

The hard press of asylum

by Sharon Pickering

As a criminologist, I am interested in the ways that the press represents refugees and asylum seekers as deviants, particularly in relation to the integrity of the nation state and race. This article, monitoring press coverage of refugee and asylum issues in two popular Australian newspapers¹ from January 1997 to December 1999, looks at how the media has influenced public opinion and added to the perception that Australia has a refugee 'problem'. It seeks to alert those working with refugees to the pervasiveness of the media's inherently criminal representations of refugees and asylum seekers, representations which potentially hamper advocacy work in the public domain.

From the language employed by the media one would not realize that Australia's refugee programme is small by international standards [see p31]. Readers of these papers are regularly warned that Australia is to be "awash", "swamped", "weathering the influx" of "waves", "latest waves", "more waves", "tides", "floods", "migratory flood", "mass exodus" of "aliens", "queue jumpers", "illegal immigrants", "people smugglers", "boat people", "jumbo people", "jet loads of illegals", "illegal foreigners", "bogus" and "phoney" applicants, and "hungry Asians" upon "our shores", "isolated coastlines" and "deserted beaches" that make up the "promised land", the "land of hope", the "lucky country", "heaven", "the good life", "dream destination" and they continue to "slip through", "sneak in", "invade" with "false papers" or "no papers", "exotic diseases", "sicknesses" as part of "gangs", "criminal gangs", "triads", "organized crime" and "Asian crime". In response, "we" should have "closed doors", only sometimes having "open doors"; we should respond "nationally" with the "navy and armed services at the ready"; "we" should "send messages", "deter", "lock up" and "detain"; and "we" should not be "exploited", "played for a fool" or seen as "gullible".

When writing about asylum seekers and refugees, the press often elides the vocabulary of war with that of crime.

Refugees are "massing in Indonesia" for a "sustained assault on Australia's shores". Identities and individualities are irrelevant in time of war. There are only two sides - "ours" and "theirs". Metaphors of war justify the need to repel whatever is hostile or threatening. "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".

Representing asylum seekers who arrive in Australia without prior refugee determination as "bogus" and "phoney" implicitly legitimizes policies that move beyond policing and into detention and deterrence for the "sake of the nation". The need for "blunt warnings" to deter "queue jumpers" has very little to do with sending messages to international communities and everything to do with sending messages to domestic communities and justifying expansionist penal policies.

A respite, during which alternative perceptions emerged, came during the Kosovo and East Timor crises. The inviolability of the nation state was sidelined as the rhetoric changed with altered political imperatives. Refugees and asylum seekers were represented as "acceptable" and "worthy" as the media deployed the language of humanitarianism and justice. Kosovan refugees became the subject of nationwide jostling as governments of each state vied to "welcome" and "house" them. Those state governments that "missed out" on the opportunity to grant "safe haven" to the refugees

repeatedly expressed "disappointment". Readers were told that "war-weary Kosovo refugees", "grateful for sanctuary", would "enrich Australia's cultural and intellectual capital and make excellent citizens". These refugees were considered decent and deserving. "Excellent citizens" never came on "rag tag" boats from Indonesia.

However, any deviation from the image of the passive grateful invited refugee was soon met with a swift return to devaluing representations of refugees as ungrateful, aggressive, demanding, draining and different. Thus Kosovans who refused to enter an inadequately heated army barracks were "disgruntled" and "unreasonable" and "thumping their noses" at "frustrated officials".

Media language implicitly harks back to the period when "populate or perish" and the White Australia Policy explicitly expressed racist fears of a "threat" from Asia and the need for racially exclusive population growth. At times the racial assumptions underlying media depiction of "illegal" asylum seeking are made explicit. A racially derogatory statement from the Deputy Prime Minister that the message that Australia was determined to protect its shores had to "ripple up



the bamboo grapevine” went unchallenged. The media taint ethnic groups with imputations of criminality by allegations that they are helping to fund illegal arrivals or that ethnic “crime syndicates” are profiting from trafficking. The use of loaded terms such as “integration”, “national interest” and “social harmony” can be read as euphemisms for race.

Press coverage has focused on the deviant problem that asylum seekers and refugees represent to the robust Australian nation and the need for a strong state to keep out and control the menace. With few exceptions, reports on asylum seekers and refugees have not been interested in listening to the voices of asylum seekers, nor of home country conditions or conditions of flight. When alternative views are offered, they are usually presented as “human interest” stories rather than “hard” news.

Some journalists have raised protests against the prevailing media stereotyping but in general they have been ignored by the waves of press coverage preoccupied with “normality”, “common sense” and the integrity of the nation state and race. Misrepresentations of asylum seekers and refugees have gone unacknowledged and unchallenged. Such coverage has meant that ‘rule breakers’ are easily excluded and repelled from the community: they can never belong and the community depends upon this symbolic and actual exclusion. Repressive state responses have been underpinned by a discourse of deviancy in relation to asylum seekers and refugees that the press has largely reproduced rather than interrogated.

Sharon Pickering is a former visiting fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre and currently Lecturer in Justice Studies in the School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Email: spickering@csu.edu.au

1 *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Brisbane Courier Mail*.