

How many refugees?

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The lack of clarity about the numbers of people who are refugees and the different categories of refugee enables us, as Australians debating the issues, to avoid facing some important questions.

I didn't watch the ABC documentary on the Tampa last night because that issue is one of those guaranteed to make me very angry - I feared it would become "a near occasion for sin". However I did find myself drawn into watching some of the Q&A afterwards. As I thought about the way the questions and responses went it occurred to me that the lack of clarity about the numbers of people who are refugees and the different categories of refugee enabled us, as Australians debating the issues to avoid facing some important questions.

No matter how large the numbers of those seeking asylum are on a global scale, they are nowhere near the total number of refugees across the globe. Many are displaced people within their own countries. Many more are displaced people outside the land of their origin who want to go home. The moral issue of how we deal with asylum seekers and refugees who seek to come to Australia is important. No question but we need some perspective here. The number of people coming via boats is in the order of 2-3,000 per annum at the moment. The number who seek asylum after arriving in Australia by air is around 9,000 per annum. The fear and anger in the Australian community over this number of people coming by boats is out of all proportion to the numbers involved - contra Scott Morrison.

Surveys have shown that most members of the Australian community think the numbers involved are much larger, 100 times larger and neither of the major political parties have seen fit to get out there and educate people about the facts. Instead we have appeals to fear and prejudice and blatant attempts to de-humanise the people involved. Why we are so vulnerable on this point is an issue that needs thought and self critical reflection that will take us beyond simply using labels like xenophobia as David Marr did last night.

Beyond that the focusing on the relatively small group of asylum seekers coming by boat enables us to dodge consideration of the reality of the much larger groups of displaced people in the world and our implication as a nation or as consumers in helping create the situation that led to that displacement.

For example, our involvement in the war in Iraq helped fuel a massive displacement of people both within and outside Iraq. Our ongoing involvement in the war in Afghanistan implicates us not only in the creation of Afghan refugees but also in the flow on effects in Pakistan and the displacement of people within that country.

On the economic front some of the immense displacement of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo and surrounding countries in the Great Lakes region of Africa has been fuelled by the push for minerals to sustain our consumption of the goods in which they are incorporated and I won't even go on to discuss the displacement of people in civil wars arising from struggles for the control of diamonds.

So by all means let us explore thoughtfully the issue of how we as a nation-state are to respond to the claims of the vulnerable and displaced who come seeking asylum. Let us not become so obsessed that we assume that even achieving a relatively just and compassionate policy will exhaust our responsibility towards the displaced people across the globe. We are all deeply implicated in their condition. We are, more truly and deeply than we might want to acknowledge, our brother's and sister's keepers.

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