



**African Think Tank Inc.**

WORKING WITH VICTORIA'S AFRICAN COMMUNITY

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### **The quality of mercy...disappearing like the gentle rain?**

African Think Tank Inc. is dismayed by the current concerted media campaign on African refugees and prompt reaction of our political leader on African refugee's intake in Australia.

The Hon. Kevin Andrews, the newly appointed Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, has announced the intention to cut the humanitarian refugee intake from the Horn of Africa, with recalibration of the program to the Asia-Pacific region (*Sudan refugees face quota cut over gang claims*, Sydney Sunday Telegraph, 4/2/07).

This radical decision, along with the nature of the alleged justification for it, should alarm all fair-minded people. It marks the transformation of Australia from the 'land of the fair go' that we all treasure: Australia is fast becoming a different country. The sunny land of hope, the good-natured land of the fair go, especially for the underdog, seems ever more remote, as does the zero-tolerance our mainstream society traditionally had for the unfair treatment of minority groups. Sadly, our compassion seems to be heading for the same distant horizon.

Also apparently ebbing away is the intellectual rigour of public debate. Even ten years ago, it would have been impossible for either the media or policy makers to freely make sweeping, subjective, unsubstantiated generalisations, or for the media to consistently quote, without challenge, unnamed police and other sources who have supposedly provided the media with explosive information about African refugees in Australia.

This information is allegedly so damning that the government claims there is

community pressure to cut back the African humanitarian program; yet it is apparently so flimsy that it is never backed up by hard data or by named, credible expert sources. It is so flimsy that we are not allowed to know what the hard data is.

The campaign is conducted almost entirely by innuendo, with a couple of highly sensationalised crimes, including accidents, which, while tragically regrettable, do not change the fact that the African crime rate remains well below that of the mainstream population, and below that of most other community groups. Australian Institute of Criminology, 2000, figures reported 75% of prisoners were born in Australia, with prisoners born in Australia, the UK and New Zealand more likely to be apprehended for violent offences, while drug related offences were more likely to be associated with prisoners from other backgrounds, especially Vietnam and other Asian countries. (Australian Corrections: Main Demographic Characteristics of Prison Populations, No 150, 2000).

In 2004, the trend remained the same. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures concur: "Approximately three-quarters of prisoners were born in Australia (74%). Prisoners born in Viet Nam were the next largest birthplace grouping (2.8%), followed by those born in the country category of United Kingdom and Ireland (2.6%) and New Zealand (2.5%)." (ABS, 4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia, 2004). No prisoners are listed as born in a Horn of Africa country in ABS's analysis of prisoners by place of birth, 2006, although a relatively small number are listed as born in South Africa (ABS 4517.0, Prisoners in Australia, 2006).

Not so long ago, we had bulwarks to guard against such unfair public maligning of individuals or groups by innuendo. We followed the traditional ideals of "live and let live," "love thy neighbour" and "don't give false evidence about your neighbour."

In addition to a social code that encouraged people to live freely as long as they did not hurt other people, major tracts of law supported the rights of the vulnerable. For example, the Geneva Convention, as the heart of international humanitarian law, specifically forbade collective punishment and intimidation based on collective characteristics (Article 33). For a host of reasons, the average Aussie wanted no truck with 'gutless picking on the little bloke'.

There are many reasons why we may have changed, not the least of which is the public nature of 'gossip' and commentary on individuals and groups practiced throughout modern-day media. Celebrity culture has killed off any values opposed to gossiping or bearing false witness against others. Generations X and Y, born after the 1948-1960 Baby Boomer generation, are largely products of popular culture, and may have been entirely cut off from the traditional education and values of their parents and grandparents.

Politically, it is recognised that aspirational voters in marginal seats on the outskirts of Melbourne and Sydney are the voters who swing the pendulum to decide our Federal Government. Media political commentators generally describe this disproportionately powerful group as entirely attuned to

upward financial mobility, committed to material acquisition and vulnerable to interest rate rises. Almost entirely absent from the profiles of this demographic is concern with the welfare of vulnerable people, be they locally born or otherwise.

The upshot is that virtually full power now resides with the Government to shift the immigration levers in any way it chooses. Public outrage is an art not quite dead, but certainly more muted and tired than it was. Facts give way to opinion and innuendo as dominant social paradigms shift from the rational scientific tradition to the intellectually lightweight, gossip-based world of celebrity. In this world, we are not citizens going about our lives and minding our own business. We are all looking over each others fences, and voting people out of the Big Brother house, or off Survivor Island.

And that is even before we get to the god of Narcissus, the template for our freemarket engineers which underpins our illusory power: we are hot, we shop in the mirrored malls all day, nobody can tell us what to do, we are after all the masters of the universe...we're on the side of might.

Just sometimes, a glimmer of alarm rises to the surface 'It's gone too far.' 'It's too unfair.' 'It's too cruel.' This is most certainly one such wake up call... it's not us... Please God; let this not be sunny, open-hearted Australia.

The alterations to refugee policy are not reasoned nor reasonable:

- Two well-publicised matters concerning Tabin Gany and Hakeem Hakeem are tragically regrettable, but they are only two of a population of many tens of thousands of African immigrants in Australia. In 1999, South Australia had the grisly 'bodies-in-the-barrels' Snowtown murders, with four people ultimately arrested, but we did not condemn the whole of the Anglo-Celtic population for this atrocity.
- When Martyn Bryant mowed down visitors to Port Arthur in 1996, killing 35 and injuring 37, we did not link this to his white skin; nor did we generalize it to the Anglo-Celtic community. Likewise, when Thomas Towle drove into a group of teenagers in Mildura, killing 6, and failing to stop after the accident, the community did not rally against all people of Anglo-Celtic Towle's ethnicity, nor did the media coverage trawl through all misdemeanors allegedly committed by his ethnic group.
- Yet when a car crashed in 2007 into the Café d'Afrique in Footscray, tragically killing a man, the media went into overdrive to highlight race, repeatedly mentioning the woman was African and/or Sudanese. The Melbourne Herald Sun's report was almost entirely couched in terms of race or ethnicity, including filler comments of little or no relevance:
- "Opposite, a big crowd had gathered behind the blue and white police tapes. There were tall men in colourful patterned shirts and tall women in vivid turbans and long dresses. It could have been in downtown Mogadishu or

Addis Ababa. There wasn't a word of English being spoken in the hubbub. But this was Footscray, not Somalia or Ethiopia ...Down the walkway known as the Footscray Hub, African businesses jostled -- hair braiders next to traditional dress shops, international money transfer agents next to travel agencies. And in a crowded internet cafe, Africans were calling home at \$2 an hour. About what had just happened outside an African restaurant in Footscray, Melbourne, Australia? “ (Crowd fury after crash, Herald Sun, 3 Jan 2007)

- Australia claims a sophisticated approach to mental health. Therefore, latitude must be made for the occasional psychiatric matter which inevitably arises in every population. Why do we accept the litany of 'white' crime presented daily on our media philosophically, seeing it as an aberration to the norm of 'good' white culture? Yet, when 'coloured' crime occurs it is not only extremely newsworthy, it is collectively generalised as commentary on, and the smearing of, an entire race – in this case the Sudanese. If Anglo-Celtic Australians are not like the Snowtown murderers, Martyn Bryant and our many other high profile criminals, other Sudanese are not like Gany or Hakeem.
- Innuendo, the vague notion of unspecified “community concerns”, and unnamed sources inferring unspecified problems in relation to the law, do not constitute facts. They have more the look of a witch-hunt, the very name of which derives from the tactics adopted to persecute minority figures and groups.
- Incited mass hysteria has a long and tragic history in Western culture from the Salem witch-trials, to the McCarthy era, to the Holocaust. These have been formidable lessons in respecting the limits of human nature, and assiduously guarding with fair and reasoned public policy the rights of those who live at the mercy of the power-wielders.

It is not to Australia's credit to waiver in its commitment and support for African refugees here and in holding camps en route. The level of humanitarian need is the greatest in the world in the Horn of Africa.

To 'cut and run' from Africans in need on the spurious grounds presented by Minister Kevin Andrews in the media is a chapter of humanitarian tragedy unfolding before our very eyes. To do this, Australia is falling through the looking glass, far from its own traditions and social values of compassion and helpfulness to the needy. As William Shakespeare sagely observed, mercy can never be forced from a people, it must be freely given.

How much poorer affluent Australia will be if it withdraws mercy from the Africans and cuts their numbers in the humanitarian program for reasons so spurious as to barely cover the hollow core, and heartlessness? Please God, let this be a nightmare to fade with the dawn, not our new 'reconstituted' Australia.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice

#### The Merchant of Venice

Dr. Berhan Ahmed,  
Chairperson  
African Think Tank Inc.

**“Why is it that people who want to tell me about their religious views never want to hear about mine?”**