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Call me illegal: The semantic struggle over seeking asylum in Australia

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Abstract

Since the arrival of the first post-colonial "boatpeople" on Australian shores in 1976, the language used by governments and media to discuss those who arrive "irregularly" by sea has changed dramatically. From earlier descriptors as "refugees" and "boatpeople", asylum seekers who arrive now in Australian waters are officially referred to in government statements as "illegals", ministers have publicly alleged they "could be murderers [or] terrorists" and report "whole villages" are coming to Australia in uncontrollable "floods". Prime Ministers are reported in the media condemning asylum seekers as opportunists who "jump the queue", and "throw their children overboard", while discussion of Australia's policies regarding asylum seekers is now framed as a matter of "border protection" from "threats to national security".

While these discursive changes have attracted public, media, and academic attention, this paper seeks to ask further: where has this semantic change come from? What forces have driven it, and why? What impact has this changed rhetoric had on public opinion and understanding of asylum seekers? And what responsibility rests with those who report these words and these phrases about these people?

In assessing these questions, this paper will rely on primary sources – the Commonwealth Record, government statements, cabinet minutes, and interviews with key policy and political figures – and secondary sources – media reportage, published papers and analyses. This paper will seek to critique the changes in rhetoric used by governments and media to discuss boat-borne asylum seekers in Australia, specifically examining four distinct, and crucial, periods in the development of Australia's asylum seeker policy and political debate, ranging from the first "wave" of post-colonial "boat-people" to Australia to the election campaign and government of Tony Abbot and its policy of "stopping the boats".

This paper will further question to what extent these changes in rhetoric have been deliberately constructed for political aims. It will ask how changes in language have been adopted, or challenged, by Australia's media, and if and how those semantic shifts have impacted upon the Australian public's perception and understanding of asylum seekers and refugees.

Keywords
Asylum, migration, rhetoric, media, government

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1. Lam Binh and his boat

Lam Binh was first. The self-taught sailor and four friends found Australia from Vietnam navigating with a single page torn from a school atlas. The page went no further south than Timor: from there he was simply following a hand-drawn arrow on the bottom of the page. But on April 26, 1976 he sighted land, and piloted his battered junk, the *Kien Giang*, into Darwin harbour, where he dropped anchor and waited. Lam had a speech prepared for the immigration officer who boarded the next morning: "Good morning. My name is Lam Binh and these are my friends from South Vietnam and we would like permission to stay in Australia".[1] He'd learned some English. Language is important. Words matter.

The words of the government's response were equally important. Lam and his friends were granted asylum and as other compatriot asylum seekers began arriving, fleeing the same conflict and following similarly unlikely voyages, the government publicly declared it would "offer sanctuary"[2] to those seeking asylum, promising the government's "full resources"[3] would be made available to them. "As a matter of humanity, and in accord with international obligations freely entered into, Australia has accepted a responsibility to contribute towards the solution of world refugee problems," the immigration minister said in newspaper reports.[4]

In the decades since Lam Binh's arrival, the language used by Australian governments and media in discussion of people who arrive in Australia by boat has changed dramatically. Asylum seekers who arrive now in Australian waters are officially referred to in government statements as "illegals"[5]. Ministers have publicly alleged asylum seekers "could be murderers, could be terrorists"[6] and report "whole villages"[7] are coming to Australia in uncontrollable "floods"[8]. Prime Ministers have condemned asylum seekers as opportunists who "jump the queue"[9], and "throw their children overboard"[10]. Discussion of Australia's policies regarding asylum seekers is now framed – through the media – as a matter of "border protection" from "threats to national security"[11]. Policy measures such as "stopping the boats"[12], it is insisted, must be conducted in secret as "if we were at war".[13]

Where has this semantic change come from? What forces have driven it, and why? What impact has this changed rhetoric had on public opinion and understanding of asylum seekers, and what responsibility rests with those who report these words and these phrases about these people?

Australia's position is not unique. Internationally, there have been similar shifts in public, political, and media discourses. Over the European summer of 2015, the nations of the European Union have been locked in divisive internecine and external disputes over "illegal immigration" across the Mediterranean Sea.[14] The US has witnessed vociferous debate over "illegal aliens" in the country "taking American jobs",[15] while in Pakistan, Afghan asylum seekers have been publicly branded as terrorists, accused of spreading disease, and of being a drain on scarce national resources.[16] Around the world, the language used to describe asylum seekers, refugees, and forced migrants is increasingly politicised and polemic.

"Political language… is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind," George Orwell wrote.[17] The manipulation of language for political advantage is not new, and its consequences neither necessarily benign nor motivated by public interest: in his self-promotional account of the Gallic Wars of the 1st Century BC, Julius Caesar described the Germanic tribes to the north of the empire as bloodthirsty and uncivilised,[18] while in *The Prince* in the 16th Century AD, Machiavelli urged the liberation of Italy from the "barbarian" foreigners who ruled it.[19] And if semantic manipulation can be considered an ancient art, it is no less powerful in the modern day: Goebbels used the euphemism of a "final solution" to describe the slaughter of innocents by the Nazi regime;[20] the Vietnam War popularised "collateral damage" to describe civilians killed by napalm attacks (or "soft ordnance"); while Iraq gave the world "enhanced interrogation" and "extraordinary rendition" for torture.[21]

The consequences of changes in discourse are significant. Alterations to language and thought have the potential to change the course of history, and in the case of asylum seekers and refugees, the fate of some of the world's most disempowered and vulnerable people. In a global order predicated upon nationality and bounded territoriality, people displaced from their homelands lose rights and lose agency. Often, they are voiceless in public discourse, defined by the language used by others to describe them. Their image – the public's fundamental understanding of who they are – is created not by themselves, but by others. "Terminology matters because it shapes our understanding of a phenomenon," McAdam writes. "If people are described as 'illegals', this creates an assumption that they have broken the law and deserve to be treated as criminals."[22]

And the media – as the major means by which governments communicate with their populaces – play a significant role in the promulgation of this language.[23] Journalism must, of course, report objectively and accurately the words of government. But is it sufficient for journalists to stand behind the shield of so-called "accuracy" and "impartiality", a mentality

of "the government said it so we reported it"? Should the media uncritically report the language with which it is provided? Should it repeat the rhetoric and narratives of government if those are loaded, pejorative, or inflammatory? Journalism's power is great, but what of its responsibility?

"History constantly teaches us," Foucault argues, "that discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized."[24] Lam Binh knew it, and others before and since. Language is important. Words matter.

2. From in-need to illegal: The evolution of government and media asylum narratives in Australia

2.1: Historical Perspective

People move. Any history of humanity, however far back into the past that is taken, is a history of migration. Since the earliest movement of *Homo erectus* out of Africa across Eurasia, humankind has found reasons for, and ways to, move from one place to another. Sometimes that movement is orderly, planned, and peaceful, but, as often, it is a harried, desperate, and violent exodus of large numbers of people, fleeing persecution, war, famine or other natural disaster. Throughout history, communities, polities, and civilisations have been destroyed, supplanted, or enriched by inflows of people from foreign cultures and alien ethnic groups.[25]

Lam Binh, of course, was not the first "boat person" to arrive on Australia's shores unannounced. Australia's history, if it is nothing else, is a history of people turning up on boats. More than any other, arriving unannounced on a boat is the act that has defined Australia, shaped the country's character, and directed its development. Australia is, fundamentally, a nation of boat people.

Indigenous Australians arrived, likely in multiple waves of migration, on the continent in small boats from Africa via Asia, somewhere between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago.[26] European explorers scouted Australia's east and west coasts throughout the 17th Century, but it was not until the late 18th – in 1788 – that a British colony was settled.[27] The new migrants brought agriculture, the English language, and industrial technology, but they also

carried powerful new weapons and disease. They brought with them concepts around private property, individual rights, and, eventually, democracy and the rule of law.[28]

Arriving unannounced in Australia by boat has made, for better or for worse, the nation of Australia. But no act is now more controversial, more contested, more confronting, than turning up at Australia's shoreline by sea. Since Lam's fortuitous arrival, the issue of boat-borne asylum seekers – their arrival, their rights, and Australia's response – has consistently been at the forefront of political and media discourse.[29]

Since Lam Binh's arrival in 1976, Australia has experienced four broad cohorts of boat arrivals. The first, from 1976 to 1980, came mainly from Vietnam fleeing the conflict in Indo-China.[30] The second wave of asylum seekers arrived between 1989 and 1998, mainly from South China and Cambodia. Concern over their uncontrolled influx led to the (then Labor) government establishing laws for the mandatory detention of all asylum seekers who arrive in Australian territory by boat.[31]

The third wave – between 1999 and 2001 – saw asylum seekers from previously minor source countries, in particular significant numbers of ethnic Hazara fleeing Afghanistan, arrive in Australia. The government responded with the further "hardening" of asylum policies, characterised by the introduction of temporary protection visas, the *Tampa* affair, and the "Pacific Solution" of forcibly moving asylum seekers offshore for processing.[32] The fourth wave, between 2009 and 2013, saw, by far, the largest number of asylum seekers reach Australian shores – more than 51,000 over five years.[33] Australian governments (one Labor, one conservative Coalition[34]) responded, again, with more self-declared "hardline"[35] measures, including forcibly turning boats back to sea, sending asylum seekers back to Indonesia in lifeboats, and re-opening the closed offshore detention centres on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru. In 2014, only one boat, carrying 157 asylum seekers from Sri Lanka, reached Australian territory. After attempts to send the asylum seekers to India were rebuffed, the Australian government removed the asylum seekers to Nauru.[36]

The progress of Australian asylum seeker policies has not been linear. In particular, leading up to and after the 2007 election (the final years of the Coalition Howard government and the first years of the subsequent Labor administration under Kevin Rudd),[37] especially contentious policies, such as temporary protection visas and offshore processing, were abandoned for several years, before they were re-introduced.

However, the dominant reaction of Australian governments to increases in asylum seeker

boat arrivals has been to "crack down" on the problem.[38] In order to be able to prosecute these "hardline"[39] policies, governments have needed to justify the measures, and portray them publicly as reasonable and required actions. This section of this paper examines the development of Australian government rhetoric, and media reportage of that language, over the course of four distinct, and critical, periods in Australia's asylum history. These periods correlate with the "peaks" of these asylum "waves" to reach Australia: 1976-1979, 1990-1992, 1999-2001, and 2012-2013.

2.2: The 1970s - 'National soul-searching'

The arrival of Lam Binh and his compatriots – modern Australia's first "boat people" – was barely news at all, and certainly not an event worthy of a formal government response. This first boat's arrival was treated almost as an oddity. *The Canberra Times* had the first report, carrying a nine-paragraph story on page 10 of its April 29, 1976 edition. The language of the headline was factual and dispassionate, "S. Vietnamese refugees arrive in Darwin" and the article reported simply that a boat had arrived from South Vietnam bearing "five men seeking political asylum". A spokesman for the immigration department was paraphrased as saying the men had been granted one-month visas, while their case was considered by the minister.[40] "We wanted to leave South Vietnam because life under the Communists is not good," Lam Binh was free to tell reporters. "So I bought a fishing boat, I went fishing for about nine months. After we had studied carefully all we could learn about the sea we saw a way to make our escape."[41]

More boats followed in the weeks and months, and the tone in reportage changed from curiosity to emerging issue of concern. Who were these people? And why were they being allowed to simply turn up and then stay? But the government's attitude towards asylum seekers remained benevolent, and its policies – as they were explained to the public – grounded in a context of international legal obligation and humanitarian imperative. "Australia would offer sanctuary" to the asylum seekers, the Coalition government's immigration minister Michael MacKellar[42] said.[43] He drew public attention to their "harrowing experiences" in their homelands and during their journeys to Australia, and he extolled the moral rightness of Australia's acceptance of boat-borne refugees, and the country's international legal obligation to do so.[44]

The minister publicly stated the asylum seekers' qualifications and occupations,[45] an endeavour which can be seen as an effort to "humanize" otherwise unfamiliar people, to

highlight their similarities to Australians, and to demonstrate their usefulness to the Australian people and economy. The minister also acted as a conduit for the asylum seekers to speak directly to the Australian people, relaying their written messages through the press. Of one boatload, the minister said: "No-one spoke English but a message in block letters was handed to Customs officers on arrival. It summed up all that needed to be said: 'Please help us for freedom. We live in South Vietnam… Please, Australia Government help us live in Australia. There are fifty-six persons on board, eighteen mans, ten womans, fourteen boys, fourteen girls. There are ten familys. We shall keep Australia law, will be goodman' "(sic).[46]

Ministers across portfolios presented the arrival of asylum seekers on Australian shores as the result of calamitous events overseas and promoted Australia's humanitarian response as legally sound, and morally right. But the government was also careful to portray the issue as one over which it had control – "the final decision whether to accept refugees must remain with Australia"[47] – and one it had the resources, and will, to handle. "As a matter of humanity, and in accord with international obligations freely entered into, Australia has accepted a responsibility to contribute towards the solution of world refugee problems," MacKellar told parliament in May 1977.[48]

However, as more and more boats continued to arrive, government rhetoric began to "harden", becoming significantly more oppositional towards asylum seekers. MacKellar stated publicly "anyone who encourages people to set out in these small, often unseaworthy boats, which are inadequately prepared and equipped for a long and hazardous journey must understand the responsibility associated with their actions."[49] He warned of deaths: "no-one knows for certain how many of these boats have set out for Australia. Consequently no one knows how many, if any, have failed to survive the long voyage."[50] In September, the Minister was widely reported in the national press when he said Australia's intake of refugees needed to "balance the claims of compassion and humanity with the needs of the workplace"[51] and the next month he said refugee status determinations would be tightened after "misrepresentations" by asylum seekers as to their situations.[52]

The government, having dominated the flow of information around boat arrivals, and the narrative around the nature of the issue, now found itself losing its control of the story, and forced to respond to the media obtaining information from new sources. It sought to counter an emerging narrative, sourced overseas, that even more boats were already on their way to Australia, and that it was powerless to control the flow of unauthorised people to its shores. In November 1977, the government was forced to deny reports an "armada"

of asylum seeker boats would imminently arrive in Australia,[53] as well as stories of "rich businessmen arriving posing as refugees" and of organised "rackets to bring people to Australia in boats".[54]

The government recognised the political potency of the asylum seeker issue, particularly the consequence of a perception of government inability to control its borders. In November 1977, foreign minister Andrew Peacock[55] and MacKellar issued a joint media statement counseling: "the issue of the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees by Australia… might become an election issue. It must not be allowed to do so:
…because the basic question of human suffering involved transcends partisan advantage in an election context;
…because… Australia has particular responsibility to these people;
…because Australia's status within the region would be seriously – and justifiably – damaged if it were.
"This government will not indiscriminately "make examples" of boat refugees by turning some of them back… we will not risk taking action against genuine refugees just to get a message across. That would be an utterly inhuman course of action."[56]

Guy Goodwin-Gill, then the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' representative in Australia, wrote to Geneva in his 1977 Report that Australia had undergone "extensive national soul-searching" on the issue of asylum seekers and refugees, but that the government fundamentally took "a benign interest" towards them.[57] However, Goodwin-Gill noted a public disquiet, and a disconnect between the government and popular positions. The government's policies, he wrote, were "all the more admirable in view of loud opposition to refugee acceptance voiced in the media by some conservative as well as liberal sections of public opinion... particularly apparent in August/September/October when a large number of refugee boats landed on the shores of Australia thus raising questions of inadequate defences, fears of epidemic and of invasion by cheap labour, as well as a panic reaction to what some rumour-mongers term 'the peaceful invasion'."[58]

Almost every cabinet meeting, ministerial statement and letters to the editor page carried some mention of the asylum seeker issue in 1978.[59] The government attempted to shift the debate onto its preferred themes of humanitarian intervention and international legal obligation. "Press, radio and television were fed numerous press releases, editorial materials, interviews, films and other visual aids to dramatise the refugee situation in South East Asia and the Pacific and create a groundswell of public opinion favourable to the Australian

initiative [of accepting refugees]."[60] But the media largely ignored this, choosing instead to reflect the more sensationalist public sentiment, Goodwin-Gill reported. Despite government efforts to quell disquiet and opposition to the policy, he observed "most media representatives in Australia… tried subtly, or not so subtly, to emphasise the 'non-refugee' character of the latest wave of Vietnamese escapees."[61] Here can be seen the power of the "narrative not chosen": that those rhetorical constructions not accepted by the media (in this case one emphasising the humanitarian nature of the asylum issue) also have an influence on shaping the nature of public discourse, as much as those constructions widely accepted and reported (e.g. new arrivals as "non-refugees").

As Goodwin-Gill's observations attest, the latter half of the 1970s was a seminal period in the evolution of the asylum narrative in Australia, and, it can be argued, the beginning of the change from a rhetorical construction grounded in response to a humanitarian crisis and international legal obligation, to one of deterrence, threat, and illegality. Critically, it must be seen that the media, not the government, was the dominant agent in creating and establishing this narrative in public discourse. As will be discussed in greater detail later, this narrative appeared to reflect, and even amplify, an existing community concern over boat arrivals.

The media became the platform through which the disconnect between the government and its electorate was made most apparent. Ministerial insistence that the government's policies were humane and moral – and, in addition, required under international law – competed with the popular narrative of Australia being threatened by boat arrivals. An illustrative, albeit singular, example was in August 1979, when immigration minister MacKellar was a guest on Sydney talkback radio station 2UE following a one-hour investigative report on the situation of Indo-Chinese refugees. Of the 16 callers to the program – eight men and eight women – only four favored Australia accepting any refugees at all. One exchange, in particular, made starkly apparent MacKellar's frustration with the audience (his voting public):

Caller: "What has happened to the White Australian Policy?"
MacKellar: "We haven't got one."
Caller: "We have not got one unfortunately. It is a communist plot to have these people infiltrate us."
MacKellar: "Have you been listening for the past hour? There are hundreds of thousands of people leaving, risking their lives to get out of countries which are administered by communist governments."[62]

Other callers accused refugees of "being threats to the Australian economy, stealing jobs from Australian workers" and of "multiplying".
"I am one of the vast majority of Australians who disagree with the immigration program that you have with the refugees. The Australian taxpayer should not have to pay for the resettlement of these people."[63]
MacKellar, perhaps undiplomatically, said the radio station's audience had "failed to grasp the real problem of the refugee crisis". The minister's comments were prominently reported in other media.[64]

But divergence from popular opinion by democratically-elected governments is an unsustainable political position. Popular concern over an "invasion", over the introduction of disease,[65] of economic imposition and a sense of unfairness were not assuaged by the government's assurances. With each arriving boat – 59 vessels carrying 2029 people had reached Australian territory by the end of 1979[66] – community concern grew louder, and the government responded by taking a "harder" line in oppositional rhetoric towards asylum seekers.[67] "The new situation has all the ingredients for one of the most controversial and divisive issues in Australia's history," a confidential submission to cabinet said. "A hostile public reaction, stimulated by traditional fears of the 'yellow peril' and by concern about present high levels of unemployment, could not only jeopardise Government attempts to resolve the refugee problem but could also cause a head-on collision between domestic public opinion and Australia's foreign policy interests... the most effective way that Australia can protect and serve its national interest is to shift the emphasis of its policy from resettlement to staunching the flow."[68]

Driven by this populist policy demand, it is here that the first indications of a change in rhetoric around asylum seekers and refugees are apparent in Australian government discourse. By the end of 1979, ministerial language had shifted significantly. When another boatload of 50 Vietnamese arrived in Broome in November of that year, MacKellar condemned the arrival: "it is unfair to those in refugee camps who are prepared to wait for orderly processing."[69] [70] The change in rhetoric to a more hardline response was the obvious and safe political option, but also, it can be argued, the craven one. Neumann describes it as a "capitulation to vox populi".[71] Here lie the origins of the adverse rhetoric used against asylum seekers in contemporary Australia: not in a narrative driven by government for its own policy purposes, but in a rhetoric of defence, created by a government in response to a rising public opposition.

The Coalition government, under Malcolm Fraser,[72] was, ultimately, a significant participant in the Orderly Departure Program (1979-1997),[73] and later the Comprehensive Plan of Action (1989-1997), which, together, resettled more than 2.5 million Indochinese refugees across the world over a quarter of a century.[74] The fundamental premise of the programs was to reach asylum seekers in their home countries or countries of first refuge (usually close by in Southeast Asia) and, after identity and medical checks, arrange ordered resettlement by plane to a third country, such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (which resettled, by far, the most refugees). Australia resettled 185,700 Indochinese refugees between 1975 and 1997, the fifth largest resettlement country.[75]

Within Australia, the programs were well-supported[76] and viewed as an expression of Australia's humanitarian credentials and adherence to its international legal obligations.[77] Perhaps as importantly, they were also seen as restoring order to a disordered situation that had previously appeared beyond the government's control. The Australian voting public was more comfortable with the migration of Indochinese refugees, because it was occurring with the government's imprimatur and oversight: nobody was simply turning up unannounced on a boat.

Ian Macphee,[78] who succeeded MacKellar as the Coalition's immigration minister in December 1979,[79] argues that the creation of an orderly resettlement scheme – a migration path that the government was seen to be in control of – as well as bipartisan political support, meant the refugees' arrival was broadly accepted by the Australian polity and public. "I addressed the opposition backbench committee as well as our party room and Mick Young [the Labor Party's immigration spokesman] and I travelled with John Menadue [Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs] to all major cities and towns and explained the policy. It was all humane and in accordance with Aussie values such as a 'fair go'."[80] Macphee says the language around resettled refugees was carefully constructed to be neutral. "Our work with our neighbours and the UNHCR was so easy and co-operative about the time I was minister that language was not an issue diplomatically. Because it was bipartisan, we only referred to 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees'. I do not recall any problems with the media, although occasionally a prominent person might criticise us."[81]

With the creation of regional agreements to resettle refugees from southeast Asia, the flow of boats to Australia ceased in the early 1980s, the rhetoric became more neutral,[82] and the political sensitivity subsided.[83] But Marr argues the semantic tone had been set: when boats re-emerged on the horizon at the end of the decade, so to would the hostile rhetoric of the decade before. "The language of 'queue jumpers' and 'illegals'… 'coming in by the backdoor'

was fashioned in the late 1970s," Marr writes. "Instead of attempting to reconcile Australia to this novel but hardly unusual development, both sides of politics reinforced the vague but profound sense that for refugees to turn up in this way was a violation of the true order of things. It was by far the easier political path to take… so these first boat people were abused as interlopers."[84]

2.3: The early 90s - Illegals

In 1980, changing geopolitical factors and the success of the Organised Departure Program saw the boats stop appearing on Australia's horizon, and public concern faded with them. But at the end of that decade, with Cambodia's peace plan faltering, and civil unrest in China, new boats, carrying new people, suddenly appeared, and the deep-seated fears of the Australian public and polity returned. In early 1990, Labor MP Gerry Hand[85] stood in the betting ring at Melbourne's Moonee Valley racecourse. Only a handful of boats had reached Australian shores by that time, and Hand had been immigration minister less than a week. "Between the second and third race some bloke got into me, physically, about the boat people," Hand recalled later. The man suggested sending the boats back to sea, and bombing them.[86] "I get tackled in supermarkets and on the beach. But a lot of the reaction is kneejerk… after talking it through, I even put doubts in the mind of a bloke who wanted to zap them half way to Indonesia."[87]

The return of the boats, and its accompanying public concern, was met with sterner government action, enabled by aggressive rhetoric. When 220 Cambodians arrived by boat in July 1990, Prime Minister Bob Hawke[88] told the asylum seekers – and the Australian voting public – that they were not welcome. Those arriving by boat now were "economic migrants", the government said,[89] not genuine refugees, and they were subverting Australia's inherent authority, as a sovereign nation, to control who came to its borders. "Do not let any people… think that all they've got to do is break the rules, jump the queue, lob here, and Bob's your uncle. Bob is not your uncle on this issue. We're not going to allow people just to jump the queue."[90]

The language is typically Hawke-ian: colloquial, but carefully constructed, and layered with meanings. By casting the latest boat arrivals as "economic migrants" even before their claims to refugee status had been assessed, the Prime Minister had condemned them all as illegitimate and undeserving, seeking to exploit Australia's generosity and its legal system. Matthew describes this government language as "blurring legal boundaries for political

gain".[91] Hawke also insisted the boat arrivals had sought to "break the rules", implying, at best, a blatant disregard for correct customary behaviour and for the Australian sense of "a fair go", at worst, a criminality to their actions. It was, and is, not illegal to enter Australia without a visa in order to seek asylum.[92] [93] Even Hawke's phrase "any people", seeks to cast the asylum seekers as "other", as a "deviant population" and a "problem".[94] Whereas the very first Australian government response to boat arrivals sought to highlight the similarities, and the common ground, between the asylum seekers and the Australian people, the government rhetoric of the early '90s emphasised the differences. Through focusing on divergence – from accepted "rules" about coming to Australia, and from the Australian mainstream (for whom, presumably, Bob *is* an uncle) – government rhetoric sought to drive the two communities apart.

It is at this time that the dichotomous narrative of the "good" refugee and the "bad" first emerges strongly in Australian government rhetoric. In June 1989, Hawke was moved to tears in saying he would accept as refugees any Chinese students already in Australia who feared returning home after the Tiananmen Square massacre.[95] But he rejected a Cambodian cohort who had arrived by boat a few months later as undeserving of assistance, even before their claims had been assessed[96] (his position was not based on the numbers of either group, there were more than 20,000 Chinese students in Australia at the time, and fewer than 400 Cambodians had arrived by boat).[97]

The public labeling of boat-borne asylum seekers by the government as "illegals" also emerged during the early 90s. Previously, "illegal immigrant" had been used to describe people who had legitimately come to Australia but then overstayed their visa (still a by-factors larger group numerically).[98] But it came to be applied, including by the minister, to those who had arrived in Australia by boat without documents. Gerry Hand told ABC television he had been "a bit soft" and "made a mistake" in believing asylum seekers arriving by boat were genuine. "There is no more of that. Those who arrive in this illegal way will be brought up [assessed]." The government promoted the narrative that the boat arrivals had no claim to refugee status and were exploiting Australia and Australians. Instant deportations were threatened, and carried out. "If you rort the system, you get the flick… If you enter illegally, you go straight away: I mean, there is no mucking around," Hand said.[99]

This rhetorical shift proved crucial to government policy plans. The alleged illegality of boat arrivals gave the Australian government the impetus, indeed the imperative, to act to deter others from coming the same way. The government chose to enforce mandatory detention on all boat-borne asylum seekers. Legislation was passed, with bipartisan support, in May

1992 mandating that all boat-borne asylum seekers, without exception, were to be held in detention until their claims were determined.[100] The policy was controversial, particularly with human rights lawyers, who argued the policy was illegal, because it breached Australia's international legal obligations, and a "draconian measure" enforced by the government "hurriedly to get itself out of trouble without thinking the consequences through".[101] [102] The policy was intermittently problematic for the government – particularly when it emerged some people were held for nearly a year before they could speak with a lawyer[103] while others were incarcerated for four years before they were determined to be refugees and released[104] – but fundamentally mandatory detention enjoyed broad popular support. The policy was only ever intended to be temporary, "designed to address only the pressing requirements of the current situation",[105] but once in place, governments were reluctant to eschew a useful prerogative, and, rather than being wound back, the mandatory detention regime was expanded. The initial 273-day time-limit on detention was abandoned in 1994,[106] and the regime is now regarded as an integral element of Australia's immigration system.

Publicly, minister Hand framed the issue as one of a sovereign government defending its fundamental rights: "the issue of detaining people who arrive on our shores without entry rights is an important element of the Government's capacity to control our borders."[107] Privately, the debate was more vituperative. Labor minister Neal Blewett recorded in his diaries that while the proposed legislation – opposed by some in government as essentially indefinite detention without charge – was controversial within cabinet, the minister was able to garner sufficient support. "Hand supported his proposals with his usual blend of vivid anecdotes about the wickedness of the boat people, their sinister manipulators (Chinese tongs this time) and attacks on the self-righteous attitudes of churches and the do-gooders."[108]

Chris Evans,[109] elected into parliament in 1993, and who would become immigration minister a decade-and-a-half later in 2007, saw the trend towards a more oppositional language from the early 90s. "There's no doubt it [language around asylum seekers] has gotten harder and more pejorative over time, and there were elements of that in the Hawke-Keating[110] years… and certainly, the language became quite critical, and it was very pejorative."[111]

Arja Keski-Nummi, an officer in the immigration department for 32 years from 1979 and First Assistant Secretary of the Refugee, Humanitarian and International Division between 2007 and 2010, argues the construction of the "illegal" asylum seeker arriving by boat became an established narrative in the early 90s. "The whole rhetoric around asylum

seekers, going back to Gerry Hand, is that there is a right way and a wrong way, and somehow getting on a boat is the wrong way."[112] Keski-Nummi argues government rhetoric has been hugely influential in establishing a justification, and winning public support, for policies: "if governments say that these people are doing the wrong thing, then they must be. This is the whole foundation of the public accepting mandatory detention: that these people must be doing something wrong if the government feels they have to detain them."[113]

As Keski-Nummi argues, the semantic construction of the argument was crucial to the government achieving its policy outcome. The government's rhetorical insistence that asylum seekers who arrived by boat were acting illegally – at the very least, behaving wrongly – enabled it to justify policies condemned by human rights lawyers and refugee advocates as illegal and draconian.[114] Implied by, and in alliance to, this argument was the government's converse position: that the government was acting to uphold the law and due process, to protect its sovereign mandate, and to defend the nation from possibly malign external influence. Australia remains the only country that mandatorily detains all boat arrivals, including children.[115]

The government's rhetoric on asylum seekers was widely reported, and the terms of the government's language reproduced, in the media. The government's actions were largely framed in positive terms, with headlines such as "Minister gets tough on boat people"[116], "Crackdown on boat people, illegal entry"[117] and "Illegals start Port Headland hunger strike"[118]. While the government's narrative was the dominant construction, the media did not act as a singular, monolithic entity, and there were explicit efforts to counter the government position. "Terms like 'rorters' and queue-jumpers' are used frequently in ministerial and departmental communiqués on asylum seekers," Margaret Piper from the Refugee Council of Australia wrote in *The Canberra Times*.[119]

> The use of such emotive language does not foster community understanding of the issues or engender sympathy for people who have been traumatised and tortured at home; it fuels community prejudice and xenophobia and legitimises the racist attitudes of some.
>
> Increasingly, a whole range of clichés is emerging in official Australian immigration rhetoric, which on closer examination is found to be based on spurious logic. The worry is that these myths have been repeated so

> often that not only do they appear to be believed but they also are being used as the foundation for the formulation of policy.[120]

Mary Crock argues the language used around asylum seekers arriving by boat in the early 1990s was crucial in framing Australia's public debate on the issue, and enabled the introduction of new, punitive policies. "It was the beginning of the politicisation of boat people and refugees. It was hugely damaging."[121] "The Labor government's response to the Cambodian and Chinese boat people of the early 1990s set the course for the policies and institutional hostilities that continue to this day."[122]

It must be seen here that the campaign over the language of and labels for asylum seekers was not a secondary consideration to the policies themselves. The government's rhetorical insistence that boat-borne asylum seekers had arrived improperly and were "illegal" was not an additional element to smooth the passage of potentially controversial policy. Rather, the rhetorical campaign was a fundamental keystone to the policy outcomes being achieved. Asylum seekers were no longer "refugees", but "illegals" and "rorters". This construction did not simply allow the government to act against those people, it compelled it to do so.

2.4: 2001 - Asylum as Terror

The black letters of Prime Minister John Howard's[123] words at the Liberal Party campaign launch for the 2001 election campaign were unremarkable: "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come".[124] The message those words carried however, resonated far beyond any strict interpretation. Taken literally, Howard's comments were no deviation from generations of government policy, and a reflection of a fundamental tenet of the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty.[125] But the words were as much a piece of political rhetoric as they were a statement of policy. Supporters saw the statement as a firm defence of Australia's right as a sovereign nation to control its borders: critics accused the Prime Minister of "dog-whistling" on immigration, appealing to base, xenophobic fears of unauthorised arrivals.[126] The sentence became the defining statement of the election campaign of 2001, when Mares argues, "the demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers for political gain may have reached its apotheosis".[127]

The number of boat arrivals to Australia had been building since 1999, when fleeing oppressive regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran began arriving off Australia's western coast.[128] Boat arrival numbers had been consistent at a few hundred a year for a decade until

1999, when a sudden surge which saw more than 12,000 (at a rate of more than 4000 a year) arrive between 1999 and 2001.[129] The government responded, again with more stringent, and then radical, such as temporary protection, legislation, but crucially, it reacted first with greater rhetorical escalation. As Marr argues:

> First [Howard] ramped up the language. To the old vocabulary he added a term plucked from the world of tariff reform. 'Border protection' powerfully fused race fear with anxiety about the nation's security. Howard didn't invent the link between race and invasion: this is what focus groups, particularly on the fringes of big cities, were telling his people. Howard's genius was to find the language to accuse disorganised, exhausted people arriving in dribs and drabs at islands far out in the Indian Ocean of being a threat to the security of a heavily defended modern nation.[130]

Legislation to give the navy more powers to stop and search asylum seeker boats was called the Border Protection Legislation Amendment Bill 1999.[131] [132] The language – and with it the concept – of asylum seeker boats as an issue of "border protection" remains fixed in Australian law and discourse. Several more "border protection" bills and amendments followed, and in 2013, the name of the government department responsible for processing asylum claims was changed from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.[133]

Four events helped catalyse asylum seekers as a crucial issue of government and media discourse in the second half of 2001: the *Tampa* affair, the September 11 terror attacks in the US, the Children Overboard incident, and Australia's general election in November.

On 24 August 2001, a Norwegian freight ship, the *MV Tampa*, rescued 438 asylum seekers, predominantly ethnic Hazara from Afghanistan, from their stricken fishing vessel, the *Palapa 1*, which was in distress in international waters north of Christmas Island.[134] The Howard government refused the *Tampa* permission to enter Australian territory, sparking a diplomatic dispute with Norway and a political controversy at home. After protracted debate, the asylum seekers were taken by the Australian Navy to Nauru, where their claims for protection were assessed. Some were ultimately resettled in Australia and New Zealand, others returned to Afghanistan. The detention of the *Tampa* asylum seekers on Nauru became known as the "Pacific Solution", and emerged as the genesis of successive governments' policies of offshore processing and resettlement in third countries.[135]

The terror attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 altered political discourses across the world,[136] and Australia's debate over asylum seekers was almost immediately transformed. Within 48 hours of the 9/11 attacks, and in an environment of suddenly- and dramatically-heightened concern over international terrorism, defence minister Peter Reith[137] drew an explicit link between asylum seekers and terrorism. He warned the unauthorised arrival of boats "can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities".[138] Parliamentary secretary Peter Slipper[139] similarly claimed, "there is an undeniable linkage between illegals and terrorists".[140] And the Prime Minister, John Howard, three days before a general election, cautioned: "Australia had no way to be certain terrorists, or people with terrorist links, were not among the asylum seekers trying to enter the country by boat from Indonesia."[141] The Prime Minister's language was more precise than his colleagues but its effect was identical to that of Reith and Slipper: the conflation of asylum seekers with the newly-emergent terrorist threat.[142]

The head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, and the Prime Minister's most senior security adviser, Dennis Richardson, later described the risk of terrorists coming to Australia by sea as "extremely remote".[143] Regardless, the construction of asylum seekers being a potential terrorist threat was widely reported across Australian media.[144]

The third event to dramatically shape discourse around asylum seekers occurred on October 7, when immigration minister Phillip Ruddock[145] announced that a group of asylum seekers, whose boat had been intercepted by a Navy vessel,[146] had thrown their children overboard from their boat into the sea in a "planned and premeditated" attempt to force the Navy to take them to Australia.[147] Defence minister Peter Reith released photographs of children in the sea wearing life-jackets, asserting the pictures were evidence the government's stated version of events was "absolute fact".[148] Prime Minister Howard argued on radio (and his quotes widely reported in major newspapers): "I can't comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard…. I certainly don't want people of that type in Australia".[149]

It was found by a subsequent parliamentary inquiry that the version of events presented by the government was untrue: that no children were thrown into the water in the incident; that the pictures presented were taken a day after the alleged incident was said to have taken place (when the asylum seeker boat broke up and sank under tow from the navy and almost all passengers ended up in the water);[150] and that military chiefs had explicitly told

government officials no children were thrown overboard in the incident.[151] However, this information was not revealed until after the 2001 election.

The children overboard affair took place in the first week of campaigning for the general federal election held on 10 November, 2001. Ongoing concerns over terrorism immediately post 9/11 (including the subsequent US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, to which Australia contributed troops), the continued arrival of unauthorised boats, and the controversy of the *Tampa* and Children Overboard incidents, meant that the issue of asylum seekers was the "main preoccupation"[152] of the campaign, and represented "one of the government's chief claims to national leadership".[153]

The Howard government campaigned effectively that it, through the new policy of the "Pacific Solution", was dealing with the "crisis" of asylum seeker arrivals, and was protecting Australia from the threat of terrorism by keeping these people from ever reaching Australian shores. In this context, Howard's otherwise unremarkable words "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come", took on new potency. Having trailed in public opinion polls all year, the Howard government was resurgent after *Tampa*. A newspaper poll, published a week after the incident under the headline "Tampa Gives PM refuge from sinking poll hopes", found 77 per cent of voters supported the government's decision to refuse the ship entry to Australian waters, and 74 per cent approved of the government's overall handling of the issue.[154] Two months later, the Howard government was returned with an increased majority.[155]

Julian Burnside QC acted for Liberty Victoria against the federal government in the *Tampa* case, arguing the asylum seekers' detention at sea was unlawful. Burnside contends that the construction of asylum seekers reaching Australia by boat as "illegal", while it had existed previously, gained new prominence in 2001, and has remained a feature of Australian political discourse since. "After *Tampa* and 9/11 you didn't have "boat people", you had "Muslim boat people", you didn't have terrorists, you had "Muslim terrorists". To my recollection that's when the Howard government started calling them illegals, which links quite neatly with the proposition, stated or unstated, that boat people are terrorists, or potential terrorists."[156] Burnside argues the deliberate use of the word "illegal" has been a crucial strategy in maintaining the position and the policies of successive governments.[157]

John Menadue, secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet between 1974 and 1976, and secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs from 1980 to

1983, argues similarly that the language to describe asylum seekers was consciously altered during the immigration debates of 2001.

> When I was in PM&C, and in immigration, 'illegal' was not a language used by the government or by senior public servants. They were basically people in need and while managing boat arrivals was an important issue, it was seen as a customs and immigration issue, not a military or defence force issue. But that changed in 2001… there has been, since *Tampa*, a consistent attempt to demean asylum seekers, to make them seem less than human
>
> In particular, in the Children Overboard incident, the government line by ministers, including the Prime Minister, was that 'these people are so unworthy, they'd even throw their children overboard to save themselves'… That was the beginning of that process of demeaning of asylum seekers. And it's continued in all sorts of ways, that they're illegals, that they are not unauthorised or irregulars as previous governments have described them, they are now illegals akin to criminals, that's the inference governments want people to understand.[158]

The 2001 election was ultimately dominated by the issue of asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat,[159] and the parameters of that discourse were fundamentally framed by the government's narrative. That narrative was overwhelmingly negative towards asylum seekers.[160] It was government rhetoric that conflated asylum seekers with terrorism, and government ministers who questioned the legitimacy of asylum seekers' claims to refugee status because of alleged actions (later shown to be untrue) at sea.

In an analysis of government media releases in 2001 and 2002, Klocker and Dunn found the federal government described asylum seekers in an "unrelentingly negative way".[161] The most frequent terms of reference used by the federal government to portray asylum seekers were "illegitimate" (36 per cent of statements), "threatening" (16 per cent), and "illegal" (11 per cent). Significantly, Klocker and Dunn found too, that Australia's media was largely captive to the negative narrative promulgated by government. "Analysis of newspaper reporting during the same period indicates that the media largely adopted the negativity and specific references of the government. The media dependence upon government statements and spokespersons in part explains this."[162]

Gale argues similarly that the media assisted the government in promoting its rhetoric and establishing the narrative that the asylum seekers reaching Australia by boat represented a "crisis" that required a decisive and forceful reaction. "The arrival of refugees by boat in 2001 was constructed as a crisis through the use of headlines such as 'Island awaits human flood' and '5000 new illegals heading this way'. Other front page headlines such as 'People-smugglers push Howard's limits' and 'Boatpeople turn hostile in ocean standoff' reflect the negative stereotypes that are commonly used to represent refugees and the means by which they arrive in Australia."[163]

Again, it must be stressed that the media did not react as a monolithic entity in its coverage of the asylum debate. There were notable and noisy exceptions to the government-dominated narrative. *The Australian* newspaper, nominally right-leaning and a supporter of the Howard government, fiercely questioned the government's actions over *Tampa* and Children Overboard. Within one fortnight in August 2001, the national daily carried headlines which read: 'A leaky boat to heartbreak',[164] 'REFUGEE CRISIS',[165] 'Cargo of human misery',[166] 'PM's refugee bungling defies reason and decency',[167] 'A leaking boat's cargo of humanity',[168] and 'The human face of our rising tide of our refugees'.[169] Most of these were page 1 stories, focusing not on the government's construction of the asylum seekers' unauthorised arrival in Australia, but on the fraught nature of the asylum seekers' situation at sea, and the circumstances from which they were fleeing. These stories overtly sought to 'humanise' the asylum seekers coming to Australia ('the human face…' '…cargo of humanity'), in what can be seen as a direct challenge to the government's asylum rhetoric. The government responded by attempting to tighten its control of the flow of information about asylum seekers. In the aftermath of the Children Overboard incident, the defence department ordered that "no personalising or humanising images" of asylum seekers could be taken by department staff, so that these could not find their way into the public domain.[170]

The foreign editor of *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan, was perhaps the most explicit in criticising the government's rhetoric, and of its efforts to control the asylum narrative. He argued the government's deliberate portrayal of asylum seekers as dangerous, threatening, and illegitimate was a fundamental component of its policy objective, not simply an addendum to it. And he stated that government control of access to information was a key element in dominating the public narrative formed around and about them.

> The government has consistently tried to dehumanise the

> refugees. This follows a familiar historical pattern. If you dehumanise a group of people in the public mind, it is much easier to deny them their human rights without generating a vast outcry. Thus, in typically undemocratic fashion, the media has been consistently denied access to the refugee centres lest it actually report on the harrowing stories of these people and, by humanising them, generate some sympathy for them.[171]

2.5: 2013 - Asylum and the language of war

In 2013 the language of asylum was made synonymous with the language of war. 2013 was again an election year, coming, as in 2001, at the peak of a surge of boat-borne asylum seekers arriving in Australia, and amplifying community concerns about uncontrollable, unauthorised migration to Australia. 51,637 asylum seekers arrived by boat in Australian territory between 2009 and 2013, a wave larger than any previous cohort.[172] The asylum seekers came from across the world, including southeast and south Asia (including significant numbers of Tamils from Sri Lanka), Africa, central Asia, and the Middle East.[173]

Reference to war or armed conflict in Australian discussion of asylum seekers was not original in 2013. Immigration minister MacKellar was forced to reject rumours of an "armada" of Vietnamese boats in 1977, and, in 2001, Pickering, noted that the discourse around asylum seekers "often elides the vocabulary of war with that of crime". But comparisons between asylum seeker boats and military conflict developed a new currency in 2013. Both major political parties – Labor was in power until the election in September, with the Liberal-National coalition in office following its election victory – used metaphors, and even literal descriptions, of war to describe Australia's position in relation to boat arrivals.

Both Labor Prime Ministers in 2013, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard,[174] were anxious to draw a distinction between the asylum seekers who arrived by boat and the people smugglers who had engineered their journey. "It is very important… to separate in the community's mind… the problem of seeing more boats from the people who are on those boats. It is not, in my mind, a question of blaming the people who are on those boats."[175] However, the government said, aiding asylum seekers to reach Australia was "people-smuggling", and, beyond being a criminal act, was an "evil" business that "preyed on human misery".[176] "People smugglers are the vilest form of human life," Rudd said. "They trade on the tragedy of others and that's why they should rot in jail and, in my own view, rot in hell."[177] The

language used to oppose the people-smugglers' industry was bellicose. Ministers regularly referred to their willingness to "fight the fight against people smugglers",[178] whom they described as "the common enemy".[179] The government's policies were promoted as "smashing the people smugglers' business model".[180]

Scott Morrison,[181] the Coalition's immigration spokesman (who became immigration minister after the election) directly compared the arrival of asylum seeker boats with a military conflict: "This is a war against people smuggling and you've got to approach it on that basis,"[182] he said in a television interview. The inflammatory nature of the language was noted by his interlocutor, Morrison was asked: "Isn't this debate now utterly hysterical? Is it right to start describing this as a war with people smugglers?"
"This is a war against people smugglers," he replied.[183]

The "humanitarian" rationale for Australia's actions, first posited in the 1970s, returned to the forefront of public discourse, but in inverse form. In the 1970s it was argued by government that Australia had a humanitarian obligation to assist and accept boats trying to reach Australia. In 2013, it was posited that it was humanitarian to forcibly push boats back. "The most humanitarian, the most decent, the most compassionate thing you can do is stop these boats," Coalition opposition leader (who became Prime Minister) Tony Abbott[184] argued, "because hundreds… drowned at sea during the flourishing of the people smuggling trade."[185]

Abbott campaigned for the election using a series of three-word slogans, the most memorable of which – and, electorally at least, perhaps the most effective – was his party's asylum seeker policy encapsulated: "stop the boats".[186] Prime Minister after 7 September, he used the comparison of armed conflict to justify withholding information about government actions to achieve this aim. "We are in a fierce contest with these people smugglers and if we were at war we wouldn't be giving out information that is of use to the enemy."[187]

Abbott's immigration minister Scott Morrison instituted the government's asylum seeker policy under a new name: Operation Sovereign Borders. The "operation" was headed by a Lieutenant General in the Australian Army, who appeared for media briefings in full military dress uniform.[188] This nomenclature and appearance further emphasised the impression that Australia was engaged in a military conflict against the passage of boats arriving in Australian territory. The press briefings were reduced to "farce"[189] – in the words of at least one journalist in attendance – by the refusal of either the Lt-General or the Minister to reveal any information about boats that had been interdicted at sea, boarded, or turned back,

repeatedly using the military-style justification of secrecy for "operational matters". "This is a border security operation. Briefings will not be provided on tactical and operational matters that may compromise current or future operational matters."[190]

The government further emphasised its conflict aspect when it passed legislation in 2015 to change the title of the 'operational arm' of the (only recently-renamed) Department of Immigration and Border Protection to the 'Australian Border Force'. "The ABF will be the nation's first line of defence against individuals and networks seeking to undermine our border controls or threaten our community," new Coalition immigration minister Peter Dutton[191] said, announcing the semantic alteration.[192]
Commentators have seized upon the political utility of the nomenclature of war. MacCallum argues, "the cloak of a military campaign against the hapless asylum seekers has been adopted as a political camouflage, partly to inflate the importance of what is, by any normal measure, no more than an irritant, and partly to justify the cult of secrecy".[193]

Greg Lake, the immigration department's former director of offshore processing and transfers (of asylum seekers) argues that the language used to describe asylum seekers changed within the department also, driven by different parts of the department which variously viewed the asylum issue as one of compliance with international legal obligations, or of detention, or of case management.[194] But he says the significant semantic shift in public discourse began ahead of the election year in 2013, as the Labor government wrestled with the politically-damaging issue of boats arriving almost every week. The government, Lake argues, was "searching for a new vocabulary" to explain and justify a "toughening" of asylum policy.[195] "By the time Manus and Nauru were being contemplated in 2012, even when they were talking about the Malaysia Swap,[196] I think the language had shifted, so that it was much more deliberately and intentionally framed around phrases such as 'economic migrants', or 'detainees' who are 'transferred'. And that was driven by a political imperative. What that meant was, ministerial staffers would require briefs or letters, either for a public or a private purpose, to be changed to use that kind of language. They would specifically ask for that kind of language to be used."[197]

A communications officer within the immigration department – who was interviewed on condition of anonymity, because of the sensitivities of the subject – says a peak in boat arrivals in mid-2013 coincided with political 'boiling point' and a 'media frenzy' over the issue of asylum.[198] But, the officer argues, many journalists writing about the issue of asylum were unfamiliar with the specific meanings of terms such as 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee', or with Australia's migration classifications, and as such were vulnerable to subtle manipulation by

changes in rhetoric. Foreign minister Bob Carr's[199] stated in June 2013 that most boat-borne asylum seekers arriving in Australia were "economic migrants" and not genuine refugees,[200] a statement that fundamentally changed media, and consequently public, perceptions. "The term 'economic migrant' became synonymous in the media with a large proportion of those seeking asylum," the officer says. "It became the norm to question the motives of those getting on a boat to Australia, there were distinct connotations that we were being taken advantage of as a country."[201]

Post-election, the new government carefully constructed the language it intended to use in discussion of asylum seekers, the officer says. "A document was circulated within the department from the Minister which outlined expected terminology. 'Irregular maritime arrival' becoming 'illegal maritime arrival' was the most significant instruction because of its sheer use. But this also carried through to other terms – such as the directive not to use 'clients' but 'detainees'."[202] The control of this public language was crucial in establishing the parameters within which the asylum policy debate could take place, and in which public opinions were formed. "The overall effect of this is one of framing: framing the department's approach, framing the media's attitudes, framing the public's understanding," the officer says. "Asylum seekers became an amorphous group and I think this language merely reinforced the 'otherness'".[203]

Former immigration minister Evans argues that the language of government, in framing the issue of asylum as one of border protection, was profoundly influential on media reportage and consequently on public understanding of the issue. "The media tend to use that language, journalists will use the lines out of a press release, young journos in particular are just trying to file their story, and if the government pushes the border security context, if the issue is presented in that way, you report it in that context. It's not just the particular words, it's the whole structure and context. The government can announce: *'as part of Operation Sovereign Borders, the minister for Border Protection announced the border force had caught 40 more illegals,'* or it can say, *'today, the minister for immigration and citizenship reported customs had rescued 40 asylum seekers'*. It's a different story."[204]

As Evans, the department's communications officer, and Lake demonstrate, and as Pickering, MacCallum, and others have independently argued, the confrontational language towards asylum seekers is not an adjunct to "hardline"[205] policies to repel and deter boats, or a semantic device to smooth the passage of potentially controversial legislation. Rather, it is a fundamental part of the policies themselves. The aggressive and oppositional nomenclature of conflict does not simply permit governments to enact forceful policies to counter a real

or perceived threat: that language compels governments to act in that way. In times of war or national crises, other competing interests, such as concern for individual human rights, can be overridden by the need for decisive government action.[206] The language of war gives governments the imprimatur, indeed the obligation, to respond to the threats enlivened by its rhetoric. Failure to respond to those threats with significant force would be derelict. "Metaphors of war justify the need to repel whatever is hostile and threatening," Pickering writes. " 'Immigration controls' become matters of 'national security'; a 'national emergency' requires 'full deployment' of the armed forces on a 'prime defence mission' to 'detect incursions'."[207]

3. Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers

3.1: Opposition to asylum seekers

Australian public attitudes towards asylum seekers arriving by boat have consistently hardened over the four decades since the first cohort of Vietnamese arrived in the north of the country. "Since then," McHugh-Dillon argues, "opinion polls have indicated overwhelmingly negative public attitudes towards unauthorised arrivals and high levels of support for punitive policies towards them."[208] A skepticism about the legality or properness of arriving by sea, or about the legitimacy of boat-borne asylum seekers' claims for protection, have combined with broader, historical migration concerns around the 'yellow peril', impact on jobs, or on social cohesion.[209] Comparisons between polls of different eras are imperfect – because of changes to polling data collection, questions, and sampling – but serve as broadly analogous and as reflection of the trend of progression of Australian community attitudes.

3.1.1: The 1970s

Between 1976 and 1979, as the first 'wave' of Indo-Chinese asylum seekers arrived in Australia in steadily increasing numbers, Australian attitudes towards the new arrivals turned significantly more oppositional. A Morgan Gallup poll in December 1977 found 13 per cent of Australians at that time wanted to allow "any number" of boat arrivals to stay, while 60 per cent wanted to "limit" the number of boats, and 20 per cent wanted to "stop all boat arrivals". When the same questions were asked 15 months later, in March 1979, the number of people who wanted to allow all boat arrivals to land had fallen to eight per cent, while the number who wanted all boats stopped had jumped to 32 per cent (the number who wanted a 'limited' number of boat arrivals had fallen only marginally to 57 per cent).[210] Initial

government efforts to portray the arrival of boats as an extraordinary and limited circumstance, and to frame Australia's response as one grounded in a humanitarian rationale and international legal obligation, appear not to have been accepted by the Australian public, as latent concerns about an irresistible wave of "unknowns" arriving found reinforcement through continued arrivals.

Attitudes towards boat arrivals 1977, 1979: *Australia should allow:*

	Any number of boats (%)	Limited number of boats	Stop all boats	Can't say	Total
Dec 1977	13	60	20	7	100
Mar 1979	8	57	32	4	100

[211]

3.1.2: The early 90s

In 1993, nearly one year after the introduction of mandatory detention, an Age-Saulwick poll appeared to show community attitudes significantly opposed towards asylum seekers arriving by boat. The poll (which asked different questions to those in the 1970s) found 44 per cent of respondents wanted asylum seekers sent back to the countries they had left, "regardless of what they say might happen to them" if returned.[212] Forty-six per cent of people said boat arrivals should be detained while their claims were assessed. Seven per cent said all should be allowed to stay in Australia.[213] Men were more likely than women, and those born in Australia more likely than overseas-born, to want asylum seekers forcibly sent back to their country of origin.[214]

Attitudes towards boat arrivals, 1993: *People on boats, Australia should:*

	Total	Men	Women	Born in Australia	Not born in Australia
Send back	44	51	37	45	40
Detain and assess	46	40	52	46	46
Allow to stay	7	5	8	6	8
Don't know	3	4	3	3	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

[215]

3.1.3: 2001

Australian attitudes to boat-borne asylum seekers appeared to be negatively influenced by the *Tampa* crisis, September 11 terrorist attacks, and Children Overboard affair, in 2001. The government's handling of the *Tampa* crisis was largely supported by the Australian people: 77 per cent supported the government's decision to refuse the ship entry to Australian waters, and 74 per cent approved of the government's overall handling of the issue.[216] The terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, which government ministers directly linked to the arrival of asylum boats in the immediate aftermath, also appeared to turn Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers more oppositional. Just prior to September 11, 50 per cent of Australians wanted all asylum seeker boats forcibly turned away. In the immediate aftermath, that figure had risen to 56 per cent.[217]

Attitudes towards boat arrivals before and after September 11, 2001:

Australia should:

	Before September 11 (4 September, 2001)	After September 11 (31 October, 2001)
Turn back all boats	50	56
Allow some boats to enter	38	33
Allow all boats to enter	9	8
Uncommitted	3	3
Total	100	100

[218]

In the aftermath of the *Tampa* crisis, the Children Overboard affair, and the September 11 terrorist attacks, Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers appeared the most oppositional of an international survey of similar countries. (It should be noted, for the international comparison, the question asked was in relation to asylum seekers arriving *in Australia*, not the countries of the respondents).

Attitudes towards boat arrivals arriving in Australia, domestic and international response: Australia should:

	Australia	New Zealand	USA	UK
Accept refugees	20	38	34	42
Send them back to sea	68	43	25	45
Undecided	12	19	41	13
Total	100	100	100	100
(No. of responses)	853	526	567	510

[219]

3.1.4: 2013

Direct comparisons with the earlier polls are difficult, but the 2013 Lowy Report found that in 2013, 74 per cent of Australians were either "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about "unauthorised asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat".[220] 58 per cent of Australians supported 'offshore processing' and 'regional resettlement',[221] the policies subsequent to the Pacific Solution, under which asylum seekers are sent to Nauru or the PNG for refugee status determination and resettlement in a third country. In Lowy's 2011 poll, 72 per cent of respondents were "somewhat concerned" or "very concerned" about boat-borne asylum arrivals. Of that 72 per cent: 88 per cent believed those who arrived by boat were "jumping the queue", 86 per cent believed boat-borne asylum seekers "posed a potential security risk to Australia", while 66 per cent disagreed that "international treaty obligations mean Australia has to accept refugees regardless of how they arrive here".[222]

3.1.5: Good refugees and bad

It is important to note a distinction apparent in Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers who arrive by boat, and those who arrive by other methods (through the offshore humanitarian program or by plane). "The public makes a distinction between refugees selected under the off-shore program and self-selected asylum seekers," Betts says in her analysis of opinion poll data. "Hostility to boatpeople does not mean hostility to refugees."[223] Australians are broadly supportive – 75 per cent in favour[224] – of refugees who have first been assessed overseas, then being resettled in the country. McKay et al argue that government and media narratives contrasting boat-borne asylum seekers with resettled refugees are crucial to public perceptions.

> Refugees accepted under the Humanitarian Programme are commonly perceived to be deserving of resettlement, partly because they are seen to be following the 'correct' procedure for entry into Australia. By contrast, negative media reporting and political discourse, and the public rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers, imply that their claims are not legitimate, that they pose a threat to Australian identity and security, and are in some way engaging in illegal behaviour by not following formal refugee processes. This perception of illegality is reinforced by the use of mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrive without a valid visa.[225]

4. The impact of government and media discourse on public attitudes towards asylum seekers

Quantifying the extent to which government rhetoric – and media reportage of that rhetoric – influences public opinion of asylum seekers is inherently problematic. Why people feel the way they feel about a particular issue is often unknown to them, and the factors that shape those opinions, and by how much, are often complex, contrary, and changeable. It is certainly the case that several factors – personal experience, socio-economic background, education level, geographic location (rural/urban), sex, and own migration history – are all important influences on attitudes towards asylum seekers.[226] As McKay et al found: "attitudes towards asylum seekers were influenced by a complex interplay between political rhetoric, media reporting, personal experiences, socio-demographic factors and the way that respondents conceptualised traditional Australian values."[227] Correlation does not equal causation, and any assertion of the influence of government and media rhetoric on shaping public opinion must come with the significant caveat that the level of influence is difficult to establish empirically.

However, there is strong evidence that, for most people, the mainstream media is the primary, if not the only, source of information about asylum seekers, and that "media reporting has an important role in influencing public opinion".[228] Hay argues that: "media influence does not reside in the power of direct ideological indoctrination, but in the ability to frame the discursive context within which political subjectivities are constituted, reinforced and reconstituted".[229] Essentially, the media does not dictate *what* its audience should think on particular issues, but it is influential in promoting about *which* issues its audience should think, and *how* it should think about them. The language used by media has been crucial in defining the terms of the asylum debate in Australia and the framework in which that debate exists.

The nature of the discourse around asylum seekers, and the limitations on it, also gives disproportionate weight to the influence of government rhetoric and its reportage by the media, in shaping public opinion. As discussed earlier, the government is very often the "owner" of information about asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia by boat, and can choose to release, or not release, information, and in a way that suits its narrative and political aims. Similarly, the media is often significantly reliant on the government for information to report about asylum seekers, because of the lack of access to asylum seekers themselves, and a paucity of other independent, verifiable, and knowledgeable sources.[230]

Physical distance (people are on boats at sea) and policies of removal (offshore processing, regional resettlement) further severely limit access the media's access to first-hand information independent of government influence or control. A minority of Australians has first-hand knowledge of boat-borne asylum seekers,[231] and government influence in shaping public opinion can be seen to be amplified on issues about which people have little or no personal experience.[232] In addition, the very act of seeking asylum – and the consequences of that action, particularly mandatory detention – results in a loss of agency by asylum seekers.[233] Asylum seekers are not free to speak to the media, to explain their situations, points of view, or motivations. In the absence of any power to create their own narrative, asylum seekers are beholden to the narrative created around them by others.

A number of studies, including McKay et al[234] and Pederson et al,[235] found that survey participants spontaneously reproduced political rhetoric that had been reported in the media when commenting on asylum seekers.[236] In particular, "catch-phrases" such as "queue-jumper", "illegal" and "terrorist" are reported regularly in focus groups.[237] Former immigration minister Evans says he believes government language and media constructions of the asylum issue, shape public understanding. "This language does have an influence on the public, it does lead people to conclusions, there's no question about that… I think the language, and the way the issue is presented, does have an influence in how people see things and on how they determine their view. These things are designed to add to people's insecurities, I do think it has an influence on the public, and to be frank, sometimes the terms have been used to prick their fears or prejudices."[238]

However, the relationship between government, media, and public is more complex than a simple transmission of ideas, concepts and language from government, through media, to populace. In public discourse, each of those three "actors" has its own agency and its own ability to influence the shape, direction and nature of debate.

The media are not simply passive acceptors and reproducers of government rhetoric. Journalists, their editors, and their media organisations, bring their own beliefs, understandings and subjectivities to asylum reportage. Media can, and do, choose to accept or reject government narratives, and that decision can influence government presentation of issues (for example, in the 1970s, the Australian media rejection of government construction of asylum as a humanitarian issue).[239] Media are also influenced by broad public opinion on matters, and by their particular audiences, which provide feedback through circulation figures or viewer numbers, letters to the editors, phone calls, or online comments.

In addition, the public plays a role not only as the intended audience for government rhetoric, but as an influence on it. Democratic governance is fundamentally designed to reflect the will of the people,[240] but in modern liberal democracies, administrations are attuned with increasing sensitivity to the concerns of their constituencies through regular opinion polling, market research, and focus groups, as well as more traditional democratic feedback mechanisms, such as elections.[241]

Certainly, the progression of asylum discourse in Australia, and the relationship between government, media, and popular discourse, must be seen as multi-directional, with each actor in the discourse influencing the others. The actors can be argued to have a reinforcing influence on each other, with something akin to a racheting effect on public discourse, as each actor drives the narrative further in a particular direction – in this case, negative, oppositional attitudes towards asylum seekers – which is reflected, and then amplified further, by the other actors. In some instances public opinion can be seen to drive political rhetoric: witness the growing public unease in the late 1970s over continued boat arrivals – exemplified (and the role of the media also highlighted) in minister MacKellar's fraught radio interview – which appeared to precede a change in government language. In other examples – such as the conflation between asylum seekers and terrorism propounded by minister Reith in 2001 –government rhetoric appeared to promote a concept previously unconsidered by many members of the public. At the very least, the 2001 government narrative entwining asylum with a possible terrorist threat – presented as a factual account issued by an authority (and reported by the media) – offered a legitimation of existing beliefs or concerns. Government reinforcement of those beliefs, may, in turn encourage people to hold those views more strongly, and express them more regularly or forcefully.[242] Again, the media's role is crucial as the conduit by which these narratives are propounded and disseminated. As a fundamental (though not sole) line of communication between government and population, and as a platform on and through which debate occurs, the media's participation in asylum discourse is significant and consequential.

To claim that government rhetoric as reported in the media is the sole determinant of public opinion on asylum seekers would be to overstate the influence of both of those institutions, and to underestimate the complexity of modern political and public discourses. However, both government rhetoric and media reportage must be seen to have a significant influence on public opinion. Too, the government's rhetorical influence is amplified by the arcane nature of the debate.

5. The political construction of asylum narratives

The previous sections have demonstrated that the narratives currently dominant in Australian public discourse around asylum seekers – that asylum seekers on boats are "queue jumpers" acting illegally, that they are potential terrorists or threats to national security, that they are a risk to the Australian way of life – are political constructions, used deliberately to engineer a desired political outcome, that is: support for Australia's current regime of asylum policies. The changes in language used to describe asylum seekers have not been the result of any casual evolution or responses to changing circumstance, but rather a series of considered and deliberate manipulations: in the late 1970s, the language of the improper, undeserving "queue jumper" emerged; in the early 1990s, asylum seekers were described as 'illegals' as justification for the policy of mandatory detention; in 2001, asylum seekers were conflated with terrorists and cast as undesirable people; and in 2013, the Australian polity fused discourse on asylum with the language of war.

Burnside argues the semantic changes have been carefully considered, and "manipulated, in the nature of propaganda".[243] "I don't think it's accidental that [immigration minister] Morrison issued a directive shortly after he became the minister saying that the group previously called "irregular maritime arrivals", must hereafter be called "illegal maritime arrivals". And that has become policy in the department, in internal communications, and external communications. Now, you don't do that, unless you've got a very clear objective, and I think the clear objective is to make the public think these people are criminals."[244] Without the rhetorical foundation, Burnside says, the broad policy suite – mandatory detention, offshore processing, boat turn-backs – is unsustainable. "In my view the word 'illegal' has been probably the most powerful element in maintaining the position of successive governments. Because that, coupled with the recent developments of calling it 'border protection', or 'Operation Sovereign Borders', persuades a lot of members of the public that the government is protecting us from dangerous criminals. It is untrue."[245]

Edward Bernays, in his seminal work on the manipulation of public opinion, "The Engineering of Consent" argues democratic governance depends "ultimately on public approval, and is therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's *consent*[246] to a program or goal." But rather than resist this engineering, which critics might condemn as an attempt to manipulate, Bernays argues publics understand "the right to persuade" is a critical mechanism of democracy, and part of the social compact. "We expect our elected government officials to try to engineer our consent – through the network of communications open to them – for the measures they propose."[247] But, Bernays cautions,

rhetorical constructions to engineer consent will not be effective unless they resonate with already-held beliefs or concerns. Bernays argues consent can only be achieved by appealing to existing "impulses" or "motives", instincts and understandings already consciously or unconsciously held by the public being convinced.[248] Governments seeking to harness popular support for a policy must know of their publics what their current attitudes are, and what underlying impulses govern those attitudes.[249]

This is a crucial point: the ability of successive governments to harness community fears about unknown boat arrivals has only been possible because those fears existed already. As seen above, in the late 1970s the Coalition government made inchoate though genuine efforts to counter these public concerns. These efforts, however, were not sufficiently effective, and the response of a 'tougher' response (coupled with the constituent and necessary element of 'harder' rhetoric) proved a more electorally appeasing path. Later governments, particularly amid the heightened terror sensitivity of the 2001 world immediately post-9/11, and the electoral imperative of the federal polls of 2013, chose not to make any attempt to counter or assuage those public fears, but rather to enliven and exploit them. Having been shown previously to be an effective political mechanism, these fears were harnessed for electoral gain.

So how much is government rhetoric simply reflective of community views – the rationale for a well-supported policy – and how much is the language of the executive moulding public opinion, or moving it in a certain direction? Empirically quantifying this interdependent relationship is almost impossible, but certainly, the evidence of people closely and critically involved in the creation and prosecution of government asylum policy has demonstrated that the construction of language has been deliberate, made with political outcomes in mind. Bernays describes this process as the "engineering"[250] of consent, Chomsky the "manufacturing".[251]

The danger inherent in certain rhetorical constructs is that they can close off the possibility of other understandings of an issue – they make the narrative put forward the only one able to be debated. The rhetorical constructions employed create a discursive environment where any alternative understanding of the issue cannot be realised or articulated, and genuine debate around the issue is not possible. Chomsky writes that control of an issue is achieved when those in power "strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum… [giving] people the sense that there is free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate".[252] Asylum policy in Australia is a case in point: by

constructing the debate as one of "national security", or of "illegal" activity, any alternative framework – asylum viewed through the prism of humanitarian obligation or of international legal commitment – is removed from public discourse. Are Australia's asylum seeker policies supported by the electorate because they reflect the electorate's views, or are they popular because they are the only viable policies given the fundamental paradigms which are constructed to support them? Asylum as an issue of national security and criminality is a legitimate, and obviously electorally-successful, political construct. But it must be recognised as that: a political construct, engineered for a political end.

The argument allied to this, that the established policy suite is electorally supported, is popular with the Australian people, and therefore the correct policy for the country – *argumentum ad populum* – is flawed. It is especially so in an area of debate so arcane, and where information is overwhelmingly controlled by the source creating the policy. Just because a policy course is popular, does not mean it should be the only one able to be debated. Majoritarianism is not a replacement for genuine democratic discourse.

Former immigration department secretary John Menadue sees, in the rhetoric of successive Australian governments, an attempt to appeal to an underlying xenophobia in Australia, a concern, justified or not, about 'outsiders' disrupting Australian society, economy or way of life. "Historically, I think it's true, you can make political gains by appealing to our base instincts, because people are fearful. That's been politically successful in Australia, and that's why it continues to be done: there's a political bonus."[253]

That underlying concern is not unique to Australia. Almost all cultures, Menadue says, hold some level of fear of outsiders, but in Australia it has been successfully exploited for electoral advantage.[254] The 2001 election, he says, was the archetypal example of community concerns being amplified for political gain. An existing concern about disordered boat arrivals of foreign people (most of them Muslim) was deliberately conflated with terrorism – in an environment of heightened fear of Islamist terrorism in the immediate post-9/11 environment – to create a platform of political support for a seismic policy shift to offshore processing.[255] And the rhetorical constructions used by Australian governments to make this connection – disseminated through the media – were key elements in convincing their publics of the need for, if not the desirability of, punitive asylum seeker policies, Menadue argues. "Those language shifts play a huge part in governments leading the public opinion on the matter. It would be naïve to think that that language doesn't send clear messages on the government's position on something. I think it has a massive impact on their support or otherwise."[256]

The communications officer within the immigration department argues that semantic changes are used in internal communications also to shift understanding and policy frameworks. "Language at [the] immigration [department] was both descriptive and prescriptive – while language of course reflected the policy of the Government of the day, it was also a clear indicator of what the outcome was expected to be. While I believe staff would do their best to make decisions on the facts at hand guided by policy directives, the language served to set their understanding of the Minister's expectations of an outcome."[257] Former minister Evans makes a similar point that departmental staff look to reflect the attitudes and politics of their ministers and governments. "Public servants pick up the language of the politicians and they then start to demonstrate the attitudes that that language reflects. If ministers are using harsh language and… pejorative terms about people, then that flows through to how those people will be treated. The language creates an expectation within government that this is how people like this should be treated."[258]

Promotion of potentially-controversial policies such as offshore processing, boat turn-backs, or regional resettlement, has been made possible by their rhetorical constructs, the departmental communications officer says. But the officer also argues the language used by the department has become "detached" from the asylum seekers as people.[259] The political debate on asylum seekers exists all around them, but they are absent from it, depersonalised by the language used to describe them. "The language has essentially become more militarised – terms like 'Operation Sovereign Borders', 'on-water matters', 'breaking the people smuggler's trade', all of these put emphasis on the process and not the person, and in turn the characterisation of asylum seekers changes as well. It's a numbers game – no boat arrivals in x days, x number of turn-backs. The individual is absent in this discourse,"[260] the communications officer says.

Evans sees the language used now to describe asylum seekers in Australia as a result of the trend begun in the early years of modern Australia's asylum experience.

> Overall, there has been an attempt to dehumanise refugees, that's where we've got to in the end, that's where we are now. So people refer to them as 'illegals', we use all sorts of military terms and operational titles and talk about border security. The whole prism the issue is viewed through is illegal entry to the country, posing a security threat. That's become the dominant language. Whether it drives public opinion or whether public opinion drove politicians to

> that point, no doubt it's been exploited politically. And it's been hard on those in politics who have a slightly different view of the world to push back against that language when it became so common.[261]

6. Conclusion

Language is important. Words matter. George Orwell argued the importance of semantics in shaping ideas, in establishing patterns of thought, and in creating orthodoxies. He recognised too, the difficulty in changing established narratives once entrenched. "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better."[262]

The semantics of asylum in government, media and public discourses in Australia have changed dramatically over the four decades since the first post-colonial vessels arrived on the country's shoreline. The language has become intensely oppositional and hostile. Deliberately-constructed narratives have established that asylum seekers arriving by boat are acting illegally, are jumping a queue ahead of more deserving refugees, are linked to terrorism, or are a threat to Australia's national security and social cohesion. That change in language has occurred in concert with a steady, though not linear, hardening of policies, designed to deter arrivals: the introduction of boat turn-backs, mandatory detention, offshore processing, and regional resettlement. And that change in language, led by government but reproduced and amplified by media, has been influential in shaping Australian public opinion on asylum seekers.

The semantic shift has not been accidental. Nor has it been a minor corollary of the changes in government policy. Rather, the language has been a deliberate and integral part of the policies themselves. The alteration of rhetoric around asylum seekers has been designed to change public understanding of the issue of asylum and of the people arriving by boat themselves. The rhetorical constructions have allowed – and, as has been argued in this paper, in some cases compelled – successive governments to enact more and more punitive regimes against boat arrivals. Language is a key element of prosecution and of reinforcement for policy. At a fundamental level, the language is the policy.

To paraphrase Orwell, Australian journalism should and does know better. But too readily, Australian journalism has accepted this change in language unquestioningly or with too little

resistance. Journalism's role as a public service is diminished when it is captive to the rhetoric of any side in a debate.

The issue of mass irregular migration – of people seeking sanctuary in a country not their own – will be one of the planet's great challenges of the 21st Century. Already, more people are currently displaced from their homes that at almost any time in human history, and continued political instability, widespread poverty, and climate disruption insist the issue will grow rather than diminish.[263] Discussion of asylum seekers is discussion of some of the most vulnerable, disenfranchised, and voiceless communities on earth. Governments should speak dispassionately when they discuss the policies and politics of asylum seekers. The media should report critically, objectively, and factually. Their publics, whom they both exist to serve, will be better served for it.

This is an edited version of the paper written by Ben Doherty as a Thomson Reuters Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, during Trinity Term 2015. The full paper, which also considers international comparisons with Australia, and debates future strategies for media reportage of asylum issues, can be read here: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/call-me-illegal-0

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