



Being A Contested History Humane

JOY DAMOUSI

FIRST OF ALL I would like to acknowledge the land on which we are meeting—the land of the Turrbal nation—and pay my respects to elders, past, present and emerging.

Before I begin this, the 50th Academy Lecture, I will make some very brief comments on our 50th Anniversary. I am very fortunate to be the Academy President in our anniversary year and the ambassador today for all the great work done by past Presidents, by past and current members of the secretariat and by previous and current Fellows—all of whom have contributed to the success of the Academy. We pay homage the founding fellows—three of whom are here tonight: Francis West, Alexander Cambitoglou and Gerald Wilkes—who set us a daunting task 50 years ago in their vision to establish an Academy that would foster and promote the humanities.

I want to particularly mention the three women who took part in its founding—Flora Bassett, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Ursula Hoff. In 2019 I am only the third female President in the history of the Academy—a position previously held by Lesley Johnson and Margaret Clunies-Ross. While the Academy has worked hard to achieve gender balance in its Fellowship it is important that this is also reflected in the leadership of the organisation. There is more we can do on gender equity, as is the case across the higher education sector and more broadly in Australian society,

and we continue to push and promote women and gender issues.

From its inception, the Academy has existed to promote the pursuit of excellence and knowledge of the humanities. In 1969 this was interpreted as Western knowledge reflecting how 'knowledge' was understood at that time: largely refracted through the prism of an Oxbridge education. 50 years on, the Academy recognises the fundamental contribution of Indigenous knowledge to the advancement of humanities research, the production of knowledge, and to our understanding of Australian life, then and now. This year I am delighted to say we are strengthening this recognition by inserting into our guidelines a provision that outstanding leadership and excellence by Indigenous researchers who draw on Indigenous systems of knowledge, innovation and practice be one of the central criteria for the identification of candidates for election.

I want to begin this lecture with a contemporary story from September of this year to frame my discussion about the contested notion of 'being humane' in Australia, past, present and future.

A Sri Lankan family—father Nadesalingham, known as Nades, and his wife, Kokilapathm, known as Priya, and their two daughters, Kopika, aged four and Tharunicca, aged two, were evicted from Australia because their visas had expired (fig. 1). Priya and Nades

▲ Montage using article figures.

came to Australia separately by boat in 2012 and 2013. They married and settled in Biloela, a rural town in Central Queensland in the Shire of Banana—yes, that name is true—with a population of about 5,500 people in the town. They fled the civil war in Sri Lanka and say they are at risk of persecution if they return.¹

The decision by Peter Dutton, the Minister for Home Affairs, was swift, and they were deported on the grounds they were illegal immigrants. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, believed that to act otherwise would be to inspire a new wave of people smugglers from Sri Lanka. Later, Dutton called the children involved in this case ‘anchor babies’, a racist term borrowed from the US referring to children used by parents to gain illegal entry. Their claims for asylum have been rejected. Ministerial intervention was refused.² The case attracted national outcry. Local residents began a campaign to bring the family back to Biloela. The family were portrayed as integrated, hard-working, much loved members of the community. Even conservative voices such as Alan Jones and Barnaby Joyce expressed support for the family. Other supporters said they had lost ‘trust’ in the government; they called for compassion and empathy. There was a case, they pleaded, to be *humane* in the government’s treatment of the family.³

This case has drawn public attention to a series of recent actions by the government. It reveals that Minister Dutton has used his ministerial discretion on 4,000 occasions. It reminds us too of Australia’s recent history of its attitude towards refugees. In 2013 Immigration Minister Scott Morrison instructed public servants to publicly refer to those seeking asylum in Australia by boat as ‘illegal’ arrivals.⁴ We know that according to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of which Australia is a signatory, it is not illegal to seek asylum. Article 14(1) states that ‘everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.’⁵ We know that Article 31 of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Australia is again a signatory, states that it is legal to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum and that signatory states should not impose

penalties for entering illegally. The Refugees Convention recognises a right to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum, regardless of how people arrive or whether they hold valid travel or identity documents.⁶

Not only does this case highlight where Australia has breached its international commitments and these conventions, but it raises three key issues that, I would argue, all relate to our theme this week of humanising the past, present, and future, and which form the basis of my talk.

The first is the way in which the refugee question at the moment is not a *moral problem about humanity* but a *racialised and political* one. Currently, narratives that characterise the argument for the humane treatment of refugees as a moral issue are dismissed by governments as naïve, superficial, irresponsible. Allowing empathy and ‘being humane’ to dictate terms, as Scott Morrison suggested in the case of Nades, Priya and their two daughters, is in his mind, aiding, encouraging and promoting people smugglers; it will create havoc and cause the numbers attempting to enter Australia to explode. According to this view, to ‘humanise’ the ‘problem’ of refugees as a moral obligation to those fleeing appalling circumstances, is to be reckless. This position has resulted in gross cruelty towards asylum seekers, unparalleled in the world.

▼ Fig 1. The Murugappan family—father, Nadesalingham (known as Nades), mother, Kokilapathm (known as Priya) and their two daughters, Kopika and Tharunicca. IMAGE: HOME TO BILO



The government would reply that it is being humane in preventing people smuggling by boat who drown at sea, and this saves lives. Negotiating humanitarian solutions with neighbouring countries and increasing the government's humanitarian intake would end the need to 'stop the boats'. The more boats are stopped, the more people remain in countries where they are persecuted, vulnerable to being killed, or are killed in an effort to flee.

Relatedly, my second point is that Australian governments in recent times have uncoupled principles of *humanitarianism* and *internationalism* from their policies, reflected in the defiance of international protocols. We have witnessed a hardening of attitudes seen through breaching principles of international law and treaties. It could be argued this is the White Australia Policy with a new twenty-first century inflection—the resurgence of the mentality of 'fortress Australia'—where Australia resists global citizenship, or as the Prime Minister has put it recently, 'negative globalism'—opposing, in his terms, global institutions interfering in the affairs and interests of a nation.

Third, *the power of what it means to be human* is one of most effective ways in which to challenge representations and stereotypes of refugees. In the case of Priya and Nades, Kopika and Tharunicca, they became the *human face of refugees*: their story caught the public attention because they became humanised. The social media coverage, the visual material, the photographs all captured a human story: the anguish, the pain, the trauma of being a refugee.

These three issues—a loss of a moral compass; the disregard for international treaties and hardening of borders; and the importance of recognising the human face of those dispossessed and displaced—highlight, I argue, the very contested nature of being humane in twenty-first-century Australia. Importantly, these considerations are framed and underpinned by Australia's history of settler colonialism.

My final conclusion is that white Australia cannot move forward towards *humanising the future* without first recognising the need to

give a voice to First Peoples in the constitution. Until this is addressed, 'being humane' in Australia remains unresolved and a highly contested, even absurd concept.

MORALITY AND HUMANITY

Why should we care about the suffering of others, especially distant others who we don't know and have never met? There is nothing inherent about doing so. Compassion has a history: it is tenuous and deeply fragile.

Susan Sontag puts it this way: 'Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do ... then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic.'⁷

Mobilising compassion and the morality of being humane to the suffering of others has a long history. It has since the eighteenth century been associated with charity, sentiment, and neo-colonial paternalism. Humanitarians over the centuries have responded to their emotions with pity in the eighteenth century, compassion and sympathy in the nineteenth century, and empathy in the twentieth century.⁸ Being 'humane' is a deeply problematic term itself, and it has been retrieved at different times in the past with different meanings.

I wish now to turn to these issues in the context of Australian history. My comments are drawn in part from the research I and my team have undertaken as part of my ARC Laureate Fellowship on the history of child refugees in Australia since the First World War. They are also propelled by aspects of my own personal history.

The issue of refugees in Australia has not in recent times been seen as a *moral problem*, that honours, respects and upholds the human rights of refugee children and refugees more broadly. This was not always the case.

The question of morality, refugees and humanitarianism has a history in Australia. Throughout the twentieth century, there were activists who sought to challenge the White Australia Policy and, after international wars and genocide, argued for a more lenient refugee

policy. This includes activism and support for refugees from the Armenian Genocide, Spanish and Greek civil wars, and the Second World War, Korean war and Vietnam war.

An active humanitarian-internationalist tradition in Australia existed in relation to child refugees in particular. This focused especially on four groups of children: from the Armenian Genocide; the Spanish Civil War; the Second World War; and children from the Greek Civil War. There emerged over this time important discussions around the protection of the lives of children; the right of children to education; and the right to live in a family, however defined. Humanitarian campaigns—led largely by women—were sometimes in agreement with government policy and practice, but very often they were not. The closeness of the relationship between the two waxed and waned. White Australia dominated but the moral aspect was one which was stressed by humanitarians working on behalf of refugees. This is not a well-known history, but one that is important to recognise as today's discussions are just a part of a longer resistance to government exclusionary policy.⁹

The question of being humane emerged in a particular form in the aftermath of the Second World War. Australian post-war policies are best described as 'selective humanitarianism'. Australia after 1945 embarked on a wide-scale migration policy which aimed but failed to attract substantial numbers of white immigrants from Britain and Scandinavia. It had reluctantly allowed significant numbers of Southern Europeans from Greece, Italy and Germany to enter Australia, expanding the nation's labour force as well as contributing to Australia's increase in population. Anti-Semitism remained a thread with the limits of humanitarianism experienced by the Jewish community who largely relied on their own communities to provide a haven for Holocaust survivors.

From 1947, 170,000 Displaced Persons were accepted, the largest number of non-British immigrants to be allowed into the country up to that time. And while there was some relaxation of the White Australia Policy, which from the early twentieth century had

enshrined 'white' migration into law, there was little or no assistance for Japanese, Chinese or Indian nationals to migrate to Australia.¹⁰ Even so, the highest number of settlers to arrive in any one year since the Second World War was in 1969—our founding year—when 185,000 new arrivals descended in Australia.¹¹

The language of 'morality' and 'being humane' was used as the legacy of war continued to cast its shadow. In 1959, in the decade before the Academy was established, Prime Minister Robert Menzies made two significant announcements relating to the need to be 'humane'. Menzies's first comment made in 1959 was in the context of World Refugee Year 1959–60, announced by the United Nations as a year in which the plight of the world's refugees that remained after the war would be tackled. The aim was to clear the refugee camps; by the end of the 1960s, for the first time since the end of the war, all refugee camps in Europe were closed. Nations were asked to provide material assistance.

In September 1959, Menzies enthusiastically launched Australia's unqualified support for the UN programme:

The problem of refugees has been both melancholy and acute. There are many thousands of refugees in Europe and these are added to every day. In the Middle East there are a million ... refugees. From China have come thousands of refugees of European origin. In Hong Kong there are at least a million Chinese refugees.¹²

There was pride in the Australian tradition of humanitarianism and internationalism that involved citizens and government in a combined effort:

It is to Australia's credit that she has, in fact, understood such matters very well. In one sense this, of course, is a problem for Governments; in another, a problem for the Churches; but in the major sense it is a problem for private citizens who desire to make some humane contribution to its solution.¹³

The government took the lead in providing a cash contribution of £50,000.

We, in Australia, have in earlier years brought over 200,000 refugees to our shores. Our country is, on a population basis, the leading country of refugee settlement. Living under good conditions and with complete freedom, we might have had little reason to understand the heart-breaking experience which has been undergone by so many people driven from their homes ... The refugee problem is in that sense one of social and economic resettlement. In another sense it is a moral problem.¹⁴

In noting that the 'refugee problem' was not only one of social and economic resettlement but also a 'moral problem', Menzies urged Australians to work towards a humane contribution to its solution. Australia's world reputation was at stake, he argued. Furthermore, it would serve as 'proof of our instinctive national and individual understanding and generosity'. Menzies evoked a humanitarian response as an *obligation* to assure freedoms and material life, couched in terms of morality and empathy. He saw a role for ethics being brought to bear on the issue of refugees.¹⁵

It is important to note here that Menzies also used the language of being humane in 1959 in his second comment when he called for the centrality of the humanities in public life, for 'humane studies' to 'come back into their own' as an antidote to the rise of science and technology. In doing so, he assisted in supporting the groundwork and foundations for the establishment of the Academy in 1969, a decade later. By then, too, the massive expansion of the higher education sector was well underway. Five years after the findings of the Martin Report which argued for expansion and diversity within the tertiary sector, higher education had been transformed. The humanities were central to it. In this context, the Australian Humanities Research Council morphed into the Australian Academy of the Humanities.¹⁶

The issue of developing a humane response to refugees arose again during the Vietnam War. In 1969 Australia was deeply mired in this war. That year represented the height of its involvement, most notably in Tet 1969—a rerun of the notorious battle a year earlier—and in the Battle of Binh Ba where Australians fought, largely destroying the village of 3,000 people in their combat with communist North Vietnamese forces. By 1969 the anti-war protest and anti-conscription movement was also escalating across the country, including here in Brisbane.¹⁷ The growing interest in adopting Vietnamese child orphans from the war in the period from 1965 onwards points to a longstanding theme throughout the twentieth century: the relentless and intense pressure applied to governments by its citizens to bring refugee children into this country.¹⁸ With the fall of the South Vietnamese Government in Saigon in April 1975 there was a new push to evacuate Vietnamese children, which involved the dramatic effort which took place through the Babylift of 1975 involving the evacuation of Vietnamese war orphans. Significantly, too, by then the Labor Whitlam government had formally ended the White Australia Policy.¹⁹

But it was not until 1977, when the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Michael Mackellar, in the Liberal Fraser Government, introduced a new national refugee policy, that a series of strategies regarding the resettlement of those in humanitarian need emerged. Why? The question of scale made it impossible to do otherwise: numbers leaving Vietnam by boat reached 55,000 in May 1979 (fig. 2).

Malcolm Fraser took an unprecedented number of Vietnamese as refugees and immigrants in the face of fierce hostile public opinion and Labor opposition. According to a Morgan Gallup poll in 1979, 61% of Australians wanted to limit the refugee intake and 28% wanted to stop it. Refugees were processed by Australian officials offshore, in holding centres in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, and then flown to Australia. Children were among them in significant numbers.²⁰

During the 1980s and 1990s, further humanitarian aid policies regarding refugees were extended under the Hawke and Keating



◀ Fig 2. Two Vietnamese boats and refugees in Darwin Harbour.

IMAGE: LIBRARY & ARCHIVES NT, JOHN ENGLAND COLLECTION, NTRS 1637, COPYPRINTS OF OFFICIAL DUTIES AS ADMINISTRATOR, ITEM 60

Labor governments. The 1980s saw increases in the number of refugees and their children from Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, East Timor and Latin America.²¹

A moral history of this immigration policy after 1945 is thus a chequered one. It is certainly not a linear one of the march of progress. But one point we can make, I would argue, is that a clear sense that *assisting* refugees is a *moral* question has been fundamentally lost in recent times, generating an attitude which is inward and retrogressive, hardening borders in ways which are reminiscent of Australia at the height of the White Australia policy.

UNCOUPLING HUMANITARIANISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

The uncoupling of any humanitarianism and internationalism from policy-making has earned rebuke to Australia from international organisations. In 2018, the UN Commission on Human Rights called on Australia to review its domestic laws in a ruling that it had breached multiple international human rights laws. How has this happened?

In 1992, there was a distinctive shift in Australian immigration policy. This was the inclusion of mandatory detention of

all persons entering the country without a valid visa, while security and health checks are undertaken and the legitimacy of their remaining in Australia is established. Persons arriving without visas were and continue to be detained in Australian immigration detention facilities.

The mandatory detention was established by the Labor Keating Government with a 273-day limit on detention, following increasing numbers of refugees from Vietnam, China, and Cambodia. Controls were tightened under the subsequent Howard Government, including under the Pacific Solution policy. The Pacific Solution was dismantled by the Rudd Government and partially restored under the Gillard Government in response to increased boat arrivals and reported deaths at sea.²²

In relation to children specifically there have been two significant reports which encapsulate the recent treatment of child refugees. Dr Sev Ozdowski, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, held an inquiry in 2004 into mandatory detention of children who arrived without a valid visa over the period from 1999 to 2002.

The inquiry found that children detained for long periods of time were at a high risk

of suffering mental illness. It also found that many basic rights outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child were denied to children living in detention. The key recommendations of the Inquiry were that children with their parents be released immediately into the community and that detention laws should be amended to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The inquiry found that the government's refusal to implement these recommendations amounted to 'cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of those children in detention'.²³

Ten years after the Ozdowski report in 2014 the President of the Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, launched a second inquiry into children in closed immigration detention. The purpose of this inquiry was to investigate the ways in which life in immigration detention affected the health, well-being and development of children. She found that, while the Howard government was initially dismissive of findings in the 2004 report, by mid-2005 it had in fact removed all asylum seeker children from detention centres. Ten years on the situation had changed. In August 2014 there were 869 children in detention. This was a significant reduction from the 2013 figures, but still in excess of the figures in the early 2000s.²⁴

Triggs' recommendations included: that an independent guardian be appointed for unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Australia; that children have access to government funded mental health support; that children be given education to meet the learning benchmarks appropriate for their age; and that a royal commission be established to examine the long-term impacts of detention on the physical and mental health of children in immigration detention. The report concludes that 'Successive governments have failed children in locking them in immigration detention for prolonged periods'.²⁵

These reports were a devastating and sobering comment on the Abbott and later Turnbull Liberal governments and their refusal to acknowledge these violations of children's rights. Abbott's belief that 'Australians are sick of being lectured to by the United Nations',²⁶

as a way of deflecting these findings stands in the face of Australia's historical commitment to UN principles—especially relating to child refugees—as evidenced by support from Evatt, Menzies, Calwell, and the Fraser, Hawke and Keating governments.

In more recent times, this commitment to an international community has, I would suggest, been lost and Australia's commitment to a global spirit has dissipated.

DEHUMANISING AND HUMANISING

It is only by dehumanising or demonising refugees that populism can spread its anti-immigration and its anti-refugee message. In the words of the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, '*the face is what forbids us to kill*'. Face-to-face encounters, he argues, order and ordain us: naked and defenceless, the face, with or without words, signifies 'Do not kill me'.²⁷ Susan Sontag argued that with the saturation coverage of war, violence and displacement, violence becomes a normalised state, and rather than create outrage it creates a profound disengagement.²⁸

But it can take the tragedy of one individual to personalise the plight of millions of refugees. This happened in September 2015 with the death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi which shocked the world and drew international attention to the vulnerability, especially, of refugee children. The crisis of refugee children has of course remained an ongoing issue ever since with an estimated 50 million refugee children currently in the world—the worst crisis since the Second World War.²⁹

The invisibility of the face of refugees has assisted all efforts to demonise. The twenty-first century was ushered in by vilification of refugees and asylum seekers in 2001 in the so called Tampa, or children overboard, affair. The then Prime Minister, John Howard, claimed that refugees had thrown their children overboard in order to be saved and claim asylum in Australia. With an election campaign in train, this attack on refugees gained the Coalition electoral advantage. A subsequent Senate select inquiry found that such an event never happened while Howard's defence was

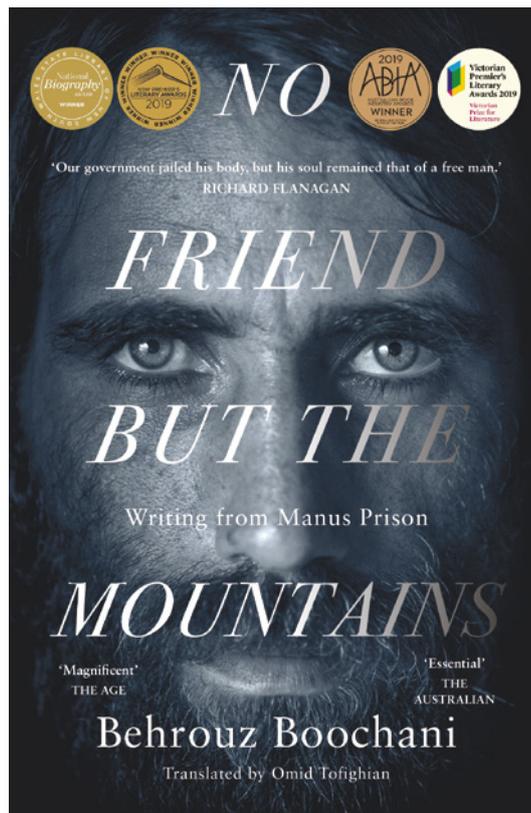
that he was acting on the advice he was given. The accusations that refugees would act in this way fuelled the Border Protection Act and further policies and slogans to limit refugee intake. It was so easy to vilify in this context.³⁰

The power of the human face is of course not new, or even recent. The philosopher Hannah Arendt, one of the most famous refugees, who was stateless for 18 years, wrote in 1943 with great eloquence and power of what it was like to be a refugee. In this essay she presents the human experience of the refugee, giving the refugee a voice, agency, power. Above all, Arendt captures the anxiety and search for dignity:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings... In a friendly way we were reminded that the new country would become a new home; and after four weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans.³¹

Refugees are expected to be silent, to assimilate, to avoid any offense. In her essay she argues that humans should be validated independently of the nation state. Humanising refugees is a potent force, and one which makes this act subversive. In the period of social media, mobile phones and Twitter—we can see more than ever before. The visual distress of Nades and Priya—the apprehended family—was broadcast for all to see. The faces of Kopika and Tharunicca became the defining face of the protest: their anguish launched the community campaign.

The voices of refugees challenge the inhumanness of our treatment of asylum seekers. In his memoir *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* Behrouz Boochani, the award winning journalist, has given us a powerful story of his experience on Manus (fig. 3). An advocate of Kurdish Independence in Iran, he fled the country in



◀ Fig 3. Cover of *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* by Behrouz Boochani (2018).

IMAGE SOURCE: PAN MACMILLAN AUSTRALIA

2013, made his way to Indonesia and was saved on the seas attempting to reach Australia. He was flown to Manus Island where he spent six years in detention. He left Papua New Guinea in November 2019 and is now a resident of New Zealand. Behrouz provides the human face of the refugee: the greatest challenge to current efforts to demonise asylum seekers.³²

THE VIOLENCE OF ASSIMILATION

For those who were able to migrate to Australia, either as refugees or as migrants, there were other problems. Permission to enter did not mean that once migrants arrived in Australia their story was necessarily a very welcome one. The height of the period of assimilation in Australia for both migrants and its Indigenous population was 1969. While modern Australian was being forged, the point of reference remained overwhelmingly British and white. Indigenous Australians were meant to turn themselves into being 'white'. Indeed assimilation was a form of overt racism and deep-seated hostility to the other, insisting that difference be obliterated and repressed in celebration at that time of a white, largely British identity. In the name of 'being humane'

assimilationist ideals were promoted as the benchmark, but in fact they were used to justify child removal from Indigenous communities and the continued dispossession of land.

Becoming a 'new Australian' for migrants meant shedding culture, identity and language from a previous life. At the time, assimilation was considered a humane response to the flood of stateless displaced persons or migrants fleeing Europe. But it was a violent one. Hannah Arendt has written of the sheer exhaustion of assimilation; of the psychic energy required to assimilate; of the denial of self and experience, that it demands:

We did our best to prove to other people that we were just ordinary immigrants. We declared that we had departed of our own free will to countries of our choice... Yes, we were 'immigrants' or 'newcomers' who had left our country because, one fine day, it no longer suited us to stay, or for purely economic reasons. We wanted to rebuild our lives, that was all.

In order to rebuild one's life one has to be strong and an optimist. So we are very optimistic... The less we are free to decide who we are or live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles.³³

This of course masked the trauma people brought as well; stories of migration come with stories of violence which remain in families, an experience familiar to me.

And here I seek your indulgence as I take a biographical turn for a moment. My parents arrived as post war migrants in the 1950s from Greece (fig. 4). I am eight years older than the Academy. 1969 was a very special year for me, for in that year I first heard about the Holocaust. I recall my mother Sophia talking about how the Nazis would raid villages in Northern Greece and in her home town of Florina when she was just a little older than I was. She talked about the survival strategies of civilians and of deprivation and violence. Her narrative was of resilience and strength.

▼ Fig 4. The author's father (in glasses) migrating to Australia in 1956 from Florina, Greece. The author's mother holds a handbag.
IMAGE SOURCE: JOY DAMOUSI



Her most striking descriptions were (and still are) of how she witnessed the obliteration of the Jewish community of the small town of Florina in 1943. She was 13. 295 Jewish residents (as I later discovered) were tragically deported. The Jewish population in the town was decimated with 84% taken away, thus ending four centuries of harmonious co-existence between my Greek ancestors and our Jewish neighbours, dating back to the Ottoman Empire. These scenes were terrifying and enduring in my mother's memory. She was keen to pass on details of this witnessing to her impressionable daughter growing up in assimilationist Australia, as she did not want them lost in the passage of time in her own displacement after the war through her migration to faraway Australia in 1957.

Her story was told as a morality tale about evil, with passionate political comment and with a very deep sense of melancholy and loss. In 1969, migrants were expected to leave these memories behind. Very little, if anything, was taught in mainstream Australia about the Holocaust. Memory, testimony, oral history were words of the future. But my mother, who is illiterate, and I were not to know that our conversations were poised at the cusp of a moment in time—for only a few years later, from the early 1970s, the memory oral history boom would burst into the history profession and take writing the history of the Holocaust into dramatically new directions.

I mention it here because hers was a narrative about speaking as a migrant and about her experience witnessing trauma, narratives which are obliterated in the project of assimilation. It is also about the brutal experience of inhumanity. The personal power of this narrative was a reminder to me of how *dehumanising* the other is an effective way of justifying inhumanity.

HUMANITY AND INDIGENOUS CLAIMS

It was not only on questions of migration and refugees that issues relating to humanity came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century. There was also the foundational question of relations between Indigenous and

other Australians, and how these have played out in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The Academy was born two years after the 1967 referendum allowing Aboriginal Australians to be counted in the census and the Federal government to make laws in relation to Aboriginal people.³⁴ The referendum became the symbol of social and political change in the 1960s and 1970s and the period after the referendum was one of advances and setbacks. The Whitlam Government legislated to positively discriminate in favour of Aboriginal people. It established schemes whereby Aboriginal people could obtain housing, loans, emergency accommodation and tertiary education allowances. It also increased funding for the Aboriginal Legal Service enabling 25 offices to be established throughout Australia. Immediately after gaining office Whitlam established a Royal Commission into Land Rights in the Northern Territory, the principal finding being that Aboriginal people had inalienable title to land in Aboriginal reserves. Whitlam actively sought to override the discriminatory practices of state governments.³⁵

In the 1992 Mabo judgement, the High Court established the existence of Native Title in Australian Common Law. The Keating Government enacted the *Native Title Act* 1993 and successfully defended a High Court challenge from the Queensland Government.³⁶ In 1996, John Howard intervened in the Hindmarsh Island bridge controversy with legislation that introduced an exception to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984, in order to allow the bridge to proceed.³⁷ Howard also steadfastly refused in 1998 to make a formal apology to Aboriginal people for their children being forcibly removed from their parents over several decades. It took another ten years before this happened when, in 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd—in probably his finest moment—delivered a formal apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples for the 'mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation's history'.³⁸ In 2010 the Gillard Government established

an 'expert panel' to inquire into changing the federal constitution so that Australia's Indigenous peoples would be recognised in it. This would require a new referendum and led to the Uluru Statement from the Heart which was rejected by the Turnbull government.³⁹

So this is a history of one step forward, two steps back. The response here is a moral history which has been deeply *inhumane*, notwithstanding some of the advances for Indigenous Australians over the past few decades.

► **Fig 5.** Professor Joy Damousi delivering the Academy Lecture at the 50th Annual Symposium in Brisbane

IMAGE: T.J THOMSON



CONCLUSION

So where do we go from here?

First, our own leaders treat the refugee crises as someone else's problem—Europe, Middle East, Africa, Asia—as if the issue belongs to someone else. As long as they do so they can justify little, or minimal, action. But of course it is a global problem, an *international* problem, where political leadership from outside of Europe can help to alleviate the crisis. Why don't they? They fear a flood of refugees and there is relatively little pressure within their own countries to do so. But if governments don't help refugees, human traffickers will, and as we have seen recently, we continue to see the deadly outcomes of allowing this to flourish.

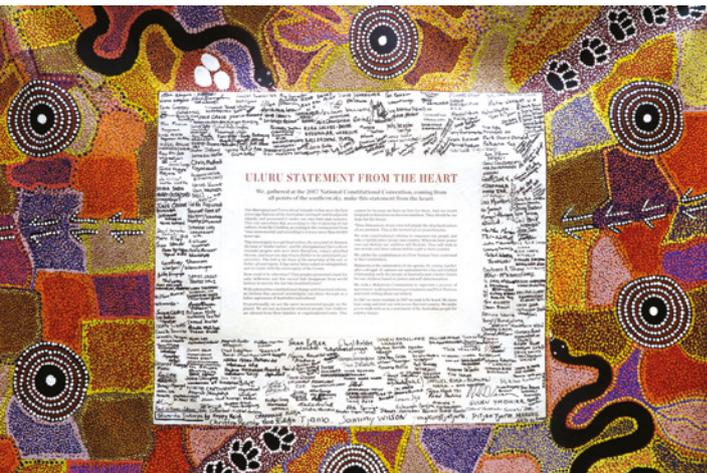
Second, there is a broader issue of the tension between moral causes and the perceived well-being of the nation state. The history lesson of post-1945 is that Australia has in the past been able to rise to the occasion. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, for instance, Australia received thousands of Vietnamese so-called boat people. Critics feared this would create a flood. It did, and how fortunate we have been that it did, as Australia has been

so enriched by its Vietnamese community. They also feared it would threaten Australian values—but instead it enhanced them. Why not more support for refugees who have been bombarded by their own government, tortured, kidnapped, and massacred, who have been in refugee camps for years waiting for an international response? As many have observed, when adults and children continue take to roads, boats and trains in biblical proportions with recent attacks, governments only see fences, wire and police. But, as Michael Ignatieff has written, if compassion won't move us perhaps fear and prudence might. We would not be surprised, he observes, if our response especially towards children creates 'a generation with abiding hatred in its heart' and they 'do not forgive us in our indifference'. Are moral causes more important than the perceived well-being of the state? This is an issue writ large in countries like Germany where Angela Merkel's detractors say her impractical humanism put her country at risk when in 2015 she allowed tens of thousands of refugees to migrate to Germany. But what evidence is there that this has really turned out to be the case in the past four years?

How do we humanise the future in light of this past history and the present? The need to humanise refugees and their experience is paramount. Refugees are not criminals; they are like us. Moving beyond the nation state and upholding the demands of international treaties is essential. The national is currently in tension with the international when the nation can override the rights of people such as refugees and Indigenous Australians. Considering this as a moral problem, and not one just of political expediency, is key.

ULURU STATEMENT

But none of this, I would argue, can be done without humanising the future for Indigenous Australians in parallel. It is on the Uluru Statement from the Heart that I end this talk. Until and unless the demands for a voice in the Constitution are met, any efforts to humanise the future will remain contingent. The Uluru Statement says: 'The Statement by First Peoples seeks constitutional reform to



empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country' (fig. 6). This of course only the beginning of the process of justice and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As Megan Davis has so eloquently put it: 'Uluru is the beginning of the process, *the coming together after a struggle*. And that, my friends, is the potential of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. It was deliberately issued to the Australian people, not politicians, because it is we, as a united people, who can unlock that potential in a referendum'.⁴⁰

The Referendum Council's final report rejected the idea of symbolic constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples, and made three key recommendations for meaningful reform: the proposal of a constitutionally-enshrined Indigenous voice to parliament, a Makarrata—a Yolgnu word that means 'the settling of differences', 'peace-making' and Treaty—and the creation of a truth and justice commission.⁴¹

The call for truth-telling is especially important for those of us working in the Humanities. Megan Davis describes it thus: 'the need for a truth-telling and remembering emerged on the first day of the dialogues, when delegates were asked, if meaningful reform was achieved, what might it mean on the ground in their communities. Delegates addressed this question by first explaining what had happened to them, thus themselves performing a truth-telling exercise to lay the foundation for a discussion about what meaningful reform might be able to achieve'.⁴²

Davis discussed the importance of learning the 'truth' about Aboriginal history;

about their stories: 'before there can be justice there must be truth'. Truth-telling is a major theme in the Uluru Statement. The recommendation of a truth and justice commission is seen as a way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to confront the violent past and give a voice to Indigenous Australians of that past. It is also a way of providing a powerful human face to the experience of Indigenous Australians.⁴³

And herein lies the challenge for us all in the next 50 years: humanising Australia by removing once and for all the stain and shame of the legacy of settler colonialism and, of the white Australia policy as it continues in its contemporary guise in the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. These twin evils, which continue to cast a long shadow today, will, I hope, be discussed by the Academy President in 50 years as events of another time, another era, of how being humane in Australia *was* a highly contested concept and is no longer. ¶



JOY DAMOUSI is one of Australia's most distinguished historians and humanities thought leaders. She is the President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and a Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Joy's areas of research include Australian social and cultural history, gender history and memory and the history of emotions. Her current research project is a history of child refugees, humanitarianism and internationalism from 1920, for which she was awarded an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship. Key publications include *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (1999), *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief in Post-war Australia* (2001), a collection of essays edited with Robert Reynolds, *History on the Couch: Essays in History and Psychoanalysis* (2003), *Freud in the Antipodes: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in Australia* (2005—winner of the Ernest Scott Prize), *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia 1840–1940* (2010) and *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War: Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War* (2015).

◀ Fig 6. Uluru Statement from the Heart

IMAGE: [HTTPS://ULURUSTATEMENT.ORG/](https://ulurustatement.org/)

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