

Voice of Shakthi Thursday 04 October 2001

Next week is Austcare Refugee Week. The event was established not only to create greater awareness in the Australian community of the barriers of re-settlement for people displaced by war and political unrest but also to celebrate the contribution they have made to Australian society and the world in general. It is an occasion worth celebrating. Ever since World War II, Australia has been a frontline state in providing a haven for tens of thousands of refugees from many countries, including Sri Lanka.

It is sad indeed, therefore, that this year's [celebrations](#) will be marred by the xenophobic hysteria that has enveloped most of the Western world in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States of America. Nowhere is this more apparent than in this multicultural nation of ours, home to people of more than 120 ethnic origins. The federal government's rejection of asylum seekers and management of regional relations had awakened the ugly side of the Australian character, former Prime Minister Paul Keating said this week.

Despite its past record in this field, Australia today stands condemned for its treatment of people seeking protection here. In the seas off the tiny nation of Nauru, a farce is being enacted to present to the Australian public, facing a general election in a few weeks time, the view of a strong Government fending off the evil machinations of people smugglers. Men, women and children, helpless and desperate, are being portrayed as possible terrorists, trouble-makers and illegal queue jumpers by both major political [parties](#) vying for the popular vote.

Four years ago, an ill-informed fish and chip shop owner in Queensland called Pauline Hanson, who aspired for leadership of this country, advocated a novel solution to people seeking refuge here in leaky [boats](#) through shark-infested waters. Give them some food and ask them to go back where they came from, said this great thinker and humanist. She was rightly condemned by Liberal and Labour leaders for her racist, bigoted views. Yet, in its last session of Parliament a week ago, these very same leaders joined together to pass the Border Protection Bill, a draconian set of regulations very much on the lines of what Ms Hanson proposed.

"If the Navy wants you off, you're off," Opposition leader Kim Beazely, heir to the Labour tradition of Ben Chifley and avid student of military affairs, declared of the people now on the Navy ship Manoora.

There's no way those people are going to be allowed to come to Australia," Prime Minister John Howard told the John Laws radio program.

Except for the Democrats and the Greens and a highly principled independent of the old school, Senator Brian Harradine, these so-called leaders bowed to the rantings of sensation hungry tabloids and shock-jocks on talkback radio who they believe voice the thoughts of the majority of people in this country.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has rightly condemned this shameless action as should other world leaders. It is shameless because this country has long prided itself as the land of the 'fair go' a place of refuge for people who have sought sanctuary from the time of the First [Fleet](#). Yet all these noble traditions are

being prostituted for the sake of the so-called popular vote. And the ugly spectre of racism has reared its head once again as it did for the Chinese, the Italians and the Greeks and the Vietnamese not many years ago.

Today it is the Muslim people of Australia who face the wrath of ill-informed barbarians in our society due to the actions of a few crazed fanatics who carried out the attack on the World Trade Centre. Australian society has been demeaned as a result of these actions and it stands condemned in the eyes of the civilised world. And for those people in our ethnic communities, including some of our very own Sri Lankans, who have rushed to join the band-wagon, here are some facts to think about.

According to UNHCR figures, more than 6.4 million refugees are still languishing in refugee camps in the poorer countries of [South-East Asia](#) and the Middle-East, 5.1 million in Africa, 4.4 million in Europe, 1.9 million in the Americas and 1.1 million in Asia and Oceania.

And this vast country, with a total population of only 19 million and so rich in resources, is bleating about 4,000 so-called illegal [immigrants](#) who sought to escape the misery of their lives last year.