'What if no one had spoken out against this policy?' The rise of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy in Australia

Diane Gosden, University of New South Wales

This paper examines the rise of an asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement in Australia in recent years. A harsh policy with mandatory detention had already been in existence in Australia since 1992, as part of the onshore component of Australia's refugee program.[1] This regime had been contested since its inception by small numbers of concerned individuals and core refugee, human rights, professional and church groups. However, further hardening of the policy by the Australian government in much publicised events in 2001, made it a highly contentious public issue. The government's actions were supported by a majority of the population. At the same time however, myriad asylum seeker and refugee support groups sprang up spontaneously across Australia to contest the policy. The paper examines this latter phenomenon utilising Alberto Melucci's theoretical framework as a guide in 'an attempt to listen to the voices' and 'read the signs' of the message and mode of being of this particular social collective (1996, 1). In this endeavour, the paper explores the 'everyday practice' of participants in their struggle to bring change not only to the detail and the logic of the contested policy, but also to the way in which 'the other' as asylum seeker and refugee is perceived, represented and received.

The policy at the core of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy contention concerns the onshore component of Australia's refugee program (Maley 2004). This policy is

---

[1] See Pickering and Lambert (2002, 65-66) for a description of the onshore and offshore components of Australia's refugee program, and an analysis of the way in which 'Deterrence, as it has been positioned within refugee policy, is aimed at onshore asylum seekers' (66).

based on Australian legislation, which applies to people seeking refugee status and protection from within Australian territory. As Crock and Saul explain, 'Most of these applicants arrive on valid visas as tourists or students, or on short-term visas, and then seek to change their status to that of permanent resident on the basis that they are refugees. A smaller number enter Australia without valid visas and then seek protection as refugees. These are the people referred to as 'asylum seekers.' They are, in fact and as a matter of law, seeking asylum, refuge, or protection in Australia' (2002, 10). There is evidence that many aspects of the policy toward asylum seekers are inconsistent with international human rights agreements, such as the Refugee Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Amnesty International Australia 1998, 2005; Glendenning et al. 2004; HREOC 2004).

The policy has long enjoyed support from the two major political powers in Australia, the Coalition of the Liberal Party and the National Party that has been in government since 1996, and the Australian Labor Party, which introduced the policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers in 1992. The policy has provided political advantage to both political groups in various periods. It has proved valuable for international political purposes for a Labor government in the early 1990s (McMaster 2001), and valuable for national political reasons for the Coalition government in the early 2000s (Goot 2002; Warhurst and Simms 2002; Manne 2004).

For more than a decade, a small number of refugee and human rights NGOs, and professional and church groups have been involved in opposing the policy. In more recent times, because of the publicisation of the issue both nationally and internationally, and the overt utilisation of it in national politics, there has been a much larger uprising of passionate opposition (Coombs 2004). However, although polling has indicated some shift from 2001 to 2004 towards a more tolerant position on asylum seeker and refugee rights (Saulwick and Assocs. & Muller and Assocs. 2004), advocates remain in the minority in terms of national public opinion.[2] Drawing

---

[2] Throughout this paper, I use the term 'advocate' as a generic term for advocates and activists. The range of activities undertaken is a particular feature of the collective action of the 'later wave' of engagement—from political activism to lobbying; to public advocacy in the form of community education; to practical, financial, social and emotional support for asylum seekers and refugees affected by the Australian onshore refugee policy. Though some people may do only one of these activities, the

from the *Australian Election Study 2004*, Dodson (2005) notes that 54.4% of those polled strongly agreed or agreed with the government policy of turning back all boats carrying asylum seekers, while 28% strongly disagreed or disagreed with this policy. This can be contrasted to polling on a similar question in ACNielsen polls in 2001 (31 August-2 September and 9-10 October) indicating a 77% strong agreement or agreement with the government's policy of preventing boats carrying asylum seekers from entering Australian waters and 18-20% strong disagreement or disagreement with the policy (Goot 2002, 72).

In examining the rise in collective action around asylum seeker and refugee advocacy in Australia as social movement action, I follow Melucci's definition of a social movement as 'collective action expressing a conflict' (1981,176). On first appearances, this seems to be an overly simple definition that could apply to many forms of social action. But a closer examination of Melucci's definition of 'a conflict' introduces much more exact criteria to this definition. A 'conflict' is not just conflictual action, nor deviance, nor crisis behaviour, although all of these may co-exist within the practice of a social movement. Rather, a conflict denotes a challenge and a struggle at the level of the logic of a system. Collective action as social movement action questions the legitimacy of the logic of that system. In Melucci's schema, what must be defined in analysing collective action is the arena of conflict, the challenge to the logic of the system, and the empirical features of the collective action.

The arena of conflict

Conflict within a system is often brought to the surface by particular crisis situations. In Australia this occurred dramatically in relation to refugee policy, through a series of events in 2001 and 2002 (Mares 2002; Weller 2002; Corlett 2002; Marr and Wilkinson 2003; Kevin 2004; Manne and Corlett 2004). Of all these events, the 2001 actions of the Australian government in refusing entry to asylum seekers on board the Norwegian vessel *Tampa*, and the subsequent development and implementation of 'The Pacific Solution' and 'Border Protection' in the 2001 pre-election period, were

---

majority of people involved may do a number of them or all of them. Thus the activism that ensues may be informed by the personal relationships with asylum seekers and refugees, and the public advocacy that is undertaken may be impassioned into activism by the needs of asylum seekers and

the most politicised and publicised, both nationally and internationally.

The demonisation of asylum seekers in government and media discourses that accompanied the government actions, ensured that the issue became an increasingly polarised one for the Australian public (Pickering 2001; Maley 2004; Manne 2004). This period saw increased levels of hostility directed toward asylum seekers, refugees, and their advocates (Piper 2002). It also resulted in passionate and committed advocacy for asylum seekers and refugees by people across Australia who had not previously been active in this area. Whilst polling showed majority support within the Australian public for the government's actions (Manne 2004), groups opposed to the policy and supportive of the rights of asylum seekers and refugees sprang up across Australia during this period, and brought a new energy to advocacy in this area.

Although the majority of these 'new' groups began from late 2001 onwards, public awareness of the harshness of the policy had been increasing in the preceding period. In this sense, the *Tampa* event and other 2001-2002 events crystallised what was an already disturbed element of public opinion. For the year 2000, Peter Mares (2002, 3-34) has detailed the occurrence of events such as hunger strikes, mass break-outs and riots at Australian immigration detention centres; the ABC *Four Corners* television program about the use of sedatives in immigration deportation proceedings; and public allegations of sexual abuse in Woomera immigration detention centre.

For the mid 2001 period, Mary Crock and Ben Saul regard the 'groundswell of public support for the 50 or so asylum seekers who escaped from Villawood detention centre in July 2001' as signalling 'a new direction in the refugee debate—towards subversion and civil disobedience of laws which are unbearably harsh' (2002, 5). One month later, national television footage of a traumatised child inside the Villawood immigration detention centre brought another dimension to that public awareness, and the group Chilout (Children Out Of Detention) was formed in August 2001 in response.

In addition, the period following the *Tampa* incident and the period of legislation for

refugees.

'The Pacific Solution' and 'Border Protection,' was one in which the Australian public was exposed to the 'Children Overboard' affair, and learnt of the drowning of 353 people (seeking asylum) on board the SIEV X (Kevin 2004). Throughout 2002, hunger strikes and self-harm, including 'lip-sewing,' continued within Australian immigration detention centres, as did escapes from Woomera immigration detention centre. By this time, thousands of Australians who had written to columnist and commentator Phillip Adams signing up for a 'civil disobedience register,' had provided funds for a national organisation of Australians For Just Refugee Programs, otherwise known as A Just Australia (Mares 2002, 257).

At one level, both the earlier and more recent social mobilisation around asylum seeker and refugee advocacy can be understood as responses to particular events and to particular aspects of the policy (McMaster 2001; Corlett 2002). At another level, the advocacy as a whole can be understood as a challenge not just to the detail of the policy, but also to the logic that has guided and continues to guide the development and implementation of the policy. At another level again, what has been engaged in is a struggle for the future direction and values of Australian society.

The asylum issue thus exposes an underlying cultural tension within Australian society. On the one hand, for some years, sections of Australian society had been aggrieved around issues of immigration and asylum seeker and refugee arrivals (Blainey 1984; Hanson 1996; Hage 1998; Jupp 2002; Burchell 2003; Poynting et al. 2004). For these sections of the Australian public, there was a sense in which their identity as an Australian had become violated and diminished, through government policies that they perceived favoured multiculturalism and reconciliation (Hage 1998; Manne 2004). The Australian government's actions of 2001 and 2002, which outraged old and new asylum seeker and refugee advocates, resonated positively for this section of the population in accordance with long held grievances and fears, thus ensuring their electoral support (Manne 2004).

On the other hand, both the practices and the logic guiding the Australian onshore refugee policy are perceived by asylum seeker and refugee advocates, supporters and sympathisers as un-Australian, and as a violation of the identity that they had previously associated with Australia in terms of a shown respect for human rights

values and a sense of social justice. In a questionnaire study circulated in 2004 by

Professor Margaret Reynolds for the United Nations Association of Australia

(UNAA), many advocates mentioned both their personal outrage and its connection to

their Australian identity, as well as their desire to redeem the good name and

behaviour of Australia.[3] The following are some examples:

> I remember being overcome with shock and even disbelief…I remember thinking, no this is not going to happen. The Australian people will not allow it. How wrong was I!

> I found it unbearable that politicians who are supposed to be representing me could maintain such a harsh policy against innocent people. I needed to have some way of expressing my support for asylum seekers, and my disgust with our government's policy. I wanted to let them know that not all Australians agreed with their detention.

For many of these 'new' advocates, it was the beginning of a process of educating

themselves about a policy that had already been in existence for a decade. That this

was so, only heightened the outrage of the situation for them.[4]

> I first became aware of Australia's detention policy when I saw a report in 2001 on the ABC *Four Corners* program where a little boy named Shayan's story was aired. I vividly remember the images shown of this little boy who would no longer speak and of his distressed parents. I remember Jacqui Everitt the family's lawyer being asked by the journalist 'How could something like this be happening in Australia?' Jacqui's response was 'Well, bad things happen when good people do nothing.' I couldn't sleep that night and felt very angry to learn that Australia was locking up children for years on end. How come I didn't know about this?

> As a middle class, forty something, ordinary, average Aussie mum, I simply could not believe that the country I loved so much could allow something like this to happen. How naive I was. As soon as the program finished, I got onto the web and found websites dedicated to helping those people our country has almost demonised. That began my belated education.

The challenge to the logic of the system

The asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement challenges the political-

administrative logic exemplified in the theory and practice of the policy**,** and it does

so in the name of the legitimising values of justice and human rights. In challenging

the particularity of this policy, the cultural norms that the policy represents, and the

cultural directions it has provided for Australian society, also come into question. In

this sense, social movement actions may 'spill over into the general social arena, and

if strong and persistent, become harbingers of general social change' (Pakulski 1991,

39).

---

[3] Unless otherwise attributed, quotations in this paper are from Reynolds (2004).

[4] For some people, there was a sense of *déja vu* in remembering the lack of knowledge that many Australians had about atrocities done to Indigenous Australians. See Reynolds (1999) for an exploration of this history.

Asylum seeker and refugee advocates have responded to the much publicised crisis events mentioned above, and they continue to respond to the ongoing crisis events that are the legacy of this policy. This legacy includes the traumatic effects upon asylum seekers and refugees of detention in Australia's immigration detention centres (Silove et al. 2000; Steel and Silove 2001; Sultan and O'Sullivan 2001; Mares et al. 2002; Zwi et al. 2003; HREOC 2004), the effects of diminished benefits of 'second class' visas accorded to refugees in the community (Barnes 2003; Phillips and Manning 2004), and the effects of deportation (Glendenning et al. 2004).

Across a diversity of groups and styles of engagement, advocates have challenged the policy that these events disclosed, and have protested and lobbied against the current policy, whilst also developing alternative policy models (JAS. 2002; RCOA et al. 2004; NASA-Vic. 2005). In addition, while ostensibly fighting a defensive battle against this policy, the societal logic underlying the policy has been challenged, and there have emerged new visions of and desires for an Australian society more respectful of human rights (Corlett 2002; Burnside 2004; Brennan 2003 and 2004).

Agnes Heller has observed that the future of a society is, to a large extent, dependent 'on the actors of the present, since they reinforce one logic of society as against another' (Heller 1982, 284). In terms of the logic of Australia's onshore refugee policy development, David Corlett, amongst others, looks towards a more humane society in calling for a needs-based rather than fear-based approach to the development of this policy (2002, 354). Such a policy would only be possible within a political and social context 'in which asylum seekers' humanity is viewed as part of a common humanity' (2002, 359).[5] The achievement of this is the challenge with which advocates are engaged.

As Melucci has noted, social movements may act as a 'sign' (1996, 1), 'allowing society to openly address its fundamental dilemmas' (10). In Australia, these include a society that has become increasingly unequal in terms of its citizens' access to opportunities, and the utilisation within that social environment of a politics of fear

---

[5] See also Benhabib's (2004) discussion of this.

that demonises and scapegoats 'the other' (Manne 2004; Dodson 2004; McMaster 2001; Maley 2004; Brennan 2003 and 2004). In this regard, the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement has signalled a renewed interest in, and commitment to, an inclusive model of social justice in Australia. While a number of those involved in asylum seeker and refugee advocacy may well have had prior involvement in other social justice issues, the 'on the ground' experience of human rights abuses in this particular advocacy has brought home in a very tangible manner the dangers of complacency and non-involvement in terms of general social justice advocacy within their own country (Higgins 2003). In the context of a conflict in which there has been historical bipartisan political support for a hard line on asylum seekers, Corlett suggests that 'It is at the level of localised interaction that hope … resides' (2002, 358).

The empirical features of the collective action

The essence of the collective action

The asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement can primarily be understood as an issue-based movement. Across a wide spectrum, advocates and supporters are opposed to the assault on human rights that has occurred within the Australian government onshore refugee policy (Oxfam/CAA 2002; Bhagwati 2002; HREOC 2004). In this sense, this mobilisation can be understood as 'other regarding' social action, as elaborated in Burgmann's 1993 discussion of 'other regarding' and 'self regarding' social action).[6] The policy is perceived as unjust and inhumane, and advocates have felt a moral responsibility to respond to the situation. The social action engendered is aimed at both ameliorating the effects of the policy and at bringing change to the policy.

Social action aimed at ameliorating the effects of the policy includes the provision of social, emotional, practical, lobbying and medical and legal support. Associated activities can range from letter writing to people seeking asylum who are being held in the immigration detention centres, to visiting them there, to practical support for

---

[6] Burgmann has noted that 'other regarding' social movements often also contain 'self regarding' components (1993, 17-18). This is true of the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement in Australia. There is a concern for the defence of humanitarian values as a central component of Australian national identity. This can be seen as 'self regarding' in terms of a vested interest in the future direction and values of Australian society.

them in the form of telephone cards and other small items, to social and emotional

support. It can also involve lobbying for individuals or groups of asylum seekers and

refugees; and involvement in their legal assistance either by finding legal

representation for them, or if that is not possible, assisting them with their

submissions and applications. In some cases, supporters may do one of these things.

In many cases, they will do all of them.[7] The following answers to Reynolds'

questionnaire give some idea of this involvement: [8]

> I really wanted to do something to change the policy or make it a bit more bearable for these poor imprisoned people somehow.

> In a personal sense, I write to detainees in Baxter Detention Centre … I also visit detainees in the Perth Detention Centre. I work with a small informal group (the Freemantle Support Project) who try to help asylum seekers. Here, I set up an email based group of people who wanted to help. Generally, people transfer $2.50 a week or $5.50 a week directly into X's account. Others who are not in a position to help financially simply give their emotional support. The list has now grown to 70 people.

> I work to organise legal help. I put people in touch with people who can help them. I have sent phone cards and parcels … I have organised for affidavits that might be helpful for appeals. I phone one person every second night for eighteen months now, and give counselling and relaxation when he is suicidal. I have travelled to Port Augusta four times and stayed to make a total of seventy visits to people in the centre by now. I have had some people on Temporary Protection Visas stay with me, one for ten months and others for just a few days.

Social action aimed at challenging and bringing change to the policy includes political

activism, lobbying, community education, and the development of alternate policy:

> I campaign to change policy. I collect and present petitions to members of parliament. I write to newspapers. On invitation, I have spoken to school groups and church groups about refugees. I work about eight hours a day most days from home, helping to organise information stalls, sending out newsletter, campaign to change government policy, contact people in detention, try to find lawyers for those who need this, liase between lawyers and detainees, research country information, help with appeals to the Minister for Immigration, maintain a database to monitor needs of persons in Baxter detention centre, organise for letters and parcels to be sent to those in detention, write to politicians, work with a refugee activist committee. I work on the No Deportations campaign.

It also includes, through a role modelling and 'signing' dimension, the previously
mentioned actions aimed at ameliorating the effects of the policy. As illustrated in the
following comments and as noted above, involvement may include all of the above:

> I have done all the normal things; lobbied federal government ministers personally, written letters to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration, attended rallies, joined and helped set up action groups. I have spent a lot of time educating myself and then evangelising for the cause. I speak to people every day and make them aware of the facts on the matter. I have accommodated a person on a Temporary protection Visa in my home for the past 18 months at no expense to him at all. I have organised his medical and psychiatric care and his

---

[7] See Clausen (2005) for details of some of the 'legal work' done by volunteers.

[8] See Stubbs (2004) and Coombs (2004) for an illustration of the range of activities undertaken by groups such as Chilout and RAR.

visa applications. I have attended meetings in the Department with him and argued with the government officials about the accuracy of the information they were trying to put across as to the security of sending my friend back to where he came from. I have found him work and I have tried to be a good friend to him.

The awareness ramifies. You can start by wanting to do something about detention, which leads you to an awareness of the determination process, the politics of mandatory detention, the problems for refugees after you get them out of detention, the threats of deportation, etc. One aspect leads to another. It tends to become a systemic questioning.[9]

The everyday practice

In the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement, the personal relationships established between asylum seekers and refugees and their supporters have become a central aspect of the milieu of the movement and the social action emanating from that. Within the closely woven fabric of relationships between asylum seekers and refugees and their advocates, the social action of advocates becomes informed and directed:

> I realised the despair that this poor boy felt when he asked me to tell John Howard to free him … I felt his despair as he told me about his father in the Nauru hunger strike, and he asked me 'When will I be free?'

> The support that I give to my friend in detention is very basic. I simply visit whenever possible to sit and have a chat. This may not sound like much, but it can make a world of difference.… It is the value of the knowledge that there are Australians who care, and that Australia as a whole is not trying to reject him, that is important.

This contact has occurred despite the psychological obstacles erected to interaction between asylum seekers and the Australian public by government and media discourses of demonisation of those people, and despite the practical obstacles that militate against the realisation of that contact, such as the physical isolation of immigration detention centres, and the limitations placed on communication with asylum seekers in Australian immigration detention centres. Across these barriers, a 'common humanity' bridges the gap:

> They are real human beings with needs common to us all, not the demons they are made out to be by politicians.

> I've been in personal contact with asylum seekers since 2001, and have maintained contact throughout this period with so many people I couldn't count, but I'd say around 100. Young men, young women, children, fathers, mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers detained in centres around Australia, as well as people in Nauru.

The penetration of secrecy

A respondent to Reynolds' questionnaire outlined the shock of meeting people used to

---

[9] Personal communication from Ian Rintoul, Refugee Action Coalition, 22nd April 2005.

identifying themselves within the administrative system of Australian immigration

detention centres, by their numbers:

> I drove the first Freedom Bus around Australia, gathered 'numbers' thrown to us over fences, and painstakingly tried to write down foreign names to line up with the numbers. The people didn't give their names first up. They just told us their numbers. The memory still makes me cry. It was truly shocking.

In order to make contact with asylum seekers in Immigration detention centres,

people have acted to access information about these people and their situation, and to

share this information with others.[10] As Dr. Aamer Sultan, a detained Iraqi doctor,

observed in the August 2001 ABC television program *Four Corners*, which showed

video footage of a traumatised young child inside one of the immigration detention

centres, 'After a time, I realised these fences are not to prevent us from escaping …

No. These fences have been set to prevent you, the Australians from approaching us'

(ABC 2005).

In the course of social action aimed at ameliorating the effects of the policy on asylum

seekers in Australian Immigration Detention Centres, a significant penetration of the

censorship and secrecy associated with the policy, has been achieved. The resultant

information, which has been gained and shared across and outside of the movement,

has become a major aspect of the functioning of the movement. From the efforts of

those in the 'Freedom Bus' which travelled around Australia in 2002 visiting

detention centres and 'raising public awareness of the plight of refugees' (Crock and

Saul 2002, 5), many advocates in urban and rural area of Australia became informed

of the details of this policy for the first time.

Dedicated advocacy communications groups relay email information about

happenings within immigration detention centres, as well as media and current events

updates in regard to asylum seeker and refugee policy.[11] Melucci has noted that the

social actions within movements often become intimately interwoven with everyday

---

[10] For literature in which the voices of asylum seekers and refugees can be heard see: Tyler (2003); Leach and Mansouri (2003); Lonely Planet (ed.) (2003); and Scott and Keneally (2004). For an account of work inside an immigration detention centre, see Mann (2003). For the voices of young Australians on this issue see: Dechian, Millar and Sallis (2004); and Dechian, Devereaux, Millar and Sallis (2005).

[11] The 2005 discovery of an Australian permanent resident detained in Baxter immigration detention centre was sparked by asylum seekers' pleas to advocates on her behalf, and by the subsequent media article on the case by Andrea Jackson in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (quoted in Marr et al. 2005).

life and individual experience (1989, 71-72). This is particularly apparent within the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement in Australia. By their determination and persistence in making contact with asylum seekers and refugees, and in their everyday habits of interaction with asylum seekers and refugees, these movement actors, along with the asylum seekers and refugees they interact with, model relationships of common humanity that transcend the 'national boundaries' of Australian sovereignty. In this sense, advocates both model and live the future they work for. As Anne Coombs of Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR) observes:

> The thing that keeps people going in the refugee movement is the personal contact with asylum seekers - meeting people behind the razor wire, hearing their stories, seeing their despair. We are involved in a struggle that is both political and humanitarian. The politics makes us angry; the people make us care. RAR and the rest of the movement will keep on going as long as there are people in detention and as long as Australia refuses haven to refugees who simply want the chance to rebuild their lives. (2004, 135)

The shape of the social collective

Coombs (2004, 125-6) has described the asylum seeker and refugee movement in Australia as:

> *a vast mosaic of overlapping networks*: lawyers, church people, human-rights advocates, welfare workers, political activists, and ordinary people; from highly skilled professionals with specific expertise to the many thousands who have joined a grassroots movement to oppose the Government's treatment of asylum seekers. (My emphasis)

The patterned vista to be observed in this mosaic of networking and overlapping is best understood in reference to its beginnings. The previously mentioned core refugee, human rights and religious NGOs and agencies, along with small numbers of individuals and groups (ranging from professional to political involvement), had been struggling with aspects of this policy with little media coverage and public knowledge before the 2001 events brought wider awareness of and engagement with the issue. The 'grass roots' engagement of the 'later' wave of advocates is best compared to the effect of a sudden scattering of seeds of awareness across Australia where, following the much-publicised events of 2001 and 2002, a plethora of 'new' groups sprang up in support of the rights of asylum seekers.[12] The orientation of people within these

---

[12] The members of these groups are volunteers in the sense that they are unpaid, and indeed spend much of their own money on their support of asylum seekers and refugees. However, the word 'volunteer' does not capture the degree of passionate advocacy and activism of their social action. The numbers of people involved in a range of social action of advocacy and activism is difficult to estimate since individuals may belong to more than one group. However, as an example, groups such as Rural Australian for Refugees (RAR) count an email member list of approximately 15,000 people, A Just Australia (AJA) of approximately 8,000 people, and the communications group Project SafeCom lists

groups could be characterised by a sudden shared sense of the urgency of the situation, and of the need for the taking of individual responsibility in opposing and bringing change to this policy.

Although many of these people did look to contribute by adding their energies to established refugee, human rights, and church campaigns by NGOs and established agencies,[13] many others felt a need to take immediate and direct social action in whatever way they could, and wherever they were situated. In addition, social action that led to personal interaction with asylum seekers in immigration detention centres and later with refugees living in the community with second-class protection visas, such as Temporary Protection Visas and Bridging Visas, reinforced and heightened the already perceived urgency of the situation. Because of this orientation towards the need for immediate social action, groups were often initiated in a 'local' or 'associational' manner, that is, groups began 'locally' in myriad locations across Australia in places of residence, work, and social, religious, political and professional interaction.

A pattern of autonomous social agency

Observers looking for a familiar tree branching structure of a major centralised group coordinating the strategies and responses of other groups, will be disappointed in the shape of this social collective. The scattered pattern of asylum seeker and refugee advocacy groups reflects the history of the periods of earlier and later engagement with the issue; and the nature of the 'later' wave of advocacy in terms of the spontaneous response that occurred in multiple sites across the nation. Those people suddenly galvanised into action from 2001 onwards did not say to themselves, 'What are other people doing about this?' They asked, 'What can I do about this? What can we do about this?, and, What can we do here, and now?'

In this manner, groups sprang up from multiple locations, and their resultant action has been correspondingly organic and exploratory in nature, with contributions

---

as supporters 5000 database contacts and 10,000 general other e-list readers (Project SafeCom Inc. 2004).
[13] Some examples are the Asylum Seeker Support Networks associated with Hotham Mission, Melbourne, the Circle of Friends network associated with the Australian Refugee Association, Adelaide, and Amnesty International Australia's NSW Refugee Network.

specific to the nature of particular groups and particular individuals. This has produced the remarkable diversity within the movement, ranging from long standing peak refugee, human rights and church and welfare groups, to arts, media, theatre and educational groups, social and practical support groups, agencies;[14] medical, legal and academic professional involvement, political activist involvement, communications groups, specific focus groups, urban and rural groups, refugee groups, unions, and many individuals who cross through the group actions and dynamics. Emanating from this diversity comes collective action that is both 'local,' in the sense of an individual's or group's primary advocacy identity, and part of a whole.

Contributing to the whole—a work in process

If the shared concern for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees acts as the binding glue of the movement, it is primarily the technology of email and 'the web' that facilitates the ability of these dispersed and localised networks to function collectively.[15] As Coombs (2004, 133) notes for the group Rural Australians for Refugees:

> RAR could never have grown into a movement as quickly or as geographically dispersed as it is without email. People can feel included in the work of the network regardless of where they are located. We can respond quickly to unfolding events—targeting politicians or sending out requests for help for specific detainees. The website has been invaluable and one of the main ways that new supporters find us.

While there have been many examples of individuals and groups travelling across and outside of Australia to make contact with asylum seekers and refugees and with advocacy support communities, email and 'the web' provide a nationwide forum for the various campaigns initiated by different individuals or groups. Email newsletters, petitions, updates, calls to action, and websites provide both knowledge of and access to the larger collective. This forum, which in addition to the personal contact with asylum seekers and refugees and the 'local' networks of social action of individuals and groups, maintains and invigorates the collective. Through this access to the social action initiated by other groups and individuals, advocates can come to 'know' the nature of the larger social collective of which they are a part.

---

[14] The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne is an example of an agency that began as a volunteer organisation, and that now functions with paid and volunteer staff providing asylum seekers with a wide range of holistic care.

[15] See Stubbs (2004) on the utilisation of web and email by the group Chilout (Children Out Of Detention).

Tensions within

Nonetheless, tensions can be observed between various movement actors within the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement. These tensions reflect often observed patterns within social movements between more reformist and more radical approaches to social action and social change (Burgmann 1993, 251; Pakulski 1991, 173). With the reasonably sudden entry of numerous groups into this domain from 2001 onwards, tensions have also been played out between earlier and later groups. As advocates involved for some time in the arena observed, the earlier groups had the knowledge and experience of the field, while the later (2001 onwards) groups brought tremendous energy into their new engagement with the issue.[16]

Tensions have included differences around expectations and strategies. At the same time, there is cooperation between the various sectors with combined actions, plus an understanding of specific marking of territory in terms of what each sector can contribute to the whole, and can provide as resources for other groups' utilisation:

> It was just a thing where people had to gradually come together, and realise what's been going on, and what was happening in both groups. NGOs have funding and paid staff—with time and expertise to network with each other and develop policy. The other groups operate on the good will of people and they realise their resources are better placed to mobilise people at the grass roots level. I think they do complement each other in a lot of ways.[17]

The focus of the social action of this collective ultimately lies in the particular contribution that can be made from a particular location with the particular expertise at hand. As one advocate observed of the engagement against the Australian onshore refugee policy, 'It's not so much a war, as a series of battles,'[18] and these battles can be fought on different fields, simultaneously. What binds advocates together is a shared concern with the logic and the detail of the Australian onshore policy and the human suffering that has resulted and continues to result from it.

The entity of the asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement
Melucci has observed that social movement actors frequently spend a lot of time deciding who and what they are (1989, 218). Yet this can hardly be said to apply to

---

[16] Interview with James Thomson, National Council of Churches of Australia, 6th December 2004.
[17] As above.
[18] Interview with Junie Ong, Chilout (Children Out Of Detention), 25th February 2005.

the Australian asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement as an entity. As Coombs has noted (2004, 134), advocates are generally too busy with the task at hand—too busy with the 'emergency work' of ameliorating the effects of the policy on asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, this kind of capacity building or identity building enterprise when it occurs, tends to again have an emphasis on the 'local,' whether in terms of place as geography or as an 'associational' locale (for example, as in associational locales of profession, politics, religion, and so on).[19]

The asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement is a multidimensional and fluid entity that can best be understood at present as 'the sum of its parts.' Advocates from many sites and many orientations combine their particular focus and expertise to contribute to the multiple tasks associated with ameliorating the effects of Australia's onshore policy; challenging the logic and practice of the policy, and struggling to redefine the values of a compassionate Australia. It is apt for the members of the movement to consider Burgmann's opinion that social movements are only strong politically in so far as they are 'unified entities' and 'coherent forces' (1993, 19). Yet, the multifaceted nature of the resultant advocacy may well ultimately prove to be the movement's greatest strength in terms of its many tentacled reaches into different sections of Australian society.

Conclusion

'What if no one had spoken out against this policy?'

With the weight of popular support for Australia's on-shore refugee policy, this fear has galvanised advocates' social action around the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees under the Australian onshore refugee policy. This fear has come for younger Australians from the reading of history, and for older Australians from the living memory of the genocides and other human rights atrocities that have occurred in the twentieth century. The dangers posed by the non-responsiveness of 'ordinary citizens' to human rights abuses, is perhaps a spectre that continues to haunt twenty first century societies. As one respondent to Reynolds' survey asserted, 'I couldn't

---

[19] Groups such as RAR have engaged in capacity building in the form of annual conferences that have provided a meeting point not only for RAR members but for people from different groups across the nation. However more generally, capacity building will occur through joint campaigns and projects, meetings with fellow advocates at events, rallies, and while visiting Immigration Detention Centres, that is, 'on the job.'

complain and do nothing, or I'd be guilty of complicity' (Reynolds 2004).

Many Australian people (though they remain a minority in Australian society) have spoken out against this policy and in passionate and dedicated support for asylum seekers and refugees. They have done this in many venues: personal conversations with friends and acquaintances; community education; creative art, theatre, film, literature and music; professional life; political parties and parliament; protest rallies; church groups; academic forums; international human rights forums, that is, wherever they happened to find themselves and wherever their expertise could be utilised in this regard. They continue to speak out against this policy.

Klaus Neumann points out that the bipartisan political support for a hardline Australian approach to asylum seekers is not unprecedented. As he shows in *Refuge Australia*, it has a long history. What is unprecedented, he argues, 'is the willingness of many ordinary Australians in the last few years to assist asylum seekers and refugees.… They consider it their personal duty' (2004, 113). As one of the respondents to Reynolds's questionnaire asserted:

> It is impossible to ignore the issue once one becomes friends with people who have been through this appalling regime, all of them following horrors perpetrated in their places of origin. The blatant and ceaseless lies of the government, whilst sometimes draining one's energy, more often serve as impetus to continue. The truth must come out one day (Reynolds 2004).

Through the dimension of bearing witness to this period, the voices of asylum seekers and refugees and their advocates may well be heard not only in the present, but also into the future as part of Australia's historical record.

The analysis of this particular collective action has situated it within Melucci's description of 'reticular and diffuse forms of collective action … located at several different levels of the social system, simultaneously' (1996, 4). The paper has explored the way in which diverse sections of the Australian asylum seeker and refugee advocacy movement both cohere around a shared concern with Australia's on-shore refugee policy, and also diverge in their respective strategies for achieving change to the policy. In the process of exploration of the way in which such 'multiplicity' co-exists as a collective actor, aspects of 'the local' and 'the personal' have been found to have had particular significance for the social action that has

evolved. In this regard, there can be observed to be a re-ordering of the nature of a relationship with 'the other' as asylum seeker or refugee, which is counterposed against the state and majority discourse and practice. In this analysis, Melucci's definition of a social movement as 'collective action expressing a conflict at the level of the logic of the system' (1981, 176) has provided a guiding rigour. It has necessitated a defining of the particularity of this collective action in terms of its arena of conflict, the challenges it has made to the logic of the system, and the empirical features of its structure and practice. I argue that such a process contributes to a more informed understanding of the reality of the social movement action.

Reference list

ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) 2005, *Four Corners* [Online], Available at: http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s344246.htm [Accessed 13th April 2005].

Amnesty International Australia, 1998, *Australia, A continuing shame: The mandatory detention of asylum seekers*, Amnesty International Australia, Sydney.

——— 2005, *The impact of indefinite detention: the case to change Australia's mandatory detention regime*, AIA publications, Sydney.

Barnes, D. 2003, *A Life Devoid of Meaning: Living on a Temporary Protection Visa in Western Sydney*, The Centre for Refugee Research UNSW & the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, Sydney.

Benhabib, S. 2004, *The Rights Of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bhagwati, P. N. 2002, *Report of the Regional Advisor for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Human Rights and Immigration Detention in Australia*, Mission to Australia, 24 May-2 June 2002.

Blainey, G. 1984, *All for Australia*, Methuen Haynes, Sydney.

Brennan, F. 2003, *Tampering With Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.

——— 2004, 'Encountering the Other' in *A Fair Go in an Age of Terror: Uniya's Jesuit Lenten seminars 2003 & 2004*, ed. P. Fawkner, D. Lovell Publishing, Melbourne, 31-36.

Burchell, D. 2003, *Western Horizon: Sydney's Heartland and the Future of Australian Politics*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.

Burgmann, V. 1993, *Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Burnside, J. 2004, 'Hope and experience: human rights in Australia,' Paper presented at the South Australian Law Society Conference, Adelaide, July 2004.

Clausen, L. 2005, 'Stuck in the system,' *Time Australia*, 21 February, 7, 34-37.

Coombs, A. 2004, 'Mobilising rural Australia,' *Griffith Review,* Autumn: 123-135.

Corlett, D. 2002, *The Politics of Exclusion: Australia and Asylum Seekers*, Unpublished PhD. thesis, Department of Politics, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia.

Crock, M. & Saul, B. 2002, *Future Seekers: Refugees And The Law In Australia*, The Federation Press, Sydney.

Dechian, S., Millar, H., and Sallis, E. (eds.) 2004, *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia.

Dechian, S., Devereaux, J., Millar, H. and Sallis, E. (eds.) 2005, *No Place Like Home*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia.

Dodson, M. 2004, 'Indigenous Australians' in *The Howard Years*, ed. R. Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 119-143.

Dodson, L. 2005, 'Immigration levels sufficient, poll finds,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March, 7.

Glendenning, P., Leavey, C., Hetherton, M., Britt, M., and Morris, T. 2004, *Deported To Danger: A Study of Australia's Treatment of 40 Rejected Asylum Seekers,* Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education, Sydney.

Goot, M. 2002, 'Turning points: For whom the polls told' in *2001: The Centenary Election*, eds. J. Warhurst and M. Simms, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 63-92.

Hage, G. 1998, *White Nation*, Pluto Press, Sydney.

Hanson, P. 1996, *The Truth*, One Nation Party, Ipswich, Queensland.

Heller, A. 1982, *A Theory of History*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Higgins, W. 2003, *Journey into Darkness*, Brandl and Schlesinger, Blackheath, NSW, Australia.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1998, *Those Who've Come Across The Seas: Detention Of Unauthorised Arrivals*,' HREOC. Sydney.
——— *A Last Resort?: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*, HREOC, Sydney.

Justice for Asylum Seekers 2002a, *Alternative Approaches to Asylum Seekers: Reception and Transitional Processing System*, JAS Alliance, Detention Reform Working Group.
——— 2002b, *The Better Way: Refugees, Detention and Australians*, JAS, Victoria.

Jupp, J. 2002, *From White Australia To Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Kevin, T. 2004, *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of the SIEV X*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.

Leach, M. and Mansouri, F. 2004, *Lives in Limbo*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

Lonely Planet (ed.). 2003, *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres*, Lonely Planet Publications, Melbourne.

Maley, W. 2004, 'Refugees' in *The Howard Years*, ed. R. Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 144-166.

Mann, T. 2003, *Desert Sorrow: Asylum Seekers at Woomera*, Wakefield Press, Henley Beach.

Manne, R. 2004, 'The Howard Years: A Political Interpretation' in *The Howard Years*, ed. R. Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 3-53.

Manne, R. and Corlett, D. 2004, 'Sending them home: refugees and the new politics of indifference,' *Quarterly Essay*, 13, 1-95.

Mares, P. 2002, *Borderline*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

Mares, S., Newman, L., Dudley, M. & Gale, F. 2002, 'Seeking refuge, losing hope: parents and children in immigration detention,' *Australasian Psychiatry,* 10.2: 91-96.

Marr, D. & Wilkinson, M. 2003, *Dark Victory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Marr, D., Metherell, M. & Todd, M. 2005, 'Odyssey of a lost soul,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12-13 February, 27-34.

Mathew, P. 2002, 'Australian refugee protection in the wake of the Tampa,' *The American Journal of International Law,* 96.3: 661.

McMaster, D. 2001, *Asylum Seekers: Australia's Response to Refugees*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Melucci, A. 1981, 'Ten hypotheses for the analysis of new movements' in *Contemporary Italian Sociology,* ed. D. Pinto, Cambridge University Press, London and New York, 173-194.

——— 1989, *Nomads of the Present*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

——— 1996, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York.

Network of Asylum Seeker Agencies Victoria 2005, *Seeking Safety, Not Charity: A report in support of work-rights for asylum seekers living in the community on Bridging Visa E*, Report prepared for NASA-Vic., March 2005, Melbourne.

Neumann, K. 2004, *Refuge Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad 2002, *Adrift in the Pacific:The Implications of Australia's Pacific Refugee Solution*, Oxfam CAA, Melbourne.

Pakulski, J. 1991, *Social Movements: The Politics of Moral Protest*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

Phillips, C., and Manning, S. 2004, 'Temporary Protection Visas and child refugees,' *Medical Journal of Australia,* 181.3: 171-172.

Pickering, S. 2001, 'Common sense and original deviancy: news discourses and asylum seekers in Australia,' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 14.2: 169-186.

Pickering, S., and Lambert, C. 2002, 'Deterrence: Australia's refugee policy,' *Current Issues In Criminal Justice*, 14.1: 65-86.

Piper, M. 2002, 'Executive Director's report' in *Refugee Council of Australia; 2001-2002 Annual Report*, RCOA, Sydney.

Poynting, S., Noble, G., Tabar, P., and Collins, J. 2004, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*, Institute of Criminology, Sydney.

Project SafeCom Inc. 2004, 'Annual report,' Project SafeCom Inc., Narrogin, Western Australia.

Refugee Council of Australia, National Council of Churches in Australia and Amnesty International Australia, 2004, *Complementary Protection: The Way Ahead,* RCOA, NCCA and AIA.

Reynolds, H. 1999, *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth about our History*, Viking Press, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.

Reynolds, M. 2004, *Australians welcome refugees: the untold story*, Report to the 60th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights - April 2004, United Nations Association of Australia Inc., Available at: http://safecom.org.au/welcome-report.htm (Accessed 20 May 2004).

Saulwick, I. & Assocs., and Muller, D. & Assocs. 2004, *JOB Futures/Saulwick Employee Sentiment Survey*, JOB Futures, Sydney.

Scott, R. and Keneally, T. (eds.) 2004, 'Another country,' *Southerly,* 64.1: 5-96.

Silove, D., Steel, A. & Watters, C. 2000, 'Politics of deterrence and the mental health of asylum seekers,' *Journal of the American Medical Association,* 284.5: 604-611.

Steel, Z., and Silove, D. 2001, 'The mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers,' *Medical Journal of Australia,* 175.11/12: 596-599.

Stubbs, D. 2004, 'Children Out of Detention: Chilout' in *Social Movements in Action*

2004, Conference Papers, Research Initiative in International Activism, University of Technology, Sydney, 89-92.

Sultan, A., and O'Sullivan, K. 2001, 'Psychological disturbances in asylum seekers held in long term detention: a participant-observer account,' *Medical Journal of Australia,* 175.11/12: 593-596.

Tyler, H. 2003, *Asylum: Voices Behind the Razor Wire*, Lothian Books, Melbourne.

Warhurst, J., and Simms, M. 2002, 'Introduction' in *2001: The Centenary Election*, eds. J. Warhurst and M. Simms, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1-8.

Weller, P. 2002, *Don't Tell the Prime Minister*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.

Zwi, K., Herzberg, B., Dossetor, D., and Field, J. 2003, 'A child in detention: dilemmas faced by health professionals,' *Medical Journal of Australia,* 179.6: 319-322.