

# RACISTS AMONG US

IT IS ONLY right to feel good about being Australian. We enjoy many blessings and we have a lot about which we can be proud.

Especially we can be proud of our multicultural success story. We are a very inclusive people. From the 2006 Census we learned that twenty-four percent of Australians were born overseas, and a further twenty percent have either one or both parents born overseas. Australians speak about two hundred languages.

It has been commented that we must give credit to the ordinary Australians who live in the suburbs that we live together with such harmony. 'It is ordinary Australians...with their fundamental sense of tolerance, decency and willingness to give newcomers a fair go who have lived side by side with wave after wave of new migrants and made multiculturalism work.' (Dr Nicola Henry, 'A Multicultural Australia' (*The Australian Collaboration*), summarizing Duncan *et al.*, *Imagining Australia*.)

Our noble ideal of 'a fair go for all' has been the moral principle on which our nation has been built. Because that principle has been widely adhered to, so many people have happily made Australia their home. For generations Australia has been a land of opportunity.

And we who have welcomed the stranger, the migrant and the asylum seeker have benefited. I always find my surroundings and its people interesting when I walk through the inner suburbs of Sydney. There is such a lively variety of people, sounds and sights and, in the commercial areas, shops selling goods from all parts of the world. We are by no means a boring nation.

However, we are challenged by what needs to be put right in our national life. One of the quotations I found when I googled 'patriotism' was from a speech by Carl Schurz in the US Senate many years ago: "My country, right

or wrong'; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.' There are inequalities and discriminations that need to be set right in our country—against women, against ethnic groups. And the often poor state of health, life-expectancy, education and welfare of our indigenous brothers and sisters is a shame on the whole nation.

One very real and pressing challenge for all of us is to deal with the racists among us. There always have been a few who expressed racist views, and these have normally been dismissed by the general population as 'ratbags'. But there has been a resurgence of violent racism recently, targeting especially our Indian guests. Such crimes are abhorrent to the rest of us, and the perpetrators must be prosecuted. Above all they must be shamed, and what better way is there of shaming them than by labeling them with the ultimate term of condemnation in our national vocabulary: 'un-Australian'?

The foregoing thoughts were stimulated by Australia Day celebrations in January. I was particularly impressed by the Australia Day address delivered by General Cosgrove, and we are grateful to General Cosgrove and the Australia Day Council of New South Wales for permission to reprint it. Particularly relevant, too, was the speech that Laurie Ferguson MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services delivered to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne last December in which he outlined our national policy towards migrants and refugees. We thank Laurie for permission to reprint his speech. Interestingly, both Peter Cosgrove and Laurie Ferguson are Catholic educated.

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We need to be vigilant and pro-active if we are to continue to live up to our reputation

as a nation that welcomes the stranger.

2010 is an election year and, predictably, refugees are becoming an issue, with politicians ramping up the rhetoric, on occasion indulging in their silly and cruel games of ‘Our-border-protection-policy-is-tougher-than-yours’. We all have to try to keep our politicians in line. But we also need to work to keep the public debate in line so that people who come to us for shelter will be treated with justice, fairness and generosity.

Erika Feller, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection with the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, speaking on ABC-PM on February 18<sup>th</sup> last, reminded us of some important facts.

- Australia’s annual total of asylum seeker arrivals—including those who arrive by boat and by air—is about 6,000. This is a small number compared with the arrivals in countries such as the U.S., France, Canada, the U.K., Germany, Sweden, Belgium. Even Norway, which

receives less than any of these countries, had 16,100 asylum seekers making a claim in 2009.

- Governments that put their energies into deterrents find that this approach is costly, often contravenes international conventions, and is ineffective. Ultimately it is unpopular because it is perceived to be inhumane.
- Most asylum seekers that come to Australia by boat are found to be genuine refugees from very bad situations.
- The focus of our attention needs to be on who needs protection and how to make it available.

Erika Feller also pointed out the need for all—politicians, media, associations (and we must include church communities)—to *manage* the public debate on border protection and policies on asylum seekers. It is time, she said, for strong ethical leadership supporting humane protection principles.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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*The Prophet Isaiah says we are all kin, of one flesh and blood, and perhaps never more than now. We are presented today with the disturbing reality, otherness—the simple fact of being different in some way, Muslim or migrant—has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Increasingly we see that exclusion, us and them, has become the primary sin, skewing all our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within in our ever narrowing circle. [...]*

*In light of this, we Christians must learn that salvation comes not only as we are reconciled to God and not only as we learn to live with one another, but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other. This is not easy. Jesus calls us friends, tells us to befriend and love one another in a risky and dangerous embrace which mirrors his own. When there is respect for the difference and dignity of the whole person, the love of the truth and the awareness of belonging to the one great family of peoples wanted by God and called to live under his watch in shared love, only then can the dream become real*

—Chrys McVey O.P., the Las Casas Lecture 2007, delivered at Blackfriars, Oxford.