

Speaking of boat people

Darwin harbour November 1977. An ocean-going trawler, the Song Be 12, sails in with 180 passengers aboard and asks permission to stay in Australia. The locals are in despair. This is but the latest of many such boats and they want the government to stop them coming.

It is a familiar story, one that was echoed nearly 25 years later when the government did refuse a boatload of people permission to land in Australia. There are differences, of course, but the most striking is the language used by government and journalists. In the newspaper coverage of 1977 one senses a struggle to find a vocabulary in which to express the same fears being played upon today. Now we have a whole new lexicon to describe the situation.

The Darwin arrivals were called “boat people” or “refugees” by everyone – journalists, government ministers and officials, refugee advocates. The same concerns that won an election in 2001 were aired, but not in the same language.

In January 1977, the Government gave notice that it might not accept the refugees who were arriving in Darwin. The following month, it announced that it would not guarantee entry to refugees who “sail unofficially” into Darwin. They were encouraged to use the “regular channels” established by the UNHCR and Australian Government in various refugee camps in South East Asia rather than risk the journey by sea to Australia and an uncertain welcome.

By November when the Song Be 12 arrived, the Northern Territory government was calling for boats to be turned back by the Navy. The Trades and Labor council denounced the passengers as “pirates” as they had hijacked the boat and held communist soldiers hostage. Both the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, and the opposition leader, Mr Whitlam, agreed that it was important to establish whether the refugees arriving in this manner were “genuine”. Two weeks earlier, *The Age*, published an article which differentiated between the “classic definition of political refugees” and those who leave Vietnam because of economic hardship. The latter forms the majority of those who flee it stated, although it is simply a statement, not a judgement. Others were not so circumspect. *The Age* did not hold Labor frontbencher, Senator Mulvihill in high regard. “His smearing assertion yesterday that many of those seeking entry into Australia were neither genuine nor decent cases, and that they should be sent straight back to Thailand, was reactionary in the extreme,” its editorial claimed on 25 November.

The Sun was more willing to give space to such opinions. It reported the Minister for Immigration Mr McKellar saying that the refugee influx had implications for the preservation of Australia’s territorial integrity. We cannot afford to give the impression that anyone can come, he said. The opposition was reported as saying the defence system was inadequate for the necessary surveillance. McKellar and the Health minister, Mr Hunt, declared that “refugees raised considerations involving protection of Australia from diseases which could threaten livestock and agriculture.” And McKellar stated that he did not accept the definition of refugee adopted by the UN, because anyone

could conveniently say their life would be threatened if they returned home. The term “quasi-refugee” was coined to cover those who fell outside the UN definition.

A common fear underlying all the coverage was that Australia would be inundated by “hordes” arriving from the north. There are constant references to a “swelling tide”, a “potential flood” of refugees, an “armada” of boats sailing to Australia, an “invasion” by refugees. But through all, everyone still referred to the arrivals as refugees.

In April 1990 the navy intercepted a boat off the coast of Broome. The people on board claimed they were from Cambodia and were eventually taken to Enterprise migrant centre in Springvale to have their claims assessed. Now they were referred to by the media as “boat people”. The term “refugee” is not applied unquestioningly. One’s refugee status must now be proven. The Government referred to them as “unauthorised arrivals”. A 1994 book, *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, traced a shift in language of the coverage that it claimed “reflect[ed] the increasing control of the agenda by the Immigration Department.”

Then, some ten years later, boats carrying mainly people from the Middle East began arriving regularly at Ashmore Reef and Christmas Island. The political panic resulted in the Tampa episode and the so-called “Pacific solution.” In August 2001, the new language is already apparent, but it is confused and the terminology interchangeable. “Refugees stranded at sea” announced *The Age* headline on 28 August 2001. “More than 430 refugees were stranded at sea last night after the government took the unprecedented decision of refusing the asylum seekers permission to land,” the article begins. Throughout the article they are referred to alternately as “refugees” or “asylum seekers”. Another article on the same day by law reporter, Darrin Farrant, discussed the legal options open to the Government and the people plucked from their sinking boat. He consistently referred to them as “refugees”.

The *Herald Sun* had also adopted the term “asylum seekers” and used this alternately with “boat people”. But it had a wider vocabulary than *The Age* referring to them as “illegals”, “illegal immigrants” and “illegal boats”, even coining such awkward constructions as “would-be illegal immigrants” and “would-be asylum seekers.” This sort of language is more consistent with the Government’s line. In media releases for the preceding four years, the Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock, never used the terms “refugees” or “asylum seekers”. They were “illegal immigrants” or “unauthorised arrivals”.

The confusion of language attracted Ruddock’s attention. The same day the Government refused the arrivals permission to land in Australia, the Minister for Immigration criticised the use of “refugees” and “asylum seekers.” “We are not dealing with refugees,” he reportedly told ABC radio. Neither should they be labelled asylum seekers. “We don’t know that either. What we know is there are people on a boat wanting to come to Australia,” he is quoted by *The Age* as saying. Language had become a site for struggle for control of the issue.

A day after his article about the “refugees” picked up by the *Tampa*, Darrin Farrant picked up Ruddock’s criticism. “Refugees, asylum seekers or suspected illegal immigrants? Even finding an accepted definition for the 438 people picked up by a Norwegian freighter off Christmas Island this week has become part of the contested territory in Australia’s refugee debate,” he wrote. “It is much more than just a matter of words. The terms you choose identify the position you take and help shape the way people making their way here are treated.”

The same edition of the paper featured a discussion of the issue in the education section. “What is the difference between asylum seekers and refugees?” it begins. “Refugees and asylum seekers are people who have a well-founded fear of persecution for social, political or racial reasons and have fled from their country of origin. Refugees have been granted protection ... Asylum seekers have come via their own means, rather than via a refugee program, have applied for refugee status and are awaiting determination of their status.”

By the first anniversary of the Tampa episode, *The Age* was fairly consistent in its use of the term “asylum seekers” to describe people arriving by boat and seeking permission to stay. Curiously, only in the headlines did “refugee” appear regularly. At the *Herald Sun* the confusion over language seemed unresolved. On 16 August, Mandi Zonnevelat discusses youth attitudes towards Australia’s immigration and refugee program, consistently using the term “refugee” to describe those in detention and seeking to come to Australia via unofficial channels. Tony Rindfleisch uses “refugee” and “asylum seeker” interchangeably in an article on 11 August. And on 22 August an article headlined “Plea for refugees in limbo” appeared, but the journalist refers to them throughout as “asylum seekers.”

If the issue of language remained contentious in Australia, no such confusion existed in political circles in Papua New Guinea. ABC journalist Shane McLeod interviewed the new Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, on 13 August this year. “The other issue that looms over the Australia-Papua New Guinea relationship is that of asylum seekers and Papua New Guinea’s role in Australia’s Pacific Solution by hosting a processing centre at Manus Island,” said McLeod. But Sir Michael uses much blunter language. “We will maintain that until such time as the refugee centre in Manus has Australian government see fit to start taking people into Australia then that may be the end of it. As long as we don’t have any more boat people.”

It is easy to draw parallels between the situation in 1977 and the events that resulted in the “Pacific solution.” In both cases fears of an invasion by uninvited arrivals, of a threat to the nation’s integrity underlie the political rhetoric. The same fears prompt calls for the boats to be turned back. But in the intervening 25 years, it is not only the terminology that has changed. Australia was very much a part of the region that was the origin of the Indo-Chinese refugees. We had been involved in the Vietnam war. Neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Thailand that bore the biggest burden of refugees, were states with whom we had to maintain strategic relationships. But the people

who arrived in the last wave of boats came from a region sufficiently far away that Australia felt no moral obligation to accept them. At the same time there was a shift to a more legalistic, dehumanising language, a shift that some journalists were sensitive to in the wake of Tampa.

Darrin Farrant of *The Age* recalls that it was something that was being discussed by his colleagues. “It generated quite an intense debate about the issue and one of the things that came out of it was an argy-bargy on the airwaves and letters to the editor and talk among the politicians about what exactly do we call these people?” he says. So he suggested to his editor that he write an article about the terms of the debate. And since then the terminology, at *The Age* at least, settled into the now-familiar asylum seeker. In other papers like the *Herald Sun* “illegal immigrants” (and its derivative “illegals”) made more appearances – a term introduced into the debate by the Minister for Immigration.

“I think it is a debate that Phillip Ruddock has won,” Farrant concedes. “Before that time, up until the *Tampa* arrived, there’d been quite a few cases where boats had been spotted off the north coast of Australia, they’d been picked up and all those times it was almost always regarded as a boat load of refugees. And now people say asylum seekers. I think that might be because it’s slightly more accurate in the sense that “refugee” is a definition given to someone who has achieved a status. You’re not automatically a refugee under the guidelines of the UN or some other equivalent body until you qualify for refugee status. I guess until then you are a would-be refugee. You are an asylum seeker because you’re seeking asylum in another country whether or not you fulfil the criteria. So I think it’s a slightly more accurate description.”

Others believe such language is less about accuracy than a political agenda. Phillip Adams is, in his own words, *The Australian’s* “token leftie” and an outspoken broadcaster. He is critical of the language in which the debate and media coverage is being conducted. “The last couple of years has been the most vivid dramatisation of what *Nineteen Eighty-four* was all about when language was being mutilated by a strange, monolithic bureaucracy constantly updated and changed and modified so that people didn’t know what to think, or rather were told exactly what to think and as you know that term for this was “newspeak” in Orwell’s text. And I’ve never seen so much of it around as there is at the moment.” He accuses journalists of laziness in being so willing to adopt it.

“When people doing perfectly legal things like applying for asylum are called “illegals” and when non-existent queues are invented for jumping and people use this, journalists who should know better use it, columnists particularly use it, it distorts and deforms the whole nature of the debate.” He suggests some pundits might be willing to embrace the language because they support the government’s line, but journalism should not succumb to the jargon and shorthand. “When it creeps into news reports it is much more alarming because people are simply [being] lazy.”

Prominent lawyer, Julian Burnside, describes the government's language as "alarmist rhetoric". In a number of articles on his website, he attacks both the language and the policies. The government, he says, has deliberately or inadvertently elided three distinct separate problems: border control, immigration policy and the treatment of refugees. It suits the politicians to dress it up as a problem of national security, border control and sovereignty. "They are not 'illegals'; they are human beings," he says. "They are being held in gaol. It is hypocrisy to call it detention."

But why do journalists seem so ready to pick up the government's language? Perhaps because values and fears are embedded in the language. In his book, *Language and Political Understanding*, M.J. Shapiro says that we affirm structures of legitimacy in our speech. Language is a bearer of political content rather than just a tool to speak about political phenomena. A "naturalist" argument appears to simply present the world as it *is*, where it is really being fitted into a moral-ideological system that would invite critical evaluation if it were stated differently. He uses an example about property to illustrate this. The initial premise is that society functions to protect the property of each of its members. From this statement can be derived the assertion that public ownership of land ought to be disallowed in order that society might function properly. The initial statement is phrased in such a way that it appears a given, a premise that does not invite discussion or disagreement. And once that is accepted, there can be no disagreement about the final assertion.

So it is with arguments about queues and legalities. Their existence is stated as an indisputable fact, from which can be derived policies of detention and suspicion, and arguments about the moral depravity of those actively seeking to enter the country rather than wait in refugee camps. If one accepts the "naturalness" of the initial premise that there are international laws dealing with the informal movement of people, then the language becomes one's own, even if something about it still rankles.

Control of the agenda is also a matter of debate. Burnside accuses the government of deliberately restricting access to people held in detention so that they cannot be seen as individual people for whom the Australian public could have sympathy. In February this year, John Pilger attacked the Australian media for their timidity. "Last month, editors of the leading newspapers meekly agreed to a demand by the authorities that their reporters withdraw from the perimeter of the notorious Woomera 'detention camp', where suicides and hunger strikes are common. Since the refugee issue arose, not one reporter has had the wit or the backing to go under cover and expose from the inside camps described by the former conservative prime minister Malcolm Fraser as 'hell-holes.'"

Maqsood Alshams is a Bangladeshi journalist who knows detention centres from the inside. He spent 18 months in Villawood, before being released on a temporary protection visa – with a bill for over \$60,000 from the Department of Immigration. Politicians want to lie and people to believe them, he says. But it concerns him that, even though we now know the so-called "children overboard" affair never happened, no one is prepared to admit that they

partook in a deceitful action. And journalists are not doing their job well enough to expose such deceits. "Australian journalists are lacking investigative nature of journalism," he says, explaining that he has worked in 47 countries and with many media organisations over the world. "While the government started saying that those who are coming to seek protection they are illegal, they are queue jumpers, they are boat people, journalists should have taken the minimum courtesy to investigate those words instead of copying politicians."

He sees the government's attempts to isolate people seeking asylum illustrating a wider problem with the Australian media. "If you look into the broader context in this country, the immigration detention centres are controlled by the Department of Immigration and ACM. None of the media has the right to go inside the detention centres unimpeded to investigate the claims and facts, what's happening, if there is even people dying inside the detention centre, the media is not allowed to go and report on those things. It violates press freedom." He's not alone in making this accusation. The Australian Press Council he says, also put out a media release stating that the Department of Immigration's actions clearly violate freedom of speech. "The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance needs to speak out about these things," he says. Every European country has freedom of speech, he says. Why is it not the case here? Why are the journalists not asking this question?

Dave Corlett has recently completed a PhD looking at how Australia has treated asylum seekers. He too believes that the Australian media has been uncritical in its coverage of the issue. The news media affect debates like this by what they choose to show. He points to the refugees from Kosovo as an example, where the Australian response was largely compassionate. Why the difference then? Corlett suggests it is partly because of the major media coverage of their plight. "Even Ruddock was slow to pick it up. He initially said they wouldn't be coming to Australia. It wasn't until Howard realised that talk-back radio was going 'we've got to do something about this' that Howard then rolled Ruddock to allow them to come."

"For the community there was a point at which we could engage with these people in a way that we've been denied the opportunity to engage with Afghans and Iraqis.

"The media chose to show what was happening in Kosovo in a way they chose not to show what was happening in Rwanda for example. The media makes decisions about what they reckon is going to sell their advertising."

Commercialism is a factor that worries others, not just in relation to the coverage of asylum seekers, but the restrictions on the media's ability to speak out on a range of issues. The ABC's Media Report which hosted a forum on this topic in August. Political commentator Mungo MacCallum lamented the sense of "propriety" creeping into the media. "The present government [uses] cover-all words like 'national security' and 'operational matter' ... phrases that don't really mean anything in themselves but which can be used just as a blanket form of censorship to tell the media to keep off this patch, and to their shame, I think a lot of the media actually do that these days.

“What people mean by the propriety of the media is a subservient media. It’s a media that won’t chase the truth and very often won’t tell you the truth because it would be bad form to do so.”

Jeff McMullen, a former 60 Minutes reporter, agreed. “The big lie of the babies overboard was a magnificent operation of government using journalism for disinformation or manipulation of the message,” he said. “My central thesis is that if it’s a marketplace driven thing, this business of news, it can never really be focused on what is the real purpose of journalism. The mass media at the moment is about selling.”

John Pilger bemoans the restricted ownership of the Australian media and what he terms the “Murdochism” that has crept into journalism. Phillip Adams also sees the structure of the Australian media as a large part of the problem. You have a choice between Rupert or Kerry, he says. “Journalists fight it, they struggle against it. But little by little, by osmosis they slip into the habit of basically doing what the people who write out the cheques want them to do. Journalists don’t have to be told what to do. If you do that they struggle against it, but if you leave them alone, basically little by little, day by day, hour by hour they go through this osmotic process and they give up. I think it’s very sad.”

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