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Those Vietnamese Refugees

John Hyde

Tens of thousands of refugees living (if that is the appropriate word) in enclosures in Hong Kong are about to be forcibly repatriated to Vietnam from whence they came. Far from welcoming this, they are staging hunger strikes and begging Britain not to make them exchange their concrete and barbed wire pens for life in Vietnam. They present tiny, threatened Hong Kong with a problem that is too big. But Australia could help by accepting many more of these brave people than we do.

In my political days, when some of the people who handed out my how-to-vote cards objected to the Fraser Government accepting Vietnamese refugees, I showed them two similar photographs. One I had taken myself of Vietnamese refugees disembarking an overcrowded river boat in Hong Kong. The other was of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany around 1938. Our generosity---in sloppy-left language our 'humanity'---did not save many of either group but, at the time of the Hong Kong photo, I could boast that we were accepting more Vietnamese refugees in relation to our population than were other countries.

At that time Australia was taking around 15,000 Indochinese (12,000 Vietnamese) refugees each year. The number has since been reduced to around 4,000 per year. We salve our precious consciences by allowing our government to give a little aid, not to the distressed Vietnamese people, but to the Vietnamese Government---no doubt increasing its ability further to persecute its citizens. Meanwhile, our government concentrates on the serious business of the international cocktail circuit. It debates human rights in forums such as the United Nations and at Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings it advocates sanctions to destroy the economy of one of the countries into which refugees are fleeing, namely South Africa.

Compounding lack of compassion with pretence, we refer to the Vietnamese people as 'economic refugees'. If these people are economic refugees, then all refugees are economic refugees---that is, people who wish to improve and lengthen their lives. The boat people did not travel first class to Hong Kong and they are not now getting by at the Hong Kong

Hyatt while they survey their economic prospects. They risked their lives and are putting up with confinement in abysmal conditions to escape a life which they know is worse.

`Why favour these particular refugees?' seems at first blush to be a reasonable question. After all, Africa is awash with refugees from its many one-party states and the Communists in Addis Ababa are as bad as those in Hanoi.

The most obvious answer to the challenge is that many of the Vietnamese refugees were our allies in a war we fought and lost, and those that were not were affected by that war. We pulled out of South Vietnam precipitously leaving our erstwhile local allies to carry the can. I am one who believes that the presence of our troops in Vietnam was honourable and that, by raising the price of pushing over the dominoes---Laos, Kampuchea, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore---the Vietnam war did save some from falling. Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that we fought for our own perceived interest. We should, therefore, be prepared to shoulder some of the consequences of our war. Those who believe that our participation in the war was either misguided or immoral should feel an even greater obligation to shoulder those consequences than I do.

A second reason to accept these particular refugees is that they are more easily absorbed into Australian ways than some others would be. Australia is an island of freedom in a sea of totalitarianism and intolerance. We are not obliged to wreck our liberal society by taking refugees who are incompatible with it. But refugees from Indochina bring with them traits that are likely to make our island more safe. They are familiar with a market economy operating under the rule of law. Most of then speak English, and those who do not on arrival must be apt pupils because they are not long in evidence. These people, above all others, seem to be dedicated to hard work. They do exceptionally well in Australian exams and many have already made modest fortunes. They are not given to political fanaticism---perhaps because they saw too much of that in Vietnam. Nor are they religious fanatics. They are not prominent in unions or given to collective action of any sort. They are individualists---productive and politically safe.

At any likely level of migration they will not become other than a minor racial group---not that I would give a damn if they do. They might, however, leaven our economic bread, as Jewish and Irish immigrants once leavened that of the United States; our economy is most sorely in need of leaven. Standard and Poor's report was written for our creditors, but its message for us is basically: "Get off you backsides while there is still time". Who better to do just that, than people entrepreneurial enough and tough enough to undertake a dangerous boat trip up the coast of China or across the South China Sea. Circumstance has selected these people for us.

When John Howard asserted that the level of Asian migration was too high, many hands were raised in horror. Where are those hands now that the boat people in Hong Kong

are about to be emptied back into Vietnam. Of course, some Liberal Party hands were raised merely to plunge knives into Howard, but surely so much clamour cannot all have been cant.

If those who protested then really believe that Australians will benefit from more Asian migration, why aren't their voices heard now? Would Mr Hawke shed even a few of his tears for these people? Would Senator Evans, stop referring to them as "economic migrants"? Would Mr Peacock risk a row with his National Party colleagues by calling for Australia to accept even a modest 15,000 Indochinese refugees annually--- the intake when he was Foreign Minister? Not Bloody likely!

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