

Zoo, Aussie, and the EU

Teena Brown Pulu

A twenty-first century riddle of *real politik* throve: what did the Tongan Prime Minister's zoo, Australia, and the European Union have in common? Two factors illustrating how preserving the unequal distribution of wealth between northern hemisphere states, and the global south, determined international relations: climate change and asylum seekers. (Idrissov, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015; Perraudin, 2015). In context, the ill-fated decision making of political leaders had allowed climate change and asylum seekers to overshadow world affairs as leading markers of the present age. (Quartz, 2015; Hedges, 2010).



Three year old Aylan Kurdi drowned at sea. Aboard a vessel with his family, the Kurdi's were Syrian-Kurdish asylum seekers travelling to the Greek Island

*of Kos from Turkey on a rubber inflatable boat. They never made it out of Turkish waters. The inscription is titled **Somebody's Child**. The feature article published in *The Independent* on September 3rd 2015 asked, **“Do we really believe this is not our problem?”***

Comprehensibly internet media, more so than traditional print media, has the advantage of quickly circulating messages to consumer masses across the globe. One social justice cause of late was the e-publication of Aylan Kurdi's drowned corpse washed up on a Turkish beach in Bodrum. He was three.

“His five-year-old brother Galip and mother Rihan” drowned with him. They were survived by “the father, Abdullah.” (Donaghy, 2015). Travelling aboard a rubber dinghy from Turkey to the Greek Island of Kos, the Kurdi's – a Syrian-Kurdish family – intended to gain refugee status under international law, and be moved on to a Western European country of their preference. The migrant dream of a better life overseas never came true for them.

Graphic internet images depicted the carnage of dead, drowned children from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, Yemen, and Pakistan. (Lavelle, 2015b; Hanna, 2015). Spat out from the depths of the Mediterranean Sea, to date 2,500 human lives have been lost while attempting to arrive safely by boat on the hallowed shores of Western *not* Eastern Europe.

Ironically it was the endorsement of certain European Union countries, especially Britain, for American military intervention in the Middle East – Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Yemen – which resulted in the wide scale destruction of these countries, their political systems, regimes, economies, and security. (Lavelle, 2015a, 2015b). Western Europe was therefore the

recipient of asylum seekers crossing into their borders via the Mediterranean Sea route, some undocumented; that is, without having their papers and refugee status officially processed on state record. (Traynor, 2015; The Economist, 2015). The situation could be read as a direct consequence of *what goes around comes around*. (Marandi, 2015).

When Western countries support despotic and ruthless dictatorships [such as Saudi Arabia bombing Yemen] because of oil wealth, later on they're going to have to pay the price when hundreds of thousands of refugees have nowhere to go but to Europe where it's safer. It's their own fault. (Mohammad Marandi cited in Lavelle, 2015a).

Historically European Union member states, Britain, France, and Germany had backed United States military invasions of the Middle East by force. What did this trio stand to gain from America's *real politik*? Economically, control of the oil fields, and politically, Western dominance over Middle Eastern and North African affairs by triggering instability and regime change. The methods by which this was done were morally dubious: American "drone strikes, target lists, Special Forces and cyber-attacks," or, training Islamic insurgents to overthrow governments, as well as supplying them with weapons. (Echague, 2015, p. 181; Kausch, 2015).

Disturbingly the *boat people* scenario was copied in the Pacific Ocean. (Farrell, 2015). In the South Seas the Australian government bankrolled two detention

centres on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and Meneng District in Nauru. The conundrum was this: why was the Australian federal government's 2012 re-activation of Manus Regional Processing Centre and Nauru Detention Centre, as goals to divert and detain asylum seekers originally headed for Australian shores, *not* a serious matter for Pacific Islands' leaders? Australia had fifteen operational confinement facilities to lock-up asylum seekers inside its national borders, and two – Manus and Nauru – at work in the South Seas Islands.

Importantly, why did Pacific Islands' governments fail to grasp the unprincipled Western European and American narrative about migrants from the Middle East and North Africa? After all their *own* Pacific Islander peoples were, and still are, subjugated by prejudiced attitudes and practices in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States – wealthy countries where they had resettled as poor migrant communities from small island developing states.

[The European narrative does] frame migrants [from the Middle East and North Africa] as somehow implicated in the decline of the welfare and social settlement within Europe, and for increasing social and economic inequality. But there's been pitifully little discussion of the desperate conditions elsewhere that force people to migrate – conditions historically created, for the most part, by European colonial powers. (Bhambra, 2015).

Sociology professor at Warwick University, Gurminder Bhambra, hit the nail on the head. The despairing living environments of homeland states forcing asylum seekers to abscond are seldom, if ever, unpacked by media for public understanding. Instead, the European Union of twenty-right member states was let off the hook, guilt-free, as if “gap in living standards between Europe and other countries” presented a normal, regular circumstance to be naturally expected. (Bhambra, 2015).



The cartoon depicts the colonial bigotry of the European Union when it comes to allowing for asylum seeker resettlement in Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. Photograph of 'Europe says Oxi' Facebook Page.

Bhambra made a stinging point: the unequal distribution of trade markets and wealth “between Europe and other countries is not a natural gap” at all. (Bhambra, 2015). In fact, wealth inequality between the north and the global

south was created by the West's commercial exploitation of natural resources – oil, gas, minerals – of poor, developing countries.

The gap in living standards between Europe and other countries is not a natural gap. The economic motivation that drives poorer people to migrate has been produced and continues to be reproduced by practices emanating from richer countries, and by those same countries' deficient understandings of their own global dominance. Europe's relatively high standard of living and social infrastructure have not been established or maintained separate from either the labour market and wealth of others, or the creation of misery elsewhere. (Bhambra, 2015).

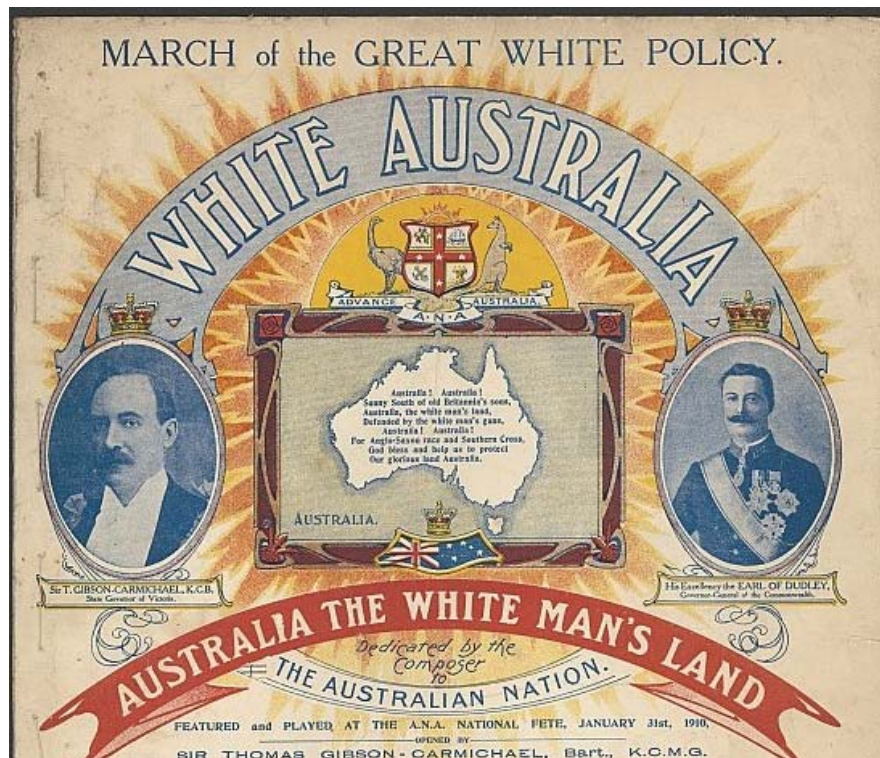
At the Fiji-led Pacific Islands Development Forum in Suva from September 2nd to the 4th, adult asylum seekers and their children largely from South East Asia who had been locked up in detention centres were off the talk-table. (Radio New Zealand, 2015a). Climate change was definitely on, but without any inkling that refugees at sea were not singly compelled to take desperate measures to save their lives because of civil war and political unrest in their homeland states. (Pacific Media Watch, 2015; Shaohui, 2015; Government of Tonga, 2015). Poverty and exclusion from lucrative trade markets like the European Union, America, Australia, and New Zealand, ruthlessly affected their unsafe living conditions. Climate change worsened the situation.

It was no secret Australia and New Zealand were British settler colonies that rose to Western developed country status by oppressing indigenous peoples. (Moon, 2013). By exploiting the countries' resources for profit, and establishing government systems and structures enforcing Aboriginal and Maori populations to be inferior to white-skinned Europeans, Australia and New Zealand gained economic ascendancy in the Pacific Islands region as the dominant powers.

Australia was expressly rooted in an aversion to non-British settlers. The colonial history of white Australia loathed skin-coloured immigrants who did not speak English as a first language. Devised in 1901, the white Australia policy sought to keep the colony for the white race by not allowing coloured settlers to defile the landscape. By this, immigration from non-Western countries was restricted, with the United Kingdom being the preferred nation from which to source migrants.

Once the constitution was instated on January 1st 1901 making Australia a self-governing federation of states, the notion of *white Australia* became the nationalist sentiment on which the country was established. The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* signposted white Australia as the federal government's legitimate stand until the end of World War II. John Curtin, Australia's Prime Minister and Labor Party leader during the Second World War validated the white Australia policy. By doing so, he illuminated that neither the Liberal Party, nor Labor, questioned the institutionalised racism in the ideology that white is right and superior to colour.

This country shall remain forever the home of the descendants of those people who came here in peace in order to establish in the South Seas an outpost of the British race. (John Curtin cited in Petrilli and Ponzio, 2009, p. 319).



Composed by W. E. Naunton, March of the Great White Policy was a nationalist song performed on January 31, 1910, at an event for the Australian Natives' Association. The song promoted a white Australia which restricted immigration from non-Western countries.

Without a doubt Australia's Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, Tony Abbott, reinvented the *march of the great white policy* of old, playing it as an anthem for how his government went about business in the Asia Pacific region. The Australian government refused asylum seekers refugee status in

Australia according to the treaty law of the *1951 Refugee Convention* and the *1967 Protocol*.

One of the things that will happen very swiftly is that people who come here illegally by boat, even those who might ultimately be found to be refugees, will not get permanent residency of our country. (Tony Abbott cited in The Guardian, 2013).

We are 100 per cent committed to stopping the boats and we are 100 per cent committed to implementing the policies we took to the election and the policies that are necessary to stop the boats. (Tony Abbott cited in Griffiths, 2013b).

By mid-year 2014, Tony Abbott's disregard for refugee rights in accordance with the United Nations *1951 Refugee Convention*, had his country firmly offside with the United Nations Refugee Agency. Under the directorship of former Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres, who was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Australian federal government was called out.

"Australia has been accused of breaking international law and violating the refugee convention," reported Oliver Laughland and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, two journalists for *The Guardian*. (Laughland and Dehghan, 2014). Abbott's *stop the boats* policy crashed head-on into international law, and backfired.

Australian authorities had returned a boat of forty-one Tamils – asylum seekers from Sri Lanka – to the Sri Lankan navy. An additional one-hundred and fifty-three Sri Lankans of Tamil descent were “subject to an Australian high court injunction on their return.” (Laughland and Dehghan, 2015).

The problem, as the Tamil Refugee Council of Australia exposed by publishing a statement by a worried council member, was that apart from “Australia’s immigration minister, Scott Morrison,” and federal government authorities, the public did not know “what he [the minister] has done with all the kids and families on the boat.” (Laughland and Dehghan, 2015).

I want to plead with the Australian minister to stop our pain and let us know what he has done with all the kids and families on the boat. I ask him to be kind to these people. They are all very frightened. They cannot be sent back to Sri Lanka. Many of them will be tortured again and even killed. (Laughland and Dehghan, 2015).

The guts of Abbott’s asylum seeker game-plan was unethical. Not only did the Australian government practice an un-transparent and ad hoc policy of how they went about *stopping the boats*, but returning asylum seekers to the countries they escaped in fear of their lives was a breach of international law on the rights of refugees. (Griffiths, 2013b).

Pacific Islands’ heads of government ought to have been forthright in their criticism of Abbott’s *stop the boats* policy. (Radio New Zealand, 2015a;

Connors, 2015). The Manus Regional Processing Centre and Nauru Detention Centre tarnished Oceania by the manner in which Pacific Islands countries were complicit in *not* challenging the 2012 re-opening of these confinement facilities. Instead they elected silence, with only Fiji's Prime Minister condemning Australia's foot-dragging on climate change funding, and a legally binding agreement on carbon emissions at the conference of parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

"We escaped death in Syria. We want to stay here [in Europe] for a better future," exclaimed eighteen year old Mohammad al-Azaawi. He "abandoned his engineering degree and fled Syria after being wounded by a car bomb." (The Guardian, 2015). What was so unfathomable about al-Azaawi's life story that the zoo – 'Akilisi Pohiva's Tongan government – and other Pacific Islands countries could *not* speak up to Australia and the European Union in favour of asylum seekers' rights under the *1951 Refugee Convention*?

We escaped poverty in Tonga. We want to stay here in Australia for a better future. It would be straightforward to adapt al-Azaawi's words to the sentiments of Tongan overstayers in Australia. (Radio New Zealand, 2015b). Truthfully this was the main focus of Tonga's internal affairs minister, Fe'ao Vakata. He wanted to keep overstayers to a minimum. His reasoning was the federal government might allow an increase in numbers of Tongans to enter Australia on temporary work visas for the recognised seasonal employer programme. (Moala, 2015a, 2015b).

Vakata had not paid attention to the geopolitical climate; xenophobia had closed the Australian border for business. Overseas Tongans who were

fortunate enough to have safe and productive lives in Australia, New Zealand, and America, empathised with the predicament of Tongan nationals absconding from seasonal work schemes so they did not have to return to a poverty-trap in Tonga.



“Oscar Kightly moved to Te Atatu [in West Auckland] from Samoa when he was 4 years old to be raised by his extended family.” (Kightly, 2015). Photograph of Kelly Dennett, Fairfax New Zealand.

Samoan New Zealander, Oscar Kightly, pointed out special circumstances drove the mass movement of asylum seekers. He observed that “things are so bad in their homeland, they are forced to consider any means necessary to get out.” (Kightly, 2015). Their *only* option for human survival is to migrate.

In Kightly’s words, “Why can’t we just call them people who are fleeing death and destruction. Maybe then, governments – including our own – will be compelled to do more to help.” (Kightly, 2015).

Regrettably Tonga's Prime Minister and his cabinet of lackeys chose *not* to respond humanely and properly to what was happening on their country's geopolitical doorstep. Perhaps Tongans, as a diasporic people residing in the homeland and across the region, will do better than the Tongan government at showing we care about the lives of families and children less privileged than ourselves.

About the Author

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