



the middle
ground

THEME 2 RESEARCH PAPER

“GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM”



Photo Credit: Nicolas Economou / Shutterstock.com

1. KEY MESSAGES (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

- People's concerns about security are real and their anxieties require empathy.
- We need to understand why people born and bred in Australia are concerned about borders and what socio-political climate has shaped these concerns.
- We need to listen to each other about how existing narratives regarding border security and refugees contribute to distance between various individuals and groups of society.
- We need to challenge the current discourse tying refugees to crime and terrorism, and to realise that this is a dangerous and ideologically motivated linkage to draw.
- We need to introduce the platform for discussion, concerning the role of media and social media in shaping mainstream perspectives on immigration and security.
- We need to challenge the notion that refugees are 'illegal'.
- The information tells us that the overwhelming number of asylum seekers are proven in time to be genuine refugees.
- We need to acknowledge and also challenge the link between refugees/asylum seekers and security threats.
- We need to emphasise the Australian values of empathy and helping the underdog/downtrodden.

2. CONTEXT: WHY IRRATIONAL FEARS PERSIST ABOUT BORDER SECURITY

Several actors link immigration and security to shape public discourse and opinions, usually to further a particular agenda. For example, politicians play a significant role in influencing how the media end up framing public discourse around immigration and refugees. This framing has led to the incorrect conflation of immigration and refugees with security issues like terrorism, violent extremism and other serious crimes. The language around immigration and security has become intertwined, leading to an inaccurate representation of immigrants and refugees. Conversations about ‘security’ have now become part and parcel of a vocabulary that constructs immigrants and refugees as threats to Australia’s security, economy and stability. However, there is little evidence to back such concerns. This particular theme, the second in The Middle Ground project, examines this issue in more detail.



Refugees and Immigration have been the subject of heated political debate in Australia, at times breaking out into protests and stand-ins.

Photo: Asanka Brendon Ratnayake / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images

One of the leading culprits to stoke a growing sense of fear about immigration, asylum seekers and refugees, is One Nation leader Pauline Hanson. In her maiden speech to Federal Parliament in 1996, Hanson tried to drum up fear that “Australia has been swamped by Asians” and, most recently, “swamped by Muslims”. Yet, it hasn’t only been marginal voices that have raised concerns in politics. In 2001, former Prime Minister John Howard stirred heated political debate about the Tampa affair, giving rise to claims that stricter measures for border security and exclusionary methods against refugees were justified. Following on from this, the so-called Children Overboard Affair was another political controversy. This incident preceded the 2001 federal election and involved the then government claiming that asylum seekers were throwing their children overboard. Such incidents were flash points leading to the issue of migrants, and asylum seekers becoming totemic issues in Australia’s political discourse..

The post-9/11 era has seen increased securitisation and “otherisation” of certain minorities as politicians and commentators seek to further particular agendas and ideologies.

Far-right political actors and even mainstream political parties frequently invoke immigration in their public statements in the name of preserving Australia’s borders and Australia’s national security. Refugees and asylum seekers have been a flashpoint between the major political parties and a subject of considerable debate during election campaigns. What is particularly tragic about these debates around

securitisation is that they operate not through poor evidence but through no evidence at all. “Turning back the boats” became a rhetorical chorus as a convenient way of political point scoring during the Abbott era and the Coalition government of the past six years.



‘Turning back the boats’ was a strong part of Tony Abbott’s rhetoric during his time as Prime Ministers

With flashpoints in the Middle East resulting in the displacement of populations and a significant rise in refugees fleeing their homelands trying to reach Australia’s mainland, refugees have become a political football and hot topic in contemporary discourse around protecting Australia’s borders from so-called queue jumpers and other threats.

3. THE IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE IN THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

There have been significant racialised tragedies that have hit Australian society and neighbouring countries in recent times. These have included recurring attacks at places of worship, culminating in the very recent and horrific mosque attacks in New Zealand by an Australian man identified as a white supremacist. These attacks are targeted at

minorities like Muslims - comprising migrants and refugees - by self-proclaimed anti-immigrant crusaders adhering to dangerous ideologies, such as white supremacy or right-wing extremism.

The New Zealand mosque attacks involved shooting Muslim worshippers at two mosques during Friday prayers - a sacred day.

The incidents resulted in the loss of more than fifty lives and many more sustaining serious injuries from gunshots wounds, not to mention the ongoing trauma that will scar Muslim communities in Australia, New Zealand and the world at large.

Many of the fatalities have been identified as migrants or refugees who moved to New Zealand to flee the violence and poor conditions of their original home countries. We have referred to some of this in the previous theme of this project.

Such tragic events should raise alarm bells about the prevailing national conversation about immigration in particular, and the policies and ideas surrounding refugees and asylum seekers. These misguided and misinformed policies create divisions and are polarising. They falsely depict migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as aliens and security threats in order to protect Australian borders.

It is clearly time for a change in how migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are depicted across mainstream and public platforms, including social media and other, less visible arenas.



The recent New Zealand Mosque attacks are a clear example of the consequences of a polarising far-right discourse

Photo: AFP

The New Zealand mosque attacks, Quebec mosque attacks (mentioned in Essay 1) and other anti-immigrant and racially-fuelled tragedies of recent times demonstrate that racial tension and the climate of Islamophobia are on the rise. If we are to avoid further insecurity and tension building up within society, it is crucial to change how we perceive and discuss migration in general, and ensure we are not on the wrong side of the debate when it comes to the topic of refugees and asylum seekers. For example, we need to ask ourselves about the type of language and labels that are being used in the media and various political actors, often with little or no evidence, and whether it is demonising migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

It is important for us to question what type of discourse is allowed to proliferate for such sheer terrorising isolation and hatred to be directed towards groups of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have worked hard to migrate here and have fled significant violence or persecution in their own countries.

There can be no denying that extreme polarisation is constructed within society to antagonise minority groups and people from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds in our communities. Such polarisation is clearly

built by various (often mainstream) operating mechanisms such as the media (examples of which are to be further discussed in Section 4) and certain political agendas or platforms (see Section 5).

The manner in which minorities and refugees have been treated in the last decade in Australia has led to tremendous human suffering including, but not limited to, high rates of suicides (in offshore detention centres but also in Australian immigration detention centres); an increase in mental health-related problems on top of already existing trauma for refugees and asylum seekers who have escaped circumstances of war or otherwise; real physical harm being created by inmates in fortified prison-like structures; inhumane incidents such as those that have transpired in places like Manus Island and Nauru.



Manus and Nauru, Australia's offshore detention centres, have attracted significant controversy over clear human rights infringements

Photo: Refugee Action Coalition

Australia's offshore processing arrangements and illegal detention of refugees have come to be recognised as violations of human rights. The cases of Nauru and Manus Island are well-known and controversial. They have been subject to much debate and controversy due to the disastrous consequences facing those refugees and asylum seekers who are held on Manus Island and Nauru. It is well-known that Australia's international reputation has suffered

due to the human rights violations. There are many examples of our refugee and asylum seeker policies facing scrutiny and derision around the world with several objections being raised by the United Nations and several NGOs such as MSF (as seen in their 2018 report) concerning Australia's methods for detaining them in such offshore facilities, academics calling for an end to immigration detention and legal experts amongst other important bodies. Condemnation for the 'warehousing' tactics by Australia has been forwarded by the UNHCR as well as Medecins Sans Frontieres Australia, with legal experts noting that Australia may well be guilty of crimes against humanity.

If we continue to ignore the plight of refugees and do not address the prevailing stereotypes that turn them into security threats and objects to securitise Australia's borders, a likely end result will be additional trauma, creating further paranoias, antagonism and division between members of different groups within society.

It is clear the national conversation must change because entire minorities of particular cultures and religion have been exclusively marginalised and painted as a threat to the nation.

The unfortunate reality is that refugees and migrants have borne the brunt of this. They are made into security threats to be protected from before they even reach here. They are turned into security threats and forced into detention when they find themselves near shore.

They are then turned into security threats by the media and politicians, turned into an Other taking over Australia and burdening the economy (see *Essay 1*).

The face and substance of the national conversation need to significantly and urgently change for the better because the stakes are real - human lives are being impacted as they face multiple, often militant, assumptions about their existence and entry into Australia. Surely one of the real threats to national security and cohesion is when refugees and asylum seekers make their home here only to be ostracised and become victims of attacks by those spouting anti-immigrant and racist ideologies.

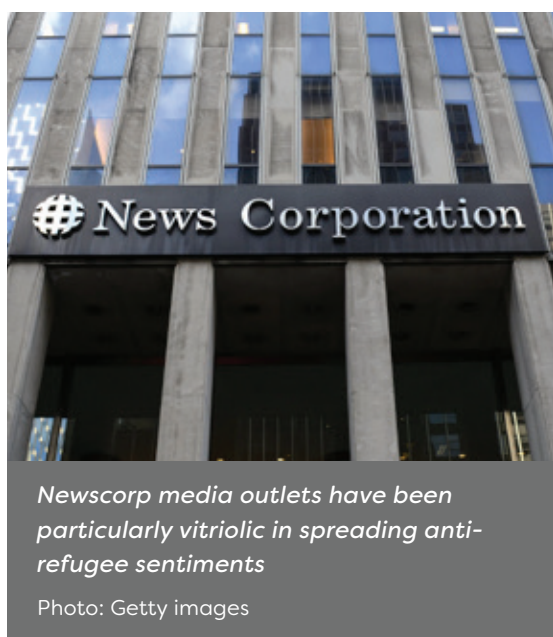
4. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN CONSTRUCTING MORAL AND SOCIAL PANIC

There can be no denying the role the media has played over the last few years in shaping a particular narrative surrounding migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The existing national conversation about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as objects from which Australia's shores and borders are to be protected is largely due to the way politicians and media have constructed moral and social panic surrounding them.

In constantly othering refugees and immigrants in headlines, and by repeatedly reporting on them in racist ways, the rest of society has had little opportunity to receive a fair representation and understanding about them other than that they should be feared.

This is particularly true of right-wing and conservative media elements, and those owned by news corporations who tend to side with conservative, reactionary and nationalist

viewpoints when it comes to these issues. The polarisation of public discourse on the immigration-security nexus is therefore in large part due to these media elements. NewsCorp, in particular, controls approximately seventy percent of daily circulation (according to The Conversation). This means that, for those who rely mostly on its outlets for their news, there is not much diversity and considerable bias in reporting.



Fear-mongering or exclusionary tactics integrated on front-page newspaper headlines have been spread by NewsCorps outlets such as *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sun-Herald*, which have featured blatantly racist cartoons, depicting certain cultures and religions in a dehumanising and defamatory light. An example of a cartoon is Warren Brown's racist portrayal of severely ill refugees. Depicted in the cartoon is an Eastern-looking refugee in hot pursuit of a doctor drawn as a white woman who is trying to flee from the refugee. Nearby, Kerry Phelp, an Independent MP, is portrayed reading a Medivac bill and condescendingly censuring the refugee, "Do you mind not doing that until I've got the

Bill passed?..." *The Daily Telegraph's* cartoon drew criticism for reinforcing the xenophobic insider and outsider dichotomy, and towards NewsCorp for allowing such racist vitriol. Other examples, such as headlines by *the Daily Telegraph*, include, 'Refugee trade puts security at stake', an article from 2010. This headline clearly depicted refugees as a threat while also rendering their hard work (see *Essay 1*) and source of income as a threat to (economic) safety.



The social and moral panic has also arisen due to xenophobic and sensationalised writings of right-wing columnists like Andrew Bolt, such as his articles "*Tidal wave of new tribes dividing us*" and "*The Foreign Invasion*". Such headlines -- not to mention their vitriolic content -- all contribute to a hostile narrative about refugees and asylum seekers and serve to instil an antipathy towards them.

The media has also constructed moral and social panics surrounding issues such as a recent crimewave in Melbourne, which directly linked "South Sudanese refugees" to terrorism, crime and associated phenomena. From articles in *The Guardian* titled '*Turnbull says there is "real concern about Sudanese gangs"*' in Melbourne to the *Sydney Morning*

Herald's "‘There is a problem’: Tony Abbott questions all African immigration amid gang violence debate”; it is clear that the national conversation about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as security threats and criminals does not exist in a vacuum. What remains to be seen is an acknowledgement by the media and politicians at large of the serious irresponsibility of suggesting a link - without evidence - between immigration and crime.

The media has played a crucial role in helping to amplify the perception of refugees, and asylum seekers as national security and crime threats.

5. ROLE OF POLITICIANS

As mentioned earlier, various politicians have played a role in constructing and exacerbating certain narratives around refugees as a potential national threat from which Australia must be protected.

In changing the national conversation, it is important to specify those politicians responsible for contributing towards racially fuelled and ostracising discourse.

Conservative politicians -- and those from fringe far-right parties who have their own agendas -- have been most prominent in engaging this discourse. There are several examples of mainstream politicians doing so. Operation Sovereign Borders and Scott Morrison's role therein has already been mentioned in Section 2. Other examples outside the main parties include the One Nation party and its leader Pauline Hanson.



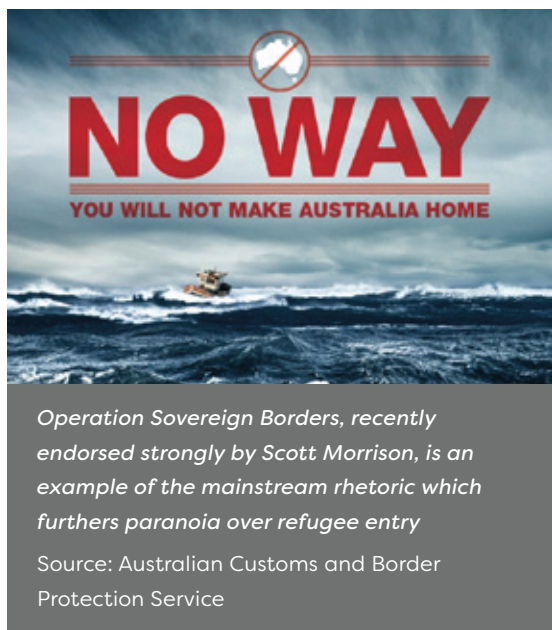
Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party have been a significant voice demonising immigrants since the 1990s

Photo: AAP

Pauline Hanson has been notorious for frequently citing blatantly Islamophobic, racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. One such example is when Hanson made the comparison that Islam is a disease that Australians ought to vaccinate themselves from. In doing so, Muslims and their faith were automatically made into a foreign 'disease' that threatens Australia's sense of security. Her views on immigration have likewise not been unfamiliar to the Australian political scene. In her speech of 2016, she described Australia as being at risk of being "swamped by Muslims" and in 2018, called for a plebiscite on the burqa. Her stunt of donning the burqa in Parliament as a show of her 'views' on the burqa, and by extension Muslims, citing it as a security threat, led to an outcry by parliamentarians, much of it hypocritical, such as Senator George Brandis'.

The most recent example of another fringe politician has been Senator Fraser Anning for Queensland. Following the Christchurch Mosque attacks against Muslims in New Zealand (*see Section 2*), he used the opportunity to further stigmatise them and displayed his lack of empathy for migrants. Instead, he drew the unrelated link of immigration and the attacks, reiterating his

extreme anti-immigration biases. Surely it is politicians like Fraser Anning who pose a real threat to Australian security as they play on tragedies to further their divisive agendas. He has previously called for a ban on Muslim and Sudanese immigrants, insisting they be 'shipped home'.



Displaying the outright bigotry of his views, Anning's maiden speech included support for Australia to return to a White Australia policy, echoing Hitler in his citing of a 'final solution'.

More recently, other politicians who have been responsible for contributing to the misplaced and unjust demonisation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers include Mark Latham, and members of the Liberal party. As demonstrated by the previous section, the media has enabled such politicians to have a platform and in places, aided them in constructing refugees and asylum seekers as the threat to be secured from in the public's eye.

CONCLUSION: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE PARAPHERNALIA

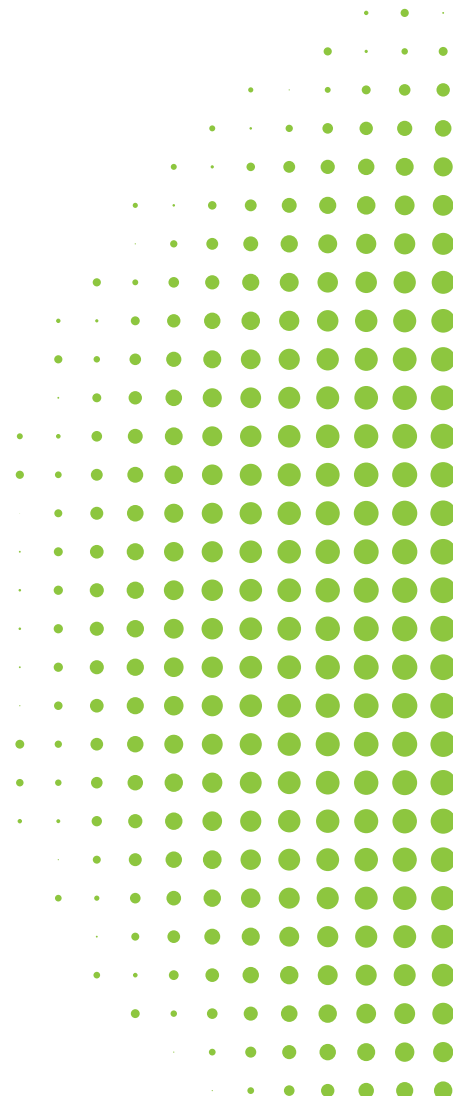
As has been shown thus far, the reality about our borders, and refugees and asylum seekers posing a threat to them, is far different to how it's been painted by the aforementioned entities: the media and politicians.

Also, as mentioned repeatedly, it is crucial to recognise in the national conversation that refugees and asylum seekers are fleeing situations and political problems that are sometimes created by the very countries they are fleeing to. They face immense pressure and extremely difficult circumstances to make their way to Australia. Drawing the connection between them and security is not only misinformed but cuts deep into their past tragedies: immigrants and asylum seekers may feel that the Government is happy to cause their displacement from their countries of birth, contribute to their people's diaspora and then further demonise them after asylum. This creates a polarising and fragmenting discourse that construes migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as foreign invaders posing a security threat to the nation, and is harmful to social relations across the nation as a whole.



Furthermore, most refugees and asylum seekers are factually found to be genuine and deserve to be resettled to a different country. They meet the standards for refugees and those who are seeking asylum. Their genuine status as refugees is a significant factor to take into account when faced with propaganda about refugees and asylum seekers as being potential criminals or terrorists, and not genuine or worthy of being citizens. In other words, the statistics and reality do not support this claim at all.

Finally, as shown in Theme 1 of this project, many refugees and asylum seekers go on to be important contributors to Australia's growth as a nation. Their hard work and efforts must not be dismissed by turning attention away from their contributions and, indeed, their gruelling journey to find a place in society to make such contributions.



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