

Preface

While most of the articles in this volume are written from the perspective of criminologists who have been moved to delve into areas previously seen as outside their scope, I come from a very different background. Criminology is a discipline about which I know little. I do, however, know about refugees, having worked in this area for over 16 years.

For most of this time, it has been a remarkably ‘unsexy’ discipline. Many members of the public have accepted without question the government’s message that refugees pose a threat to Australia and to our affluent and democratic way of life. Anyone who seeks to challenge ‘the sovereign right of governments to protect the borders’ must surely be a traitor. Making reference to human rights obligations does not help because ‘we can’t have foreigners telling an elected government what it can and cannot do’. The life of a refugee advocate has thus been a lonely and largely frustrating one — until recently.

First in a trickle and now as a flood, information about the way that the Australian Government is managing border protection and the reception of asylum seekers has made it into the public domain and more and more people — both in Australia and internationally — are beginning to take notice and to look for ways to engage. This is happening at a personal level — with members of the public volunteering their time in a plethora of ways. More significantly, however, it has happened at a professional level. One by one professional associations have taken a public stand against Australia’s policy of mandatory, non-reviewable detention. Doctors, psychiatrists, nurses, teachers and lawyers have all come out. So too have groups of actors, musicians and indigenous Australians. Each brings a new and valuable perspective to the issue and adds weight to the voices calling for change.

It is important that criminologists have now entered the debate, bringing a new and different perspective. As part of the strategy of legitimising its harsh stance against asylum seekers, the Australian Government has regularly portrayed these people as being undeserving of any community sympathy. The epithet of ‘criminal’ has been frequently employed. After 11th September, asylum seekers quickly became ‘terrorists’ and when the (now discredited) rumour came out that children were being thrown overboard, they were ‘cruel and inhuman’.

What does it say about a Government who seizes upon every opportunity to denigrate and defame people seeking protection? What does it say about a public who unquestioningly internalise these messages? Only through scholarly analysis by experts will we come to understand where Australia is now and how we can reclaim the sense of ‘fair go’ that used to characterise this once great nation.

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