



A call to alms

By Tara Davda

5 September 2016

A spate of recent violence in Germany has prompted a backlash against Angela Merkel's "open door" policy. The policy, which late last year saw almost one million asylum seekers flood into Germany, has received widespread political criticism. Despite this, Merkel has refused to bend, stoically reminding Germany of its moral responsibility and repeating, "*Wir schaffen das!*" (We can do this).

The attacks — the shooting of nine people in a Munich shopping mall by an eighteen year old German-Iranian, an axe-assault by a teenage Afghan asylum seeker on five passengers aboard a train in Wuerzburg-Heidingsfeld, and July's suicide bombing in Ansbach — have all contributed to increased pressure on Merkel to justify her decision.

Germany's far right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party claims Merkel has endangered homeland security by allowing free movement across German borders, and Horst Seehofer, Bavarian prime minister, has [observed](#) that since the policy was enacted, "The country is divided. People are unsettled and polarization has increased."

On the other side of the world however, Australia's asylum policy is in the headlines for all the wrong reasons. The [Nauru Files](#), more than 2000 leaked incident reports detailing how sexual and physical abuse, repression, fear and intimidation are a recurrent part of life in the camp, are a damning indictment of the conditions in Australia's offshore processing centres and further evidence of Australia's appalling treatment of asylum seekers.

But this is not new copy. Last year, Australia came [under fire](#) for the way its contribution to refugee resettlement had been framed. Speaking in September 2015, Tony Abbott claimed that on a per capita basis, Australia's resettlement ratio was more generous than any other country. Although this is not fictitious, [it is deceptive](#). The UNHCR resettlement program, to which Mr Abbott was referring, processes just 1% of the total global claims for protection from displaced people. It is therefore difficult to frame Australia's approach in a favorable light.

Consider Germany. Although both Merkel's approval ratings and the authorities responsible for responding to the influx sagged under the weight of the new arrivals, the approach was markedly more compassionate than that of Australia. Outside of Australia, our policies have been widely criticized, yet within our borders the narrative towards outsiders is largely unsympathetic. In 2014, 71% of Australians were supportive of policies to turn back boats [in situations where it was safe to do so](#), and earlier this year, Northern Territory Chief Minister Adam Giles described xenophobia as "part of the Australian spirit".

Although the context was government opposition to a Chinese bid for Darwin Port, his comment is insightful because it illustrates that instead of giving outsiders the benefit of the doubt, Australians have a tendency to assume the worst. Seeking reelection in the run up to the 2013 Australian Federal election, Prime Minister Julia Gillard exploited the idea that foreign workers posed a threat to domestic workers by campaigning on a platform to crack down on 457 visas. That this idea became a key policy position for Gillard's campaign suggests that the party suspected it would generate considerable support amongst the electorate.

Elizabeth Farelly's [piece](#) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the myth of the 'Fair Go' taps into the ugly underbelly of Australian consciousness. She writes that increasingly, the narrative that best describes Australianness is the vilification of the weak. What does this say about Australia and why is it important? In September 2015, Julie Bishop [announced Australia's intention](#) to run for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. As the nomination draws closer, Australia's human rights record will attract increasing scrutiny, and in several areas, threatens to undermine Australia's chances.

As part of Australia's [bid for election](#), participating countries critiqued Australia's history of human rights. Although the [issues reviewed](#) included gender-based violence and Australia's treatment of its Indigenous population, the majority of concerns focused on asylum policy, offshore detention and the legality of the campaign to 'Stop The Boats'.

Similarly, Australia's recent record of UN engagement does little to endear it. In March 2015, following a scathing report on Australian refugee policy, Tony Abbott responded that Australia was "[sick of being lectured to by the UN.](#)" With Abbott gone, Malcolm Turnbull has sought a more diplomatic approach, but still shies away from making tough decisions on asylum policy.

Francois Crepeau, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants for the UN has criticised Australia's repeated refusal to sanction inspections of offshore detention centres. In September last year, Crepeau cancelled a visit, citing fear of reprisals against those who

supported him, and making clear his position on Australia's [Border Force Act](#).

A recent piece in the [New York Times](#) described Australian refugee policy as “inhumane” and “strikingly at odds with the country’s tradition of welcoming people fleeing persecution”, whilst the president of Australia’s Human Rights Commission Gillian Triggs has argued that Australia’s compliance with international law is in “decline”. Thus, Australia’s integrity as a potential ambassador for human rights is increasingly challenged.

In the context of a post-Nauru Files landscape, and with the death knell for Manus Island having finally [toll](#)ed, perhaps Australia can use the occasion to restore some compassion to the concept of the ‘Fair Go’. With the closure of Manus, Australia’s failure to secure another offshore arrangement for the asylum of the current detainees, and the recent [announcement](#) that contractor Wilson Security will cease to provide security services to Australia’s offshore detention centres, an opportunity exists for Turnbull to rewrite the narrative on Australia’s asylum policy.

Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers sends an important moral message, one that, in light of the UN bid, should not be taken lightly. Whilst there may be benefits to processing migrants offshore (security and cost are oft-cited arguments), if we are to live up to the values of the mythical Australian ‘Fair Go’, it is essential we are more compassionate. Just as [Merkel’s humane stance](#) has been important in guiding Europe’s response to the crisis, how the Australian government approaches the latest asylum crisis will shape public discourse on the issue. As the [Cologne attacks](#) attest and Germany is currently learning, there are costs to accepting migrants, but it is still worth pursuing.

Tara Davda is a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre. This post is published in collaboration with [Policy Forum](#), Asia and the Pacific’s platform for public policy analysis, debate and discussion.

About the author/s

Tara Davda

Tara Davda was a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre from 2016 to 2018. She holds a Masters in International and Development Economics from Crawford School of Public Policy, and currently works at Abt Associates.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/a-call-to-alms-20160905/>

Date downloaded: 24 April 2024



Australian
National
University

The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.