

**From Lucky Country to Penal Colony:  
How Politics of Fear Have Changed Australia**

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**Adam Jamrozik**  
**Department of Sociology**  
**Flinders University, Adelaide**

**Introduction**

There are two issues that I want to address in this paper. First, I want to present a perspective on, and attempt an explanation of, the antagonistic policies of the Federal Government toward the recent refugee asylum seekers and the broad public approval of these policies. I want to ask: how did it happen that in a relatively short period of time, Australia – the country that became known as a model of a successful accommodation of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity promoted under the concept of multiculturalism – became a country retreating to its early policies and public attitudes of xenophobia and even racism? Then, I want to draw some implications for sociology, for the kind of research that sociologists might undertake and for the role the discipline of sociology might play through communicating the findings of any such research to the general public.

The punitive policy and antagonistic public attitudes towards recent refugees seeking asylum in Australia contrast the policies and public attitudes that through 1970s and 1980s gradually became more accepting to, and successfully accommodating, the developing multicultural character of Australian society. With the benefit of hindsight, the retreat to the earlier monocultural policies and public attitudes perhaps should not be a surprise, as there were signs of its coming in the 1980s. Therefore, the actions taken against the refugee asylum seekers in 2001 need to be seen as another step in the progression of policy statements and press articles aimed at raising fear of immigrants from Asian countries, fear of multiculturalism, and fear of the land claims by the Indigenous Australians. It is through such sustained fear-raising propaganda that demonising the refugees from the Middle East countries and detaining them behind razor wires or electrified fences, or sending them to a new form of penal settlements in far-distant islands became possible and gained the acceptance by wide-ranging public opinion.

In politics, the use of fear is not something new. This method has been successfully used throughout history by political leaders of various persuasions, especially in seeking approval of policies which, under normal circumstances, the polity would be reluctant to approve. It has been used by pointing to external enemies or 'enemies in our midst' and has served as grounds for either demonising some countries, some ethnic or cultural population, or some political ideologies or religions. Whatever the given reason, it has always been used as grounds for legitimisation of coercive legislation and curtailment of citizens' freedoms. In Australia, fear has been almost a permanent instrument of politics ever since the Federation, pressing into people's consciousness mainly as the fear of the neighbouring countries, or of certain political

ideas. In recent years, fear has been extended also to the ‘dangers of land claims’ by the Indigenous Australians, portrayed as a danger of ‘locking up’ vast areas of the country’ and of losing our backyards.

The policies pursued by the Federal Government towards the asylum seekers need to be seen in this wider context. It is this context of what I would call ‘the unresolved issues’ in Australian society that I consider to be the field that constitutes a rich ground for sociological studies. Such studies would lead to a better understanding of who we are as a society and why do we think and act the way we do. I will raise some of these ‘unresolved issues’ later but will first outline a more immediate background to the series and events directly related to the policies adopted towards the refugee asylum seekers of the 1990s and early 2000s.

### **The Revived Fear of the ‘Yellow Peril’**

The fear of the ‘peril’ from the neighbouring northern region has been an integral part of Australian history ever since the Federation and even before then. At the time of the debate on *The Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, *The Bulletin* wrote that the purpose of the Bill was to ‘keep out paupers, diseased persons and, above all, 800 000 000 closely adjacent niggers...[so as] to maintain the purity of the Anglo-Saxon type...the best and strongest and most intellectual on this earth’ (Jordan 1989). Since then, at times this ‘peril’ was ‘yellow’, at other times it was ‘brown’, and at other times, as was the case with our involvement in the American war in Vietnam, it was ‘skin-yellow’ but also politically ‘red’. Frequent graphic illustrations of the ‘yellow hordes’ descending ‘down’ on us through sheer force of the law of gravity always created the desired effect of convincing the polity that the danger was real.

Contributions to the raising of fear of, and antagonism towards, the refugees, which made the Government’s actions acceptable to the large sections of the population came from a range of social actors, and I can mention only few of them. If we looked at the specific events which raised the danger of the ‘yellow peril’ in our time, Geoffrey Blainey’s address to the Rotary Club in Warnambool in 1984 and his subsequent publication of *All for Australia* later in that year must take the prize as the starting point of the journey into the past of the xenophobic fear of racial invasion that has continued with a strengthening vigour until the present day. The next notable event was John Howard’s policy statement in 1988 in which commented on the need to restrict immigration from Asian countries. On becoming the Leader of the Opposition, John Hewson followed with his comments that multiculturalism ‘has got out of hand’ and people were worried about the risk of ‘cultural ghettoism’ (1990).

At the time, those views were not endorsed by the media, especially by the national printed media. In commenting on Howard’s statement, Max Walsh wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that ‘Mr Howard is a politician who thinks he has found a good issue. He is not a racist; he’s about exploiting racism’ (Walsh 1988). The first detention of asylum seekers in a camp at Port Hedland occurred in 1992, the detainees being refugee asylum seekers from Cambodia. This was the action of the then Labor government. That action evoked critical comments from some sections of the media, raising accusations of inhuman treatment, racism and abuse of human rights. It was called as a ‘national shame’ (Bunk 1992).

The political climate changed dramatically with the election of the Conservative Coalition in the 1996 federal elections, the election of Pauline Hanson, and subsequent formation of *One Nation* party. Encouraged by John Howard's expressed view that people could now speak freely about issues without being labelled as racists or bigots, the xenophobia returned in various forms and guises - as arguments against immigration from Asian countries, against immigration generally, and against the concept and policy of multiculturalism. The 'Ten points' legislation which curtailed the scope of the earlier Mabo decision of the High Court added to the change in public attitudes, by raising fear of 'enemies outside and enemies within the walls'. The grounds for change in public attitudes were further strengthened by some commentators in the press (eg, David Barnett 1990, David Jenkins 1993, Tony Abbott 1990) and later supported by some academic contributors, such as Katherine Betts (1999). Their writings presented the danger of a growing ethnic and cultural diversity in Australiana cities and criticised the policy of multiculturalism. For example, Tony Abbott wrote in 1990:

Immigration risks backlash because in some suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne it is hard to hear an Australian accent. Of course parts of Australia's big cities have been immigrant ghettos for a generation. The change is that today's immigrants look as well as sound different from most Australians... The issue is the sort of Australia we want our children and grandchildren to inherit. Will it be a relatively cohesive society that studies Shakespeare, follows cricket and honours the Anzacs; or will it be a pastiche of cultures with only a geographic home in common... Race matters - but only because it usually signifies different values, attitudes and beliefs. The real problem is not race, but culture.

The actions taken in 2001 aimed at preventing the landing of refugees on Australian soil were the culmination of the series of policy statements and coercive methods of control in the detention camps. In deciding to greet the refugee asylum seekers with SAS forces and naval guns, and then deporting them to far-distant islands in conditions not dissimilar to those experienced by the convicts in the First Fleet, Australia returned to its early colonial origins. As the colony of New South Wales was established by Britain as a prison for deporting its oppressed poor, so we have now established prisons on various islands, gaining the acceptance of their governments by bribing them with some money which those communities badly need. And the fact that both major political parties endorsed these decisions and apparently a vast majority of Australian population supported them, indicates how deeply desensitised we have become to the inhuman deeds of our political decision makers.

The inhuman policies have been legitimised by the Government's tapping into the same deep-seated fears and prejudices in the populations that have been successfully tapped into many times since the Federation. The political methods used cannot be adequately described by any other name than politics of xenophobia and racism. The policies have been justified by the portrayed need of 'protecting our borders' from the danger of being 'swamped' by the 'illegals', by the 'queue jumpers', by 'rich people who can pay thousands of dollars to smugglers', by 'people who throw their children into the sea', and by 'likely terrorists among them'. Those refugees who have been admitted into the country are locked in detention camps behind razor wire fences,

isolated from communicating with the media and people outside, and controlled by prison personnel. Disturbances by the inmates that occur from time to time are controlled by water-spraying trucks, tear gas and solitary isolation rooms. Now, the innovation is an electrified fence, which I consider to be the utmost humiliation of human beings and an offence to a civilised community.

I must include here a personal note. In my youth, I saw electrified fences in concentration camps and I would have never dreamt that I would see something like this in this country. The absence of protest from the Opposition, from the media and from the general public at this adaptation of the means of control that stay in our memory as a reminder of the worst crime committed in the contemporary era of our civilisation how far down the slippery slope of changing public attitudes through the propaganda of fear we have allowed ourselves to be fall.

Another cost we have suffered through the events of 2001 is the moral corruption of our public institutions, especially of our Public Administration. Through sheer political opportunism, the members of the Public Administration as well as those of the Defence Forces were drawn into a silent network of deceit and lies, which even a Senate inquiry was unable to unravel. Many unanswered questions still remain and are unlikely to be answered for a long time, if ever. The legacy of these events is that we can no longer uncritically accept on face value any statements on important issues emanating from the ministers or their departments.

Now, the issue of refugees has receded into the background of the new fear, the fear of international terrorism. We are forced to accept the reality of terrorism because we have become the victim of a terrorist act of tragic magnitude resulting in the death of many of our citizens. I do not want to discuss the problem of terrorism, except to point out that these developments pose some important questions about the effect on the attitudes towards, and the treatment of, the refugees who have come from the same region and follow the same religion that we identify with the terrorists. These questions are also related to Australian citizens of certain ethnic and cultural background and who follow the religion of Islam. To a varied extent, these questions are of concern to most Australians of non-English-speaking background. I expect that these issues will come up for discussion at this Forum.

### **Refugees and the ‘Unresolved Issues’**

How do we explain the recent events – both the policy and the methods used to control those refugees who had already been admitted to the country and locked up in detention centres and those who were prevented from landing on our shores – and the broad public acceptance of these policies and methods? I have argued that, among a number of reasons, the use of fear has been the most important factor. Considering the history of Australia since the Federation and even before then, and the criticism of immigration from non-European background sustained by some politicians, commentators in the media as well as some academics, the Government’s actions of 2001 might have been logically expected. A further reason for the actions was the opportunity such actions presented for winning the forthcoming elections. That opportunity was certainly exploited to the full.

All this still leaves an unanswered question why in an ostensibly politically enlightened society such rather crude methods can be so effective. The events of 2001 suggest that the effectiveness in the use of fear brings is strengthened if the issue in question is generalised as a danger to the cherished beliefs and values of the community. The assertion that ‘we don’t want such people in our community; we certainly don’t’, was very effective. Such assertions create in people’s consciousness the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety and tend to generalise such feelings to what I call the ‘unresolved issues’ in our society.

Let me suggest that the main ‘unresolved issue’ is the perception of our location in the world scene. After over two hundred years since the landing of what we call the First Fleet and after one hundred years since Federation we are geographically situated in this part of the globe but mentally we are somewhere else. As Dennis Kenny observed a decade ago, ‘Australian society and culture were founded as an outpost of the cultural ecology of the Atlantic... Australia is in the Pacific, but, so far, not of the Pacific’ (1992). A similar comment was made by J. E. Hoffman who observed that Australians had remained ‘regional fringe dwellers’, not really belonging to the region. This feeling, Hoffman said, was ‘...a state of mind in which Australians regard themselves as being “cut off” from somebody, something, somewhere...It is an intimation that Australia is not our home, that we are alien to the region...(1984:59).

Australians have endeavoured to allay this feeling of misplacement and insecurity through maintaining association with, and seeking protection from, foreign powers. For decades this meant relying on Britain, and then on the United States. As Donald Horne observed in his *Lucky Country*, ‘Australia has remained a province of Britain. It is, in a sense, now also a province of the U.S.A....[it is] a nation in which most activities are derivative and most new ideas are taken from abroad’ (1968:86).

Seeking protection from foreign powers raises the question ‘protection from whom?’ Now, this situation has acquired a new perspective by the ostensibly accepted and publicly asserted role of a ‘deputy sheriff’, implying a policing role in the region on behalf of the United States. It is thus no wonder that the people in our neighbouring countries tend to see Australia as an outpost imperial powers. Also, the frequent assertions of our ‘being here’ but ‘not being of here’ reinforces our neighbours’ perceptions of Australia and their concern. The effort to redeem these perceptions by Paul Keating’s argument that we needed to seek security in Asia but not from Asia was dismissed by the Conservatives as something akin to ‘selling out’ our identity and our heritage.

I venture to suggest that this state of mind is deep-seated and is bound in our history, more specifically, in the lack of integrity in the prevailing perception of our history. At present Australian history is viewed in two opposite perspectives: a ‘black armband’ perspective and a ‘white blindfold’ perspective. The ‘white blindfold’ perspective is the dominant, or the ‘official’ perspective on which the current government policy is based. The people who question this policy are seen as the holders of the ‘black armband’ perspective: their views are criticised as somehow not only historically incorrect but also somehow disloyal to earlier settlers and to the Australian community.

The fundamental issue in the reconciliation with the Indigenous Australians is the task of restoring integrity to Australian history. In the debates about reconciliation, land rights claims, and demands for apology and for a treaty, some undeniable facts tend to be entirely conveniently ignored by those who oppose these demands. The occupation of the land by the British invaders was illegal. The claim to the land was simply a claim to possession by conquest - a law claimed by the Roman Empire and used by all colonial powers since then. It was also an occupation justified by a lie. The myth of *terra nullius* was used as a handy device to legitimise the illegal occupation of the land and the subjugation of its population. The invaders never sought a peace treaty with the local population, and the local population never formally surrendered their sovereignty to the invaders. Therefore, by law and international conventions, we are still in a state of war with the Australian Indigenous population. And until such time as these historical facts are acknowledged and a proper peace treaty is agreed upon and becomes an integral part of Australian Constitution, the white occupation of Australia will continue to be illegal and the state of war will continue. Arguments against the feasibility of a peace treaty are based on a legalistic fiction. Peace treaties unite winners and losers: they make them both equal; they do not divide them. If it were not for the concluded peace treaties, we would still be in a state of war with Germany and Japan.

### **Implications for Sociology**

What, then, might be the implications of all these issues for sociology? It would be presumptuous of me to issue any priorities for the directions the sociological studies might take or for the methods of research to adopt. Clearly, the issues I have attempted to identify in this address are of great significance to Australia and it would follow that they are, or would be, of direct interest to sociologists. In my view, the changes that have occurred in Australia and on the global scene are much more significant than the general opinions among the public as well as among the academics in the social and political sciences seems to perceive and appreciate.

In perusing recent issues of the *Journal of Sociology*, I have not found any articles about the refugees. The latest issue (September 2002) contains an Introduction and three articles concerned with the event of 11 September 2001, recorded at a symposium on this issue during the annual conference of The Australian Sociological Association in December 2001. I read from this that there were three papers on this issue presented at the conference. The author of the Introduction (Kevin McDonald) notes that 'The symposium organised around them took the form of a wide-ranging discussion, one that centred on the ability of sociology to grapple with the implications of globalisation, new actors and identities, and the place of non-western experiences within the discipline, in particular Islamic experiences' (p 211). The three articles that follow the Introduction (Mervyn Bendle, Sol Encel and Kevin McDonald) discuss various theoretical perspectives in the current sociological literature and broadly come to the conclusion that a profound change in those approaches need to occur if sociology is to perform the task for which it has been established as a social science discipline. The theories of Francis Fukuyama ('the end of history') and of Samuel Huntington ('the clash of civilisations'), especially, receive critical comments.

In my view, a particularly important is Encel's argument which states that, for sociologists,

...it is essential to recognise that grand narratives continue to exist and to influence world affairs. The fact that Fukuyama's 'endism' and Huntington's clash of civilisations are badly flawed does not mean that there is no place for large generalisations about issues like power, inequality, exploitation and imperialism. Our classic authors –Marx, Weber, Wright Mills, J.A., Hobson – still have much to say to us on these subjects. (p226)

Encel's comment appears to me to be quite apposite as an implied critique of some of the current trends in sociological research and analysis. With some notable exceptions, the trend, in my view, has been towards the avoidance of 'big' issues and focusing more on what may be called 'micro-sociology', examining interesting aspects of society and producing 'safe' findings in interesting research monographs. However, such studies do not provide any significant challenge to the established structure of power and to the inequalities and injustices that structure represents.

The other issue the articles raise that I consider of great importance, especially in relation to the topic of this Forum, is McDonald's argument that '...the extent to which sociology has regarded the western experience as a universal is a critical problem that the discipline must overcome' (p212). This argument applies to sociology what Dennis Kenny applied to tertiary education in Australia as a whole by saying: 'Our universities, especially, have tended to remain citadels of the central beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and values of the European Enlightenment, and far-flung outposts of the cultural ecology of the Atlantic' (Kenny 1992). This certainly does not mean that we should 'give up' our western experience, but it means that we should seriously consider other experiences, and incorporate those experiences in our theoretical frameworks. For sociology, this would mean that any sociological studies focused on the issues of our region would be sociological rather than studies in social anthropology.

I would like to conclude by saying that an important, although difficult, task for sociologists is to communicate the significance of their work and their findings to the community at large. To the proverbial 'average person on the street' sociology is an arcane science, and the persons of influence, such as politicians and captains of commerce and industry see sociology as a 'subversive' pursuit challenging the peace of the established social order. On this issue, the words of the Swedish social scientist. Bjorn Wittrock seem apposite. Wittrock says:

In an age in which the call for involvement sounds more demanding and persistent than ever and in which the reasons for engagement may be greater than ever and aloofness and disengagement may often be just another word for cynicism, some scholars must still remain true to the need for critical distance and speak truth, whether power is listening or not. (1985)

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