

Immigration vs Democracy

JAMES FRANKLIN

ONE of the awkward features of democracy is that some of the stakeholders in a government's decisions do not have votes. They include orphans in institutions, those suffering severe mental disability, foreign nationals, and refugees seeking asylum. It is thus no surprise to find them at various times the victims of governmental interventions ranging from bureaucratic hassles to indefinite confinement. Special difficulties arise if a government decides, for one reason or another, that it needs to act on behalf of one of these groups, but the voters are unlikely to be convinced. Should the government conspire against the electors and pull the wool over their eyes?

A case in point is the Australian immigration program since World War II. The transformation of Australia into a multicultural nation since 1947 is not something that the Australian people were asked to approve. Nor were they told the reasons why their successive governments agreed to it.

In 1946, Australians were almost entirely of British and Irish descent. There were no plans to change that. Meanwhile, there were a million anti-Communist Eastern Europeans—Baltic peoples, Poles, Ukrainians and various others—in camps in Germany and Austria, refusing to be shipped back East. They threatened to disturb the reconstruction of western Europe. In contrast to the ineffectual responses of the international community in almost every other refugee crisis, this one was solved firmly, efficiently and quickly. In 1950, the camps were empty and were burned down. The million refugees had been parcelled out to countries with plenty of money and space.

180,000 of them—two per cent of the Australian population—were New Australians, and Australia's road to multiculturalism had begun.

The Australian people were not told any of this—of the behind-the-scenes arm-twisting to round up reluctant host countries, of the cables from Whitehall instructing the Australians to get on with it, of the worldwide lobbying efforts by Catholic representatives (Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell, later a Papal knight, wrote in reply to his thank-you note from the Vatican,

The transformation of Australia into a multicultural nation since 1947 is not something that the Australian people were asked to approve

'no letter which I have written in the six years in which I have been privileged to hold Ministerial office in this country has given me greater pleasure than this acknowledgement of the Holy Father's appreciation of my humble efforts in the cause of distressed humanity'.) For local consumption, the story was cast in terms of 'populate or perish' considerations and arguments about labour for national development. Those reasons were genuine enough as far as they went, but they were far from the full story. The Australian people were told only what they were likely to want to hear.

When overpopulation threatened the political stability of Italy and Greece in the early 1950s, the same co-ordinated action was undertaken, and Australia was again among the largest recipients. Australia helped again with the smaller Hungarian refugee crisis of 1956. It was not so keen to help after the fall of Saigon in 1975; according to Employment Minister Clyde Cameron, Gough Whitlam angrily refused to have any 'f***ing Vietnamese Balts' coming here. But when South-East Asian nations began towing boat people back to sea in 1979, the US State Department organized international pressure, and Australia, by then under the Fraser Government, was yet again among the largest contributors to the resettlement of all the Vietnamese in the camps.

Contrasting those events with recent ones, Malcolm Fraser noted that Calwell knew unionists in his time would not have agreed to large-scale immigration, so he avoided asking them. Similarly, Fraser said, 'If I had asked Australians, do you want me to embrace policies which will lead to about 200,000 Vietnamese ... coming to Australia; ... if I'd taken that vote people would have said 'no'. But we believed that it was necessary in Australia's interest ...'

As a reason for policy change, 'we were pressured by great and powerful overseas friends' is not something a democratic government can sell to its constituents. It may be a sound and honourable reason for action nevertheless.

James Franklin, Senior Lecturer in Mathematics at the University of New South Wales, is, with R.J. Stove, writing a book on the international dimensions of Australian immigration.

I P A