be allowed, is a shame on the national consciousness.

That the Opposition Labor party had also been complicit in establishing the system of off-shore detention for asylum seekers who can be held indefinitely detracts somewhat from their current stance, and points to an unsavoury common thread in Australian politics over the years in terms of attitudes to those seeking refuge from persecution, or simply wanting a better life.

Historically, this thread was captured in the essence of the “White Australia Policy” in operation for much of the twentieth century, by which both major parties in Australia (Labor and the conservatives in their various guises over the years) sought to exclude those who were not manifestly Caucasian from settling in Australia.

This is itself was a reaction to the fear of a “Yellow Peril” whereby Australians, predominantly of European descent in a sparsely populated land, had a distinct fear of being invaded and subjugated by a numerically superior proximate Asiatic power. Suffice to say, this “dreaded scenario” only came close to fruition in 1942, with the (brief) Japanese conquest of much of the Asia-Pacific and bombing of Darwin, and Australia remains the pre-eminent military power in the South Pacific.

Today it shows up in the manifest prejudice of some against Muslims (e.g., Pauline Hanson’s “One Nation” party), clamping down on “bogus asylum seekers” or the attempt by the conservative opposition parties in the Victorian state election late last year to inflate concerns over the purported activities of “African gangs”.

That the Federal Upper House (the “Senate”) came close to voting in support of a resolution that it was “OK to be White” until the conservative parties did a U-turn shows how “race” and “ethnicity” continue to be lodestones in Australian politics and wider society.

It was amidst this political backdrop that I chose to visit the Immigration Museum^[4] in Melbourne, in order to gain a better understanding of how migration was presented and the contribution of migrants to Australian society.

The displays and audio-visuals presented a rich narrative of attitudes and policies to migration in Australia, and more importantly, recorded testimonies of migrants themselves, serving to illustrate the essential contribution that migrants from all over the world (which included my own parents) had made to Australian culture and society.

It was clear from the displays present that a key role for the museum was to try and improve tolerance and understanding, through simply trying to present a view of the world from someone else (a migrant) so as to reinforce our common humanity. In this I felt, there was an essential balance against narratives that sought to play on fears of being “swamped” by the “other”, as the current off-shore detention saga attested to.

Australia’s immigration system of course, is held up as a Poster Boy by those of a Leave persuasion who saw the 2016 referendum as a means to “let in who we want”, and as such, an example for the UK Government to copy after the UK leaves the EU.

However, its emphasis on particular types of migrants (e.g., “skilled”) and punitive measures taken against those not deemed to have arrived by acceptable channels also serve as a salutary warning for the corrosive effects that such practices can have on shared accepted norms of basic human rights and decency.

^[1] Labor is the Australian spelling for “Labour” in this case, the full political party name being the Australian Labor Party (or ALP, for short).

^[2] See for example the speech by Manus Island detainee Abdul Aziz Muhamat, who won a human rights award

at <https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2019/feb/15/the-cage-made-me-strong-manus-island-detainee-abdul-aziz-muhamat-wins-human-rights-award-video>

[3] The writings of Iranian-Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani, detained since 2013, have detailed these conditions, for example (see <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/05/behrouz-boochani-wins-anna-politkovskaya-award-for-manus-island-writing>).

[4] <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum>