Demonization and integration of 'boatpeople' in Howard's Australia: A rural city's struggle for human rights of asylum seekers

'…all the ingredients for one of the most controversial and divisive issues in Australia's history'

(Cabinet Records 1979)

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Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signed: 

Date: 25 April 2012

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ABSTRACT

Rates of migration worldwide have barely changed over the last 100 years, but in recent decades immigration policies in receiving nations have become increasingly restrictive towards particular groups of prospective migrants, notably those with minimal economic and social capital. Hostility from politicians, the media, and residents towards these migrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, has also increased.

In the late 1990s to early in the 21st Century, increasing numbers of undocumented arrived in Australia by unauthorised boats, and overwhelming negativity was evident towards the 'boatpeople'. The federal government introduced several measures designed to cope with the increasing numbers of arrivals, and while Australia prides itself on offering resettlement to refugees identified in overseas refugee camps, it instituted the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), which meant that asylum seekers arriving as 'boatpeople' were granted only limited protection compared to the full residence status given to other refugees. Amidst government, media, and public hostility to this category of migrants, however, there were many sites where ordinary residents welcomed the former boatpeople and supported their settlement and integration. Because of the especially difficult circumstances of the TPV, volunteers from all sectors of the community, both those aligned with NGOs and faith-based groups and those non-aligned and who in many cases had never been involved with refugees before, assisted them.

Afghans were then the largest group of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide and the majority of the boat arrivals in Australia. Around 100 Afghan TPV holders settled the regional centre of Murray Bridge, South Australia, where they came to be viewed as friends, neighbours, mates, and family. Frame transformation principles, as developed in social movement studies which use framing to understand how social attitudes are mobilised, trace the change in attitudes that contributed to the success of their settlement in the town. The size of Murray Bridge and its regional location, along with its need for workers, were important factors in the positive outcome, but the study shows that the volunteers who assisted the Afghans were the main driver of attitudinal change across the community.

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The Australian Department responsible for immigration underwent three name changes over the period of this study. When most of the Afghan Hazaras arrived in Murray Bridge, it was the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), but in November 2001 it merged with the Department of Reconciliation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to form the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). In January 2007 the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs was renamed the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).

In order to facilitate understanding, the body of this dissertation refers to the department as simply the Immigration Department, or Australian Immigration department when it is necessary to distinguish the Australian body from those of other countries.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AMEP	Australian Migrant English Program
ARA	Australian Refugee Association
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
DIMIA	Department of Immigration Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
ESL	English as a Second Language
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
LSIA	Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LCC	Lutheran Community Care
LSIA	Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia
MRC	Migrant Resource Centre
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PPV	Permanent Protection Visa
PTSD	Post traumatic stress disorder
RCMB	Rural City of Murray Bridge
RCoA	Refugee Council of Australia
SHP	Special Humanitarian program
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TIS	Translating and Interpreting Service
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees