

Working with the issue of Fear and Public Policy

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Scared Stiff! -- Fear and its impact on our lives

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Today is not the first time that the issue of Fear and Public Policy in the context of Howard's Australia is presented to an audience. Just a few months ago Dr Carmen Lawrence, ALP Member for Fremantle and recent past President of the Australian Labor Party, gave a series of four lectures about Fear and Public Policy at The Herbert and Valmae Freilich Foundation in Canberra, and in 2003 Dr Lawrence addressed the Australian Psychological Society's Sydney Branch with an earlier version of the same material. Dr Lawrence's presentations are all copied with her permission to the Project SafeCom website.

Because I am not keen to repeat the thorough exposé of the issues by Dr Lawrence, lest I would be stealing her excellent outline and research, I will take a slightly different and also a more personal approach and display some of the fears at play.

Although the Howard government can readily be accused of using the issue of Fear and of spreading xenophobia – the fear of the other – in order to win what looked like an un-winnable election in 2001 – one I have called the Tampa Election ever since – I would rather want to call this strategic use of 'wedge politics' the "spreading of *false consciousness*".

False consciousness, because the thinking that spread since the Tampa election deliberately omitted what should have been widely embedded in the Australian mind: the fact that under the United Nations Refugee Convention, those who arrive by boat on Australian shores are doing so because they rely on privileged status granted to them since the ratifying of that Convention. The boatpeople, since 1951, derived their courage to sail to other countries, from the fact that both the UN Convention and the International Declaration of Human Rights give them the permission and privilege to sail to a country and declare upon arrival their desire and intent to seek that asylum. Instead the line of "illegal" was spread through the media without any legal basis, as was the notion of "unlawful" in relation to the status of asylum seekers arriving uninvited. (for a discussion of "unlawful", and a confirmation that there's no basis in law for the use of the term, see also the Al Kateb court transcript, paragraph 86)

False consciousness denies some aspect of reality or tries to bury an aspect of reality, and fills this absence with something else not based in fact. Underneath the motives of those who spread false consciousness in a deliberate strategy is fear – fear of something.

So, to work within the limits of the time allocated to my presentation, let me look at the fears of some stakeholders in Australia during and following the Tampa election. We'll start with John Howard.



John Howard's fear

The image you see is by Sydney artist Robert Bosler – more about that later. The facts a few months before the 2001 Election were, that Labor was set to win this election, according to the polls, by as many as eight seats. So, we may well define Howard's fear as **“Oh my goodness, I'm going to loose the election”**, and this set the stage for MV Tampa to become *John Howard's Ship*

Of Convenience in the 2001 election campaign.

Then the machinery was set up – and the actions of Captain Arne Rinnan were controlled – as we now know from David Marr and Marianne Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* – from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Let's mention some aspects of the campaign: the way the NAVY did its own independent media work was changed through the then Defense Minister Peter Reith – and the control of what information was released by the NAVY reverted to how it's done during War Time – everything needed to be signed off by Canberra, and this, while Howard, without asking approval from Parliament, set out to use the facilities of the Defence Signals Directorate to spy on communication between the Norwegian government and captain Arne Rinnan, and later to eavesdrop on Eric Vardalis and other lawyers who took the government to the courts over the treatment of the Tampa refugees.

My own fear

Let's now turn to my own fear at the time – appropriate, because while I followed all the news on radio and television I could manage, I was already frantically building and publishing the Project SafeCom website; and as was probably the case, my fears were similar to those of thousands of other Australians who saw what was happening to our country. It was **the fear that politicians were setting themselves up as lords and masters, regardless of international conventions and laws, regardless of conventions under our Westminster system of government, regardless of what was the standard of government accountability, regardless of all that was decent and up till then the minimum humane norm and standard.**

The issues that arose around Tampa were not so much about refugees, but about the hijacking of democratic openness and accountability, about misrepresenting the facts, about controlling and moulding those facts and replacing them with spin and disturbing untruths, about the use of such dirty politics, that even now, five years

later, we're talking about it. Wedge politics came into its own, and ever since Tampa, Howard has used this dark force at times to keep the ALP opposition in a seemingly powerless position, keep the electorate half-informed with seductive intent and seductive lines, and to further his agenda – in the current term to destroy the Trade Unions, and thus to destroy one of the main reasons for the Labor Party's presence in Australian politics.

That's the reason for Robert Bosler's painting of John Howard being shown here. The painting is called the "False Prophet". In the lead-up to the next election in 2004, Bosler installed the painting in a studio as an art exhibition, just two doors down from the electorate campaign office of the Prime Minister in Bennelong. Of course, almost immediately the campaign hounds of the PM tried to demand that the painting be removed, tried to threaten the studio owner – but he held out. The artist comments on the painting:

"We have to learn to look beyond clever words. This picture shows what is really going on - not all the time, but far, far too many times John Howard has chosen to open himself to forces that would do our nation harm. It is not meant to hurt Mr Howard. This should do him some good. Hopefully he will see, finally, that the office of prime minister has been so denigrated that the best thing for him, now, is to leave quietly, and to look instead to his own well being."

"I wish you well, Mr Howard. Should you want to continue misleading, Sir, I give you this painting, your mirror."

Here's the image of Howard that many of us may have a good sense of, but many times on the slippery road it cannot be given adequate words. The artist does that – he presents an image where words often struggle to behold.

My secondary fear forming around Tampa is connected to the astonishing discovery that 70% of Australians and most media outlets buy the false consciousness peddled by Howard and his ministers, hook, line and sinker. Suddenly we're talking about "illegals" and "unlawful non-citizens", and through Ruddock, voice hissing like a slippery snake, the untrue and vilifying but suggestive labels are slithering out through the gaps formed by his upper and lower lips.

I was left standing motionless, nailed to the ground, for months on end, astonished with the gullibility of all those Australians, and their lack of foundation in principles, those rock-solid principles that always had seemed embedded in me as someone who grew up in post-war Holland, drenched still in the smell of cordite and blood, overlaid with the sunny promise of our leaders in a resounding "never again" in relation to the Holocaust, and the promise to create absolute sanctity for those who would flee death, destruction and persecution in the future. My fear was that Australians had no defence against this dark leader, who had just won his Dark Victory, because even during the war they had been at a gracious distance from the gruesome hell that was Europe at the time. Australia had been Down Under, also in the war years, and the weather and the beaches and the endless vastness of the outback had not comprehended the slaughter inflicted by Hitler's dark kingdom and the resolve it had created in the other half of the world.

So, frantic action, based on a deeply felt and a sheer absolute fury with the lies and distortions peddled by the neo-conservative politicians, was my response. I kept working, collecting material for the website, participating in the growing network of advocates, reviewing the media, forming Project SafeCom, organising public events, I kept working, and working, and ... working.

I laid out my foundations before me, I displayed them, I marketed them, and so also grew my resolve. I wasn't by any means the best one to argue the case for those who had swallowed the line so successfully put out by the Howard Huggers – that was the job of the website, open all hours – no fees charged for entry. Right now, there are about 500 pages of information, the site has 1000 page views per day, and all over the world, students at High schools, colleges and universities write essays or conduct research on Australia's abysmal treatment of refugees, using the Project SafeCom website.

The advocacy group Rural Australians for Refugees, now somewhat in decline, because so many people are burnt out after nearly five years, put out their slogan "*When you know the facts, you will open your heart*". Generally speaking, almost everyone in Australia who has met refugees and communicated with them, has turned away from the Howard camp. Darkness and distortion of facts can only rule for a time. Hope and embracing of human beings is an end-station to be reached.

The RAR slogan also tells us about remedies to the fear campaign. While I cling to the notion of adhering to International Conventions, others have – because their location in bigger towns or cities, and a more direct and local presence of refugees as advocates – have been so lucky to have "the encounter" as a mind-bender.

Global fear of loss of identity

Political strategies of frightening Australians with the prospect that "hordes of foreigners" are invading the country is well-measured in terms of its negative populism, because many countries in the Western world are trying just that line to win votes. Public fear of loss of national identity in the face of encroaching globalisation is understandable, and it reaches a palpable climax in the context of refugees and asylum seekers, and when faced with foreign workers and ... illegals – that is, those who do not have the "paperwork" that proves who they are. In the UK, in The Netherlands, in Italy, this fear is a recurring theme, greedily whipped up by right-wing and conservative politicians, and the population at large usually buys it. This people's fear for the erosion of national identity runs counter to the agendas of promoting globalisation as supported by these same conservative parties, perhaps because it is so patently obvious that the end station of a globalised planet comes with the inevitable notion of permeable borders. And that, it seems, is at the core of the almost fanatic desire by our western leaders to put systems in place, that attempt to control all movements across borders - before it's too late.

In this context the moulding of globalisation into the hands of the banks, the multinationals, at the exclusion of those who do not hold jobs or credit cards, seems to almost have become a reality. But just like Tampa was *Howard's Ship of Convenience*, so was September 11 the *Drama of Opportunity* for the neo-

conservative think-tank that's backing the Bush Administration, the *Project for the New American Century*. The plan was to dominate the Middle East, and in our globalised world America was going to be the World's Boss Man. The events on 9/11 provided the Bush administration with more convincing use of holding people without charge in prisons outside the reach of the US legal system – in Guantanamo Bay.

Howard locking up kids

Here's a cartoon linking the Abu Ghraib prison torture to holding children in Australian detention centres. Howard's arms and fingers mimic those of US private Lindy - the soldier pointing at her prisoners in the first torture images. Far fetched? No, not really – because holding asylum seekers in



cells, preferably outside the reach of common law restrictions, is closely modelled on Guantanamo Bay. The push to paint privately initiated and unregulated people movements as “illegal” and “unlawful” is indeed spin, and because the legal basis for this gigantic labelling exercise is rather flimsy, this push needs to be paired with locking them up outside the reach of the law.

That's also the thinking behind the new Bill proposed to go to Parliament next week – Australia's Pacific Solution Mark II. This Bill – I call it the *Ban the Boatpeople Bill* – bribes the broke and bankrupt nation of Nauru, it seeks to permanently take away independent judicial review of Department of Immigration refugee determinations – they will be happening on Nauru, without scrutiny by independent legal council for refugee claimants, while the Refugee Review Tribunal will no longer have a place in the system. Seems there's plenty of reason to be *Alert and Alarmed* – here's my take on the Fridge Magnet, probably with more relevance than the Howard version of the magnet.

Antidotes and the way out

I have already hinted at my own antidote against being trapped in fear. Transforming fear and immobilisation into action and creativity is one,

and today I've let you peek into the domain of cartoonists and I've show you some ways of lampooning the creators of the Orwellian world around us. We owe much to the cartoonists in Australia, because they – as is the case with the painting of Howard by Robert Bosler - show us the way; showing the whole truth, and the spirit behind the truth, rather than the spin and the buried lies in this spin. The truth will set us free – but that means that we also need to continually struggle to capture the full picture. To *know your enemies* is the first task in remaining independent, frank and fearless, and to remain open and alive. But also, learn to develop your larrikanism and lampooning skills. Without them you may not survive. When the phenomenal activist Arundhati Roy, a woman of great repute to me and someone I adore and love, a winner of the Booker Prize for literature, was slammed by the Indian courts and someone in India – it may have been a judge – called her a whore, she started calling herself “The Hooker with the Booker” in public speeches.

Finally, you may need to adopt the attitude of the character in a movie that showed in the last decade – I forgot the name – who needs to save the world on his own, because there's nobody else to do it. All of us, first of all individually, before we think collectively, need to act one hundred percent all the time to fight for the things we value, and fight we need, with all the energy, openness, honesty and vigour. We owe it to our most loved ones – our children – and our most loved environment – a planet that experiences extreme distress – and we owe it to ourselves and those who have been gagged and stripped from their rights. Because it is not governments that run the world and its societies, but it is you and it is me who create a better world.