



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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'Islamisation' and other anxieties: Voter attitudes to asylum seekers

Denis Muller

'Islamisation' and other anxieties: voter attitudes to asylum seekers

A qualitative research report by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute and the
Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

Dr Denis Muller

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social-equity@unimelb.edu.au



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Table of Contents

Part One: Introduction, Literature and Summaries

Introduction	6
Executive summary	11
Background and method	11
Main findings	11
Attitudes towards asylum-seekers	11
Attitudes towards government policies concerning asylum-seekers	13
Other issues	14
Communications implications	16
Literature review	21
What do we know about attitudes to asylum seekers?	21
Australia's vexed migration history	21
Research into attitudes towards asylum-seekers	23
From anti-asylum seeker sentiments to Islamophobia	27
Methodology	30
Summary of main findings	33
Profiles of the groups	41

Part Two: Detailed Evidence

Sources of news and information	52
Trust in information sources	60
Language, labels and legitimacy	68
Australia's legal obligations	75
Risks, assimilation and national identity	80
Australia's response to asylum-seekers	97
Life in contemporary Australia	112
Challenges facing Australia	113
Exposure to the world	119
Australia as a fair society	122
Bibliography	134
Appendix 1	138

Part One: Introduction, Literature and Summaries

This research was commissioned by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, and undertaken by the Centre for Advancing Journalism, both at the University of Melbourne. It was designed and conducted by a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre, Dr Denis Muller, who also wrote this report.

Introduction

Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers has been a salient political issue in Australian and indeed international politics since the "Tampa" federal election of 2001. In August of that year, in the midst of a federal election campaign, the MV *Tampa*, a Norwegian cargo ship, rescued 438 asylum-seekers from a distressed vessel in international waters off the north-west coast of Australia. In accordance with international maritime law, it made for the nearest port of safe haven, which happened to be in Australia, for the purpose of landing those whom it had rescued.

The *Tampa* was ordered by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, not to enter Australian waters, and when it did so he ordered it to be boarded by Australian forces and be stopped from landing the rescued asylum-seekers in Australia. Ultimately, they were transferred to an Australian naval vessel and detained in an Australian-funded immigration detention centre on Nauru. Mr Howard's stand was credited with being a decisive factor in the subsequent election victory of his Liberal-National Coalition.

Since that time, the interdiction of asylum-seeker boats and the detention of their passengers in off-shore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island has become bipartisan policy between Australia's two main political parties, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, but has also been the subject of widespread condemnation, including from the Australian Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International and, in November 2015, from the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Nonetheless, the bipartisan policies have continued to attract clear support among Australian voters. A meta analysis of

quantitative surveys in 2012 showed that a consistent element in public opinion poll results was that those voters who held strongly negative views on asylum-seekers outnumbered those who held strongly positive views, probably by at least two to one (Markus 2012). The analysis also showed that the Coalition was perceived by voters as better able to handle this issue than Labor.

A number of individual public opinion polls and surveys also confirmed that the Australian public by and large supports a tough policy approach to unauthorised arrivals, including the turning back of boats and mandatory detention. (UMR Research 2013, Markus 2014, Oliver 2014).

A tough approach to asylum-seekers has been a feature of federal elections over the last decade, with commentators claiming that this is a key issue in a number of marginal seats. As a consequence, the policy trend in Australia has been towards an increasingly uncompromising approach to asylum-seeker issues. Whereas in its victorious 2007 election campaign, the Labor Party repudiated the Coalition's harsher policies, by the 2013 election it had adopted those policies. This followed a sustained campaign by Tony Abbott, then Leader of the Opposition, to "stop the boats". Under Mr Abbott's leadership, the Coalition won the 2013 election, and "Stop the Boats" was one of the major slogans employed by the Coalition in that campaign.

However, while election results and quantitative research tell *what* Australians think about asylum-seekers and government policy regarding them, there is a dearth of research on *why* people hold their opinions and *how* they arrived at them. The objective of this research was to discover answers to those questions. The purpose of the research was to contribute to public debate on an issue that has been at the centre of political life in Australia for well over a decade, with a view to informing that debate and the work of lobbyists and policy-makers.

Previous work by staff of the Centre for Advancing Journalism led to the development of a hypothesis that the increasing level of support among Australians for harsh refugee policies is driven by other concerns, for which asylum-seeker policy serves as a proxy, namely concerns about people's sense of material and economic security.

During the 2013 federal election campaign a cross-disciplinary team of University of Melbourne researchers, led by the Centre

for Advancing Journalism, conducted the Citizens' Agenda action research project. This consisted of conducting social media and actual town hall forums in ten electorates across the country, chosen to be broadly representative on a range of criteria. More details of this project can be sourced from the CAJ website at <http://caj.unimelb.edu.au/research/citizens-agenda>. Research publications arising from this project are currently being prepared.

The research team noted that asylum-seeker policy did emerge in both the virtual and actual forums, but almost always in the context of other perceived pressing issues, including city congestion, access to health and education facilities, and jobs.

This tended to confirm the findings of a previous study by the lead researcher for this project, Dr Muller, in a study conducted by him in collaboration with the late Mr Irving Saulwick in 1997 for what was then the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). That study explored the origin of racist views promoted with some political success by then federal parliamentarian Pauline Hanson.

That study found that there was a heavy strand of racism against Asians and Aborigines, but that this was interwoven with several other attitudinal strands:

- Resentment that economic life was now harder than it used to be.
- Fear that more jobs would move offshore to cheap-labour countries in Asia.
- Anxiety about the future, in which it was feared that people's children would have a harder life than their parents.
- Wounded pride over what was seen as an Asian buy-out of Australian assets, particularly property, and that Australians would become "white trash" in their own country.
- Resentment that the Government seemed to be giving benefits to everyone except the ordinary battlers, who paid their taxes and subsidised people who were thus advantaged at the taxpayer's expense.
- Fear that Asian immigrants, especially from Vietnam, were responsible for bringing increased levels of drug-related crime into Australia.

That study illustrated the fact that in a climate of hardship and uncertainty, people have less room in their hearts for generosity

towards outsiders. They are concerned to protect what they have and to “do the right thing” by those nearest and dearest to them.

In such a climate, resentment, fear, anxiety and wounded pride lie just under the surface and can be easily tapped into by those who wish to exploit them. The 1997 study showed that while not all Australians felt like this, many did, and a large proportion of these were people in lower to lower-middle socio-economic circumstances: wage-earners in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, or people trying to make a go of a small business. People in secure economic circumstances or with higher levels of education tended not to share these views, but to deprecate them.

Attitudes to race, in other words, were often a proxy for other life concerns, and attitudes on both sides of the issue tended to preclude meaningful debate and communication.

It was hypothesised that similar factors might be at work in the formation of attitudes towards asylum-seekers.

The fieldwork for the present study was carried out between 24 August and 3 September 2015. Although asylum-seeker issues were never far from the headlines in 2015, no events occurred during the fieldwork period that are considered likely to have had an impact on the data.

The fieldwork preceded the replacement of Tony Abbott as Prime Minister by Malcolm Turnbull, which occurred on 14 September 2015, over matters that had nothing to do with asylum-seeker policies, which were in fact continued by Mr Turnbull.

It also preceded the killing on 1 October 2015 of a New South Wales Police employee outside police headquarters in Parramatta by a 15-year-old youth said to have been radicalised by Islamist extremists, and the announcement by the Government of Nauru on 2 October 2015 that it was releasing all the asylum-seekers being held in the detention centre on that island.

The remaining prominent issue that might have potentially affected the data was a continuing controversy in Bendigo over the proposed building of a mosque. There were two major confrontations in Bendigo between opponents of the mosque and opponents of racism, on 29 August and 10 October 2015.

Prior to the first one, the controversy over the mosque had received significant media attention in Victoria. For this reason, the original plan to conduct a focus group in Bendigo as part of this research was abandoned on the basis that these events were likely to have created an atmosphere in which views were more polarised than usual, thus creating a risk that the data would be artificially coloured. Instead the focus group for regional Victoria was held in Ballarat among voters recruited from that city.

This report was drafted between 7 September and 12 November 2015, and finalised in February 2016. In order to provide consistency of context, the topics are presented in the order in which the groups discussed them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Muller', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr DENIS MULLER

Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Advancing Journalism
University of Melbourne

Executive summary

Background and method

This research was commissioned by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute and undertaken by the Centre for Advancing Journalism, both at the University of Melbourne, to discover the drivers of attitudes among Australian voters towards asylum-seekers and government policies concerning them. The purpose is to contribute to public debate on an issue that has been at the centre of political life in Australia since the so-called Tampa election of 2001.

It was a qualitative research project entailing 10 focus group discussions in metropolitan, regional and remote locations across Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The groups were conducted between 24 August and 3 September. No significant event that might be construed as affecting the findings occurred during that period. It preceded Malcolm Turnbull's replacing Tony Abbott as Prime Minister, the shooting by an allegedly radicalised youth of a New South Wales Police employee at Parramatta, and the announcement by the Government of Nauru that it was releasing all the asylum-seekers being held in the detention camp on that island.

The groups were recruited according to the variables of age, occupation (as a proxy for socio-economic status) and location. Participants were not screened for their pre-existing attitudes to asylum-seekers or related issues. Country of birth was not included as a recruitment specification, but participants came from a wide range of countries and only two of the groups consisted wholly of people born in Australia. Those born overseas came from the Britain, Europe, Canada, the Middle East, South Africa, India, China, South-East Asia and New Zealand.

Main findings

Attitudes towards asylum-seekers

The single most important driver of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers is religious prejudice, sometimes expressed as concern about the "Islamisation" of Australia.

There are two aspects to this phenomenon, and they feed into each other.

The first is a view that Islam is an intolerant religion. In this view, Muslims demand that the rest of society tolerates Islam, but are not willing in return to show equal tolerance to non-Muslims. The second aspect is that Islam is seen as inseparable from the threat of terrorism.

The combination of these two aspects produces a potent fear about what Australia might be opening itself up to if it did not take stringent measures to screen asylum-seekers. Implicit in this is the assumption that asylum-seekers are all or mainly Muslims. This leads to a syllogistic association in which asylum-seekers are equated with Muslims, Muslims with terrorism and therefore asylum-seekers with terrorism.

Allied to these attitudes to Islam is an often-voiced suspicion that asylum-seekers will not wish to assimilate but instead seek to impose their own religious preferences on the rest of Australian society, a phenomenon some refer to as “Islamisation”. This suspicion comes out in repeated anecdotes — for which participants have no first-hand evidence — about schools cancelling nativity plays and shopping centres silencing Christmas carols because they offend Muslim sensibilities. It is also widely asserted that people now avoid sending Christmas cards and instead send “happy holiday” cards for the same reason. No participant said they did this themselves, or knew anyone who did, yet many remained unshakably convinced that it was happening.

These suspicions mean that in the eyes of a broad spectrum of the Australian community, asylum-seekers are likely to breach a cardinal rule that Australians have applied to new arrivals for decades, namely the requirement that they assimilate. For the respondents to this research, assimilation means new arrivals will accept Australian laws and social mores, leave old enmities behind, learn English, get a job, not congregate in ghettos, contribute to society and generally “fit in”. That does not preclude them from being accepted as entitled to make their own contribution to Australia’s multicultural society, in which respondents express pride, but it is a condition precedent to that acceptance.

The role played by racism as a driver of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers is difficult to pin down. There is very little knowledge about what countries asylum-seekers come from and

hence what race they are, although there is a general belief that most come from “the Middle East”. The evidence suggests that to the extent resistance to asylum-seekers is driven by racism, it is racism of a generalised kind directed at people who are different from “us”. However, it is certainly a less potent factor than religious prejudice.

A third factor, reinforcing prejudice arising from religion and race but not itself an originating driver, is what might be called materialist anxieties: that asylum-seekers get preferential treatment for services such as public housing and welfare, receive government benefits, and over the long term are likely to be a drain on the Australian taxpayer. This factor is most prevalent among people who are themselves struggling, and is to be found primarily among blue-collar workers and in western Sydney, where material pressures are acute.

This third factor suggests there might be some force in a hypothesis developed prior to the research, that the support among Australians for harsh refugee policies is driven by other concerns for which negative feelings towards asylum-seeker policy serves as a proxy. This hypothesis was based on evidence from earlier research projects, one by the Centre for Advancing Journalism and the other by the lead researcher, Dr Muller, that in a climate of hardship and uncertainty, people have less room in their hearts for generosity towards outsiders. Quantitative research would be required to test this hypothesis before it could be accepted conclusively.

Attitudes towards government policies concerning asylum-seekers

Across a wide spectrum of the Australian community, support for the policies of boat turn-backs and offshore processing is conditional on there being no other approach that would be fairer and more humane, while minimising the risk of deaths at sea and ensuring that asylum-seekers are properly screened.

These views are based on an amalgam of compassionate concern for asylum-seekers, shame that Australia should adopt such a course, and disapproval of the secrecy that surrounds the implementation of the border-protection regime, set against deep concerns about the threats mentioned above, the necessity

for Australia to have a strong screening process, and relief that — so far as respondents know — the deaths at sea seem to have stopped. These respondents would prefer a better system but are at a loss as to what it might be.

Only a small element of respondents accept the current policies unconditionally. In their view, for all the hardships and human rights violations that are accepted as occurring in the detention centres, conditions there are seen as almost certainly better than whatever the asylum-seekers left behind. At the same time, in their view, Australia simply cannot take the risk of allowing people into the country until they have been properly vetted. So harsh or not, these policies are seen as right.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is another, smaller, element who advocate shutting the offshore processing centres and bringing asylum-seekers to Australia and assigning them in small groups to country towns where they could be screened and assessed while being able to work, contribute to the Australian economy, learn English and become acquainted with Australia's social mores. These people are appalled at the cruelties they see as being visited on asylum-seekers in the detention centres. They consider it a violation of the ideals they believe Australia stands for and a source of national shame. Those who hold these views tend to be among the more highly educated as well as among younger respondents.

Other issues

There is almost no knowledge among Australian voters about Australia's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention or even awareness of the Convention's existence. Hence there is very little appreciation of Australia's legal obligations to asylum-seekers.

Consequently there is a general readiness to unquestioningly accept labels such as "illegals" and "queue-jumpers". Because they lack knowledge of the legal position, respondents are inclined not to challenge the term "illegals", especially when these terms are uttered by people in authority.

"Queue-jumpers" is more widely challenged because there is a perception that there is no "queue" in the sense that we generally

use the term. However, there is also a view that asylum-seekers who come by boat are trying to steal a march on other asylum-seekers and so in that sense they are trying to “jump the queue”.

The term “boat people” is seen by some as merely descriptive of the asylum-seekers’ mode of travel, but more generally this definition is seen as disingenuous, and is regarded as a term freighted with political opportunism.

Many respondents question why so much attention is paid to unauthorised boat arrivals while hardly any is given to those who come by air. They answer their own question by saying that there is no political mileage to be made from the arrivals by air because they come in dribs and drabs and are more or less invisible.

Asked whether they think Australia is a fair society, many respondents say it is “too fair”. By this they mean Australia gives benefits to asylum-seekers at the expense of Australians who are battling. And it has a comparative aspect: that Australians who visit countries in the Middle East are forced to conform to the customs of those countries in ways that Australia does not demand of people from those countries who come here

Similarly when asked whether Australia is a tolerant society, many respondents say that Australia is “too tolerant” and that this is not reciprocated by what are seen as intolerant Islamists.

However, a wide spectrum of respondents detect an element of hypocrisy in Australia’s preferred view of itself as a tolerant society, and question whether today’s Australia is as tolerant as its people like to think it is.

This is seen as being reflected not only in attitudes to asylum-seekers – where it is very widely observed – but in attitudes to marriage equality, to homosexual people more generally and to people of other races, including Aboriginal people.

For all that, respondents generally remain optimistic about their own and Australia’s future. They believe fervently that Australia is the best country in the world and would not want to live anywhere else. The obverse of this is that they cannot imagine why anyone would want to live elsewhere. As a result, many harbour a semi-articulated fear that unless Australia maintains strict and even punitive control of its borders, the country will be overwhelmed by millions just waiting for the gates to open.

Communications implications

The primary purpose of this research project was to contribute to a constructive public debate on the issue of Australia's response to the challenge posed by the arrival, or attempted arrival, of asylum-seekers in Australia.

This chapter about how a constructive contribution may be made proceeds on certain assumptions: that knowledge is preferable to ignorance; that facts are preferable to myths; that a focus on issues is preferable to ad hominem exchanges; that civility is preferable to vulgarity. At the same time it is recognised that negative characteristics of the current debate need to be confronted and ways found to counter them.

From these assumptions, a number of possible communications objectives suggest themselves:

- To correct misperceptions and remedy gaps in knowledge.

- To add to public understanding of what drives attitudes on this issue.

- To promote community tolerance and respect.

- To promote the idea that Australia is morally correct to share the world's burden of asylum-seekers.

- To promote the idea that Australia needs to strike a reasonable balance between humanitarian considerations and those of national sovereignty and security, but to question whether this is being achieved at present.

This report reveals the existence of a large gap in knowledge among Australian voters about Australia's legal obligations toward asylum-seekers. This has two main consequences.

First, voters cannot assess the legality of the Australian Government's policies on asylum-seekers, and therefore are ill-equipped to arrive at an informed conclusion about the legal

basis of these policies. Australians are on the whole a law-abiding people, and on the evidence of this research, it unsettles the broad middle of the Australian community that their Government may be acting illegally in its treatment of asylum-seekers. Those who do have some understanding of the legalities tend to be found among the better educated, and it is among them that opposition to current policies is more commonly found. This is not just because of the legalities, but that is a part of it.

More commonly, unease about the legality of the policies is part of a broader sense of unease about the policies arising from concerns about humanitarian principles, violation of national values and damage to national reputation. This unease is not strong enough to provoke people into outright rejection of current policies, but it is certainly strong enough to make them wish for an alternative, even though they have no idea what an alternative might look like.

Remedying this gap in knowledge about Australia's legal obligations in respect of asylum-seekers is therefore a necessary part of any communications strategy designed to create a better-informed and more civil debate on this issue.

In the course of doing so, it may be that a line of argument emerges that the legal obligations are wrongheaded and that Australia should withdraw from the international instruments that create those obligations. That would shift the debate on to a different footing, less directed at the current wave of asylum-seekers. The debate would then be about the nation's preparedness to share the world's refugee burden and the conditions on which it was prepared to do so. Such a line of argument should be anticipated and a counter-argument developed.

The second consequence of this lack of public knowledge is that in the vacuum thus created, politicians and others are at liberty to use terms like "illegals" and "queue-jumpers" with impunity because there is no critical mass of informed public opinion to counter it.

An important finding of this research is that among a broad spectrum of the community, support for current policies is conditional on there being nothing better. Therefore, the perception that public support for current policies is strong is in fact a misperception. It arises from a common fallacy in research analysis, namely conflating quantum and intensity. The fact that

a large proportion of voters supports a proposition does not on its own mean that support is strong. It simply means that support is widespread.

This research indicates that in fact support for current policies is strong only among the relatively small element of the population implacably opposed to the taking in of asylum-seekers. Among the broad middle of the population, support is given conditionally and thus cannot be described as strong. Correcting this misperception would fulfill one of the communications objectives listed above, and give Australians a more accurate impression of the state of public opinion. This would contribute to making the debate better informed.

This report also reveals three principal drivers of prejudice against asylum-seekers: religious prejudice against Islam, racial prejudice of a generalised kind, and what have been called materialist anxieties that asylum-seekers will be a drain on the taxpayer, and will compete with struggling Australians for government services such as housing, health, welfare and education.

The religious prejudice is based on one assumption and two main fears. The assumption is that all or most asylum-seekers are Muslim. The fears are that Muslims bring terrorism with them, and that Islam is an intolerant religion whose adherents want to impose their practices on Australia.

The assumption concerning the religion of asylum-seekers needs to be informed by facts. If indeed most asylum-seekers are Muslims, then facts about the proportion who are Muslim and the part that their religious adherence has played in their decision to seek asylum need to be made known.

Alongside those facts, the proportion of the Australian population who self-declare as Muslims in the census needs to be made known. As with previous episodes of prejudice against new arrivals, there is a perception that Australia is being “overrun”. This is based on ignorance about the actual proportion of the target group in the Australian population, and a belief that target groups “breed” faster than the Australian population as a whole.

An Ipsos-Mori poll published in *The Guardian Australia* in 2014 showed that Australians believe the proportion of Muslims in the country to be nine times higher than it really is – 18% instead of the actual 2%. At the same time, Australians under-estimate the

proportion of people who identify in the census as Christians, believing it to be 67% when it is actually 85%.

A bold and sustained presentation of these simple facts would contribute to a better informed and perhaps less panicky debate.

It is of course an open question whether facts can shake cherished beliefs. Some respondents to the present research revealed an eagerness to accept or recount anecdotes illustrating the proposition that Muslims were already successfully overpowering Christian traditions such as the sending of Christmas cards, the production of nativity plays in schools and the playing of Christmas carols in shopping centres. Doubtless instances occur of all these phenomena, but those who wish to believe in a nascent Muslim ascendancy assert that they happen everywhere.

Facts are weak in the face of these sentiments and their associated fears and resentments, which fundamentally appeal to people's emotions. It is analogous to countering faith with science. A counter-narrative that appeals to the emotions of celebration and acceptance is probably more likely to succeed than one that appeals to reason. People celebrate the idea of Australia as a multicultural society. There is scope here to extend the celebration to include asylum-seekers. These celebrations have, in the past, often been associated with food, music and festivals. These visible and tangible manifestations are what people often refer to when discussing Australia's multicultural success story.

Humour may also have a place here. Care needs to be taken that this does not slide into ridicule, but Australians have a lively and original sense of humour and it may be that a comedian with a Muslim background could contribute to the creation of a less tense atmosphere.

Meeting the challenge represented by people's association of Muslims with terrorism is complex. Some work is being done, especially in the aftermath of the attacks in Paris in November 2015, but harnessing moderate Muslim leaders to this task seems to be imperative. One ill-considered or ambiguous statement by a Muslim leader on this question does incalculable damage because, as this research shows, there is a proportion of the population eager to seize on such statements as evidence that their fears are justified. Pro-active statements repudiating terrorism in the name of Islam, and strong condemnatory statements after a terrorist atrocity, should be encouraged. It is important that Muslim

religious leaders receive media training in this regard.

More positively, high-profile Muslims such as Waleed Aly, who articulate the majority Islamic position so effectively, are invaluable. Waleed is especially well placed because of his role on *The Project* which, as this research shows, is an important source of news and information on asylum-seeker issues for a significant number of people.

The new tone of optimism that the Turnbull government is attempting to strike in debates on public issues generally suggests an opportunity for narratives to be developed about success stories. For example, there is an excellent television advertisement made for Western Sydney University which depicts the journey of a young asylum-seeker from Africa from the moment of forced separation from his mother at the age of six, through a period in which he was forced to fight with a guerrilla army, his rescue by the UN and his arrival in western Sydney, where he taught himself to read and eventually graduated in law from WSU. Individual stories of courage and success like that are powerful because people can relate directly to them. They break through the abstractions created by labels, stereotypes and generalities.

There is also scope for commentary based on this report drawing attention to the thirst for strong national leadership on this issue and to the very important point that, in the main, support for current policies is contingent. There appears to be a willingness in the community to countenance more humane policies so long as basic requirements of security are met.

Implementing this strategy is a big job, but it has the potential to make a difference to the public debate.

Literature review

What do we know about attitudes to asylum seekers?

Australia's vexed migration history

Neumann's recent history of refugees (2015) has demonstrated how Australia has always had an ambivalent relationship to refugees and asylum seekers, veering between open arms, as in the case of fleeing South Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s, closed borders to irregular arrivals, as has been the case over most of the last 14 years, and selectivity, as we saw during and after World War II, where Australia's immigration officials carefully chose refugees that most closely resembled the Anglo-Celtic monoculture. The public was mainly indifferent, unless mass migration was proposed. In that case, they were overwhelmingly negative – even in the case of persecuted Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi territory (Neumann 2015).

To understand the deeply ambivalent Australian attitudes to asylum seekers, then, we must first understand our history of migration in general. Australia's Anglo-Celtic settler monoculture began to shift only after World War II, and it was not until the early 1970s that the last vestiges of the Federation-era White Australia policies were repealed. In practice, policies such as the notorious dictation test – in which immigration officers would administer a test of 500 words to incoming migrants. "It was understood, though nowhere stated, that the test should be in a language not known to the immigrant," notes Jupp (2007: 9). This sent a message to likely migrants, successfully deterring most non-white migrants from settling in Australia. As Jupp observes: "By 1947 the non-European population, other than Aborigines, was measured by the Census as 0.25 per cent of the total. Australia had become one of the 'whitest' countries in the world outside northwestern Europe" (2007: 9).

Immigration from non-Anglosphere countries began in order to repopulate after World War II, accelerating and broadening over the subsequent decades. Official rhetoric directed at new migrants shifted from assimilation to integration to multiculturalism. As Lopez observes, multiculturalism as a philosophy emerged in response to emerging issues with migrant welfare and the slowing

pace of assimilation due to growing ethnic communities, and was driven by a loose network of migrant leaders and academics (2000: 22). Tavan has demonstrated how the White Australia policy was progressively dismantled by stealth, as immigration officials wary of an Anglo backlash kept quiet about the actual numbers of migrants arriving (2005).

The radical change to Australia's demography seemed, at first, to have been accepted without major organised opposition. As Jupp notes: "In contrast to Britain, where Enoch Powell MP had aroused strong opposition to West Indian and Asian immigration in the 1960s, there seemed to be no comparable movement in Australia. There were no major political organisations advocating racism or a White Australia after 1966" (2007: 124).

It was not until the surprising rise of Pauline Hanson, whose anti-immigration One Nation Party garnered over a million votes at the 1998 Federal Election, that any serious opposition to the pace of change emerged. As Keane observes, the Coalition moved swiftly to reclaim these conservative voters:

"John Howard exploited the asylum seeker issue brilliantly as a form of a bait-and-switch — he took a tough line on asylum seekers, while massively cranking up permanent and temporary immigration, as the economy demanded. He convinced One Nation voters he was one of them, while doing the very thing that they were most aggrieved about, in the interests of good economic policy. It was one of Howard's political masterstrokes" (Keane 2011)

In this view, the Coalition implemented tougher policies on asylum seekers to directly pander to the fears and grievances of One Nation voters. While this is debatable, it is certainly true that the tougher policies were electorally popular at a time when immigration was at its highest point ever, reaching 300,000 migrants a year in 2006-7 (Pascoe 2007).

2001 is generally cited as the year in which Australia introduced harsh new policies on asylum seekers arriving in boats without visas, following the *Tampa* incident. The policies adopted by both major parties have been characterised as a regime of 'border protection' and deterrence (Haslam & Holland 2012: 108). While this approach in fact dates back to 1992, when the Hawke government detained 600 Cambodian asylum seekers for a prolonged period after the Prime Minister labelled them "queue

jumpers" (Manne 2013), it is true that 2001 saw this approach become the norm.

Research into attitudes towards asylum-seekers

Researchers have repeatedly found that a majority of the Australian public support the government's policy regime (Betts, 2001: 34; Dorling 2014). While it is clear from qualitative research, surveys and polls that a majority of Australians agree with the government's tough stance, it has been recognised that there is a lack of quantitative research around what the public's attitudes are, and why they exist (Pedersen et. al., 2005: 148). In response to this gap, a body of research has been accumulating regarding the antecedents of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers – especially those who arrive by boat without a valid visa, many of whom are seen by the general public as primarily Muslim (Pedersen et al, 2006: 106).

Katherine Betts (2001) traced the government's policy and corresponding public opinion throughout the 'three waves' of 'boat people.' She described these three waves to include the arrival of 2000 Vietnamese boat people from 1976 to 1981; the arrival of asylum-seekers from Southern China and Cambodia at the beginning of the 1990s; and the most recent arrival of asylum-seekers from places including the Middle East and Afghanistan from 1998 to the present. Policies over this time have shifted from providing 15 000 Vietnamese refugees permanent residency and amnesty to those who did not fit the refugee criteria under Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, to mandatory detention under the Labor Government in the 1990s and now indefinite mandatory detention and offshore processing in Pacific Island nations.

Betts' analysis of polls across these three periods shows a gradual hardening of public attitudes towards asylum-seekers. She argues that the correlation between incidents such as the *Tampa* affair and the September 11 tragedy and the rise in support for harsh government policy could reveal the source of these negative attitudes. With regards to the rise in government support following the *Tampa* tragedy, Betts believes that the increasing numbers of asylum-seekers combined with the role of people smugglers in the event fed into the public's suspicion that asylum seekers are manipulating the system. Betts argues that it is not racism but instead a 'sense of peoplehood' is what triggered these attitudes.

“Threats to a sense of common identity endanger a broad range of other goals that we care about,” she observes.

Alison Saxton (2003) analysed news articles and letters to the editor in daily Australian newspapers and found that opposition to asylum seekers drew on a nationalist discourse. Terms such as ‘illegal’, ‘non-genuine’, and ‘threatening’ occurred frequently and ‘national rights’ were used to justify unfavourable attitudes towards asylum-seekers (118). While Saxton found that race was rarely used to characterise asylum-seekers, a nationalist discourse was instead used to promote a politics of exclusion through negative representations of the other. This, she argues, could be seen may be understood as a ‘sanitised racist discourse’ (118).

But are these conclusions correct? In their overview of psychological research into negative attitudes to asylum seekers, Nick Haslam and Elise Holland (2012) argued that Saxton’s conclusions (which are similar to Betts’) were speculative and generated little empirical evidence proving that racism is a cause for the public’s negative attitudes. Haslam and Holland said that it should not be assumed that racism is the dominant force behind negative attitudes.

Haslam and Holland have also examined the argument that nationalism acts to galvanise negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers (2012: 112). There is a body of research demonstrating that the strength of a person’s identification with their country is linked to negative attitudes to outsiders (e.g. (Ariely, 2012; Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001). Following this, people who identify more strongly with Australia (a measure of nationalism), or see Australian identity as important, tend to hold less favourable attitudes towards asylum-seekers (Pedersen et al, 2005). Of course, nationalism is a complex phenomenon and a person’s tie to their country may be for a multitude of different reasons. For example, a person who believes ‘Australianness’ is a matter of being born here, having ancestors here and spending one’s life here tend to be much more hostile towards immigrants (Goots & Watson, 2005) whereas a person whose attitudes are more cosmopolitan (in which Australianness is based on inclusiveness rather than along ethnic and historical connections), will have a more sympathetic attitude (Haslam & Holland, 2012: 112).

Based on a quantitative study conducted in Western Australia, Pedersen et al (2005) also found that nationalism to be a predicting factor of negative attitudes, but also identified other

predictors including gender, a lack of education and right-wing political views (Pedersen, Atwell & Hevili, 2005: 158). Another major finding of the study was the connection between negative attitudes and 'false beliefs' – the acceptance of information that is factually incorrect. The study found the three most commonly cited false beliefs were 'boat people are queue jumpers', 'asylum seekers are illegal' and 'people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees'. With her collaborators, Pedersen et al (2006) conducted further research into the effect of 'false beliefs' in order to discern where these beliefs about asylum-seekers originate. Are they endorsed independently? Do people draw upon false beliefs in justifying their attitudes? The study found that the participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs in response to the question, '*Please describe how you feel about asylum seekers. Please indicate why you feel the way you do*' recorded significantly more negative attitudes to asylum-seekers than those who did not. The study also identified these false beliefs in a number of government statements. This is particularly important in understanding *why* people form their views and attitudes towards asylum-seekers.

Pedersen et al (2008) further investigated negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers and found that beliefs about what others believe can also implicate a person's attitude. The study showed that people who over-estimated the extent to which others share their attitudes towards asylum seekers were also the people who held more hostile attitudes. This in turn may reflect the way in which unsympathetic views towards asylum seekers are often given more attention in the media (Haslam & Holland, 2012: 113). Pedersen et al. note that the implications of this finding are disturbing as evidence shows that those who are more open in expressing their attitudes are less prepared to compromise and consequently have an influence disproportionate to their numbers. Further, a person who holds a contrary view may fall silent as shown by the study participants who held a positive attitude towards minorities – they perceived themselves to be in the minority (Pedersen et al., 2008: 554). The practical implications of the findings to emerge from Pedersen's research is that negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers could be reduced if false beliefs were debunked and by challenging the belief that antagonism towards asylum-seekers is a consensus view.

Haslam and Holland (2012) found that a number of other precursors existed which boosted the likelihood of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers. A sense of fear and threat was

identified across a number of studies as a strong indicator of negative attitudes. Haslam and Holland observe that there are concrete threats such as bombings, crime, competition for jobs and economic resources and more abstract threats to Australia's social fabric, values or morals. The studies show however, that the perception asylum seekers pose a threat to Australians' physical and material welfare were linked to unfavourable attitudes towards asylum seekers (Haslam & Holland, 2012: 116). Similarly surveys have shown that people with negative attitudes are likely to see asylum-seekers as responsible for crime, taking Australian jobs and harming the economy (ibid). Morals have also shown to be an indicative factor. For example, interpersonal disgust can be experienced towards people who are rejected because they are judged to be morally offensive, invasive threats to the social order or carriers of contagious disease (ibid). Research has found that asylum-seekers who arrive destitute and needy are likely to be perceived in a disgust-promoting manner and the possibility that people might be carriers of contagious disease has increased the likelihood that members of the public will view asylum-seekers as objects of disgust (ibid).

Haslam and Holland pay particular attention to the effect of 'dehumanisation', which they argued can serve a number of psychological functions such as legitimating harsh policies and distancing the self from other people's misery (ibid). The role of dehumanisation has been shown, in a Canadian study, to be central to the public's sentiment regarding asylum-seekers – "People who are disgust-prone view immigrants unfavourably largely because they perceive them as lacking traits that distinguish humans from other animals" (ibid). Haslam and Holland identified a number of factors that play a prominent role in the dehumanisation of asylum-seekers in Australia: policies of mandatory detention and offshore processing, restriction of public and media access to asylum-seekers, the stereotyping of asylum-seekers home countries as backward, government rhetoric such as the 'children overboard' scandal in 2001 which demonised boatpeople for falsely throwing children into the sea, and the coverage of behaviour in detention centres such as occasional riots and self-harm (ibid: 117).

For Haslam and Holland, the way to engender more sympathetic public attitudes towards asylum-seekers is by challenging misinformation, showing evidence that the dire consequences of welcoming asylum-seekers such as terrorism and disease – have not come to pass, promoting the fact that asylum-seekers have the right to seek asylum and changing the language used to describe

asylum-seekers in the news media and in everyday conversation, leading to humanised and personalised representations of asylum-seekers as opposed to one-dimensional abstractions.

Research into the variables affecting Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers has found that:

- Men tend to have less sympathetic attitudes than women (Pedersen et al. 2005). A 2004 poll also showed that a swing towards a more sympathetic attitude to asylum seekers was led by women (Megalogenis, *The Australian*, 2004: 2). A 2013 ABC Vote Compass also showed clear differences in opinion on asylum seekers and immigration between men and women (ABC, 2013). Specifically, 49.9% of men either somewhat or strongly agreed with the view that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back, compared to 39.9% of women.
- People with lower education are more likely to have negative attitudes (Betts, 2001, ABC, 2013)
- Australians suffering financial hardship and those living in rural and outer-metro regions tend to be more antagonistic to immigrants, and particularly so towards asylum seekers (Goot & Watson 2005). The further respondents lived from a metropolitan city centre, the more they supported 'turning back the boats'. (ABC, 2013)
- There are no notable differences between the views of people born in Australia and those born overseas (ABC, 2013)
- Older Australians are far more likely than younger voters to believe restrictions on work visas for foreigners should be tightened (ABC, 2013)

From anti-asylum seeker sentiments to Islamophobia: shifting cultural fears

A noticeable shift in recent years is from the common fear of asylum seekers as an undifferentiated mass of 'illegal' immigrants towards a more particular subset: those arriving from Islamic-majority nations. Poynting and Mason observe that Muslim presence in Western nations has long generated racism and distrust before the attacks of September 11 2001:

“The upsurge of anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in the UK and Australia after 11 September 2001 arose, as did similar

episodes during the 1991 Gulf War, from the exacerbation of existing tendencies, which have been manifest in everyday racism, both before 1991 and in the intervening period” (2007)

The increase in popular cultural fears of Islam and racially-motivated attacks is unquestionably linked to September 11 and related terror attacks on Western nations, the so-called War on Terror, and more recently, the rise of Islamic State as an international terrorist organisation. Research by Dunn (2003) found a sharp rise in Islamophobia in the wake of the September 11 attacks, with more than half of the 5000 people surveyed saying they would be concerned if a relative married a Muslim.

When Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party rose swiftly on an anti-immigration stance in 1996, the primary targets were Asians. But her targets shifted in line with wider cultural fears. When Hanson speaks out against immigration now, she calls for an end to Muslim immigration. As Manne observes:

In 2001, before September 11, and again in 2004, the Irving Saulwick poll asked a representative sample of Australians which groups they would like to exclude from the country. In 2001, following five years of Hansonism, 28% chose Asians and 34% chose people from the Middle East. In 2004, the desire to exclude Asians had dropped to 17%. The desire to exclude Middle Easterners had risen to 40%. Indeed, Australians were almost twice as keen to keep Middle Easterners out as they were to exclude people perceived as a burden or a threat (Manne 2006)

Islamophobia, writes Briskman (2014), has appeared in Australia as a result of global trends: “[I]mmigration and terrorism have become conflated,” she argues, following the major terror attacks on the West and subsequent wars of retaliation. Now, “[W]hole communities of Muslims have become guilty until proven innocent and ... Islam is viewed as the culprit and the cause”

Ho observes that the issue is by no means limited to Australia: “In many Western nations today, Muslims have become the pre-eminent ‘alien within’. The global war on terror, and local anxieties around ‘ethnic crime’ and Muslims’ ‘refusal’ to assimilate have given rise to a virtually unprecedented Islamophobia in public discourse. In countries like Australia, expressions of national identity and nationalism increasingly rely on anti-Muslim sentiment.”

This report aims for the first time to examine the nuanced nature of Australian attitudes to asylum seekers, and in particular, a focus on whether Muslim asylum seekers are now perceived as the main threat to 'Australianness'.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology in the form of focus-group discussions was adopted for this research. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of the basis for people's attitudes, since these tend to be grounded in individuals' values and belief systems, and are not amenable to in-depth exploration using standard quantitative methods.

The population of interest was persons eligible to vote in Australia.

Based on the available quantitative research, the relevant variables for this research were considered to be:

Gender

Age

Socio-economic status (as indicated by employment type and education)

Location

While male and female attitudes have been shown to diverge by 10% (ABC Vote Compass, 2013), it was not felt that the attitudes of men and women were so divergent as to require them to be separated. Consequently the groups were specified as including both.

Age, however, was indicated to be a divergent variable, and for that reason three age classifications were adopted as part of the specifications.

Similarly, socio-economic status, for which occupation was used as a proxy, was considered to be a divergent variable, and so groups were recruited according to a separation of white-collar and blue-collar occupations as classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Finally, location as between metropolitan and non-metropolitan had long been shown to be an important divergent variable in social research, so groups were recruited from capital city and

regional city populations, including the remote city of Dubbo.

Because a great deal of political debate about asylum-seekers had centred on perceptions about the decisive influence of voter attitudes in western Sydney, it was considered necessary to conduct three groups in that region in order to canvass a sufficiently broad spectrum of variables. The characteristics of all the groups are set out in the matrix below.

Group	Age	Socio-Economic Status	Location	Date
1	31-50	Blue-collar (inc TAFE students)	Outer Metro (SE Melbourne)	Mon 24 Aug
2	18-30	White-collar (inc uni students)	Inner Metro (Inner Melbourne)	Mon 24 Aug
3	51-plus	White-Collar	Regional (Ballarat)	Tues 25 Aug
4	51-plus	Blue-collar	Outer Metro (Sydney W)	Wed 26 Aug
5	18-30	Blue-collar	Outer Metro (Sydney SW)	Wed 26 Aug
6	31-50	White-collar	Outer Metro (Sydney NW)	Thurs 27 Aug
7	31-50	Blue-collar	Regional (Dubbo)	Mon 31 Aug
8	51-plus	White-collar	Inner Metro (Sydney N & E)	Tues 1 Sept
9	18-30	Blue-collar (inc TAFE students)	Metro (Brisbane)	Wed 2 Sept
10	31-50	White-collar	Regional (Toowoomba)	Thurs 3 Sept

Further Specifications

Recruit nine for eight participants in each group

No more than six and no fewer than three of any one gender

Use ABS occupational classifications for deciding blue-collar/
white-collar

No focus group participation in previous six months

It will be seen that of the ten groups:

Three were of voters aged 18-30

Four were of voters aged 31-50

Three were of voters aged 51-plus

Five were of voters in white-collar occupations

Five were of voters in blue-collar occupations

Four were from outer metropolitan areas

Three were from regional cities

Two were from inner metropolitan areas

One was from a metropolitan area as a whole

It was considered that this design gave a credibly representative spread of demographic factors.

Potential participants were not screened for their attitudes to asylum-seekers. It was considered that to do so would rob the research of the opportunity for participants to test and challenge one another's attitudes. A further consideration was that on a polarising issue such as this, screened groups might well have developed a spiral of consensus, which would have made the data less insightful.

All the group discussions were audio-recorded, and those conducted in metropolitan areas, where the facilities allowed it, were video-recorded as well.

The discussions were conducted according to a discussion outline, which is included as Appendix 1 to this report.

Summary of main findings

This summary is distilled from the evidence set out in detail in subsequent chapters of this report.

Australia is a society that is broadly more optimistic than pessimistic, and in which people are more inclined to say they are economically secure than otherwise. Yet it is a society that feels under pressure, facing many challenges, prey to anxieties and untrusting of the institutions of politics and the media.

The national economic outlook is seen as uncertain. Global economic forces, particularly the slowing of the Chinese economy, and the economic implications for Australia of climate change, are large concerns in the face of which Australians feel the nation is adrift. There is a perceived dearth of national leadership on both sides of the political divide.

In a world awash with information of dubious reliability, people find it difficult to know whom to trust: not the mainstream media, not social media and certainly not politicians. Faced with this situation, people triangulate information from a range of sources, including what they see, read or hear on mainstream and social media and what they are told by family, friends and acquaintances. Very few rely just on one source.

Air travel and communications technology have brought the world closer. Australia is no longer regarded as immune from what might have once been thought of as troubles in faraway lands. Digital communications technology has magnified this phenomenon by bringing Australians instantly and constantly face to face with events in all parts of the world, investing these events with a sense of personal connection and physical proximity even if, in reality, they are thousands of kilometres away. When the events are of a threatening nature, the sense of personal threat feels more direct. This is made more acute by a quite widespread belief that Australia has bought into wars that are none of its business, making the country and its people less safe and a target of terrorism.

Within Australia, job security is perceived to be weak. The loss of long-established industries such as car-making unsettles people

because it makes them think nothing is secure. Technological change, such as the growth in robotics, adds to the sense that jobs will get scarcer, and people watch with a mixture of concern and resentment as they see large numbers of jobs sent offshore, or companies apparently abusing the visa system to bring in foreign workers who are prepared to work for lower wages than are Australian citizens.

The housing market, especially in Sydney, is seen to be so expensive as to exclude ordinary Australians — especially young people — from being able to buy a house or, if they do, to be burdened with crushing mortgages. This has loosened people's hold on the Australian dream of home-ownership and in a subtle way alters people's sense of what it means to live the Australian way of life.

The issue of asylum-seekers is largely disconnected in any direct sense from these concerns. However, the underlying anxiety occasioned by them primes those in the community who feel most anxious or vulnerable to reject asylum-seekers as yet another threat and a drain on scarce resources. Specifically this arises in respect of demands on the health service and welfare system. Asylum-seekers are largely perceived as a net drain on these services and on the taxpayer who has to pay for them. There is little sense that asylum-seekers might be contributors to the economy.

People who depend on government assistance or who live among people who do are deeply suspicious that asylum-seekers get preferential treatment from the authorities. In this suspicious frame of mind, they are eager to accept as true anecdotes of very uncertain provenance that reinforce their suspicions. Therefore, it is accepted as true that asylum-seekers are given a lump sum of \$10,000, new Nike shoes and a government house to "welcome" them to Australia, or that they demand — and are given — flat-screen television sets.

To the extent that this combination of materialist anxieties and downward envy contribute to the formation of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers, the hypothesis stated in the Introduction that these were likely to be factors appears to have been borne out. However, this would need quantitative validation, and in any case they are not the primary drivers of these negative attitudes.

Such attitudes and states of mind are to be found across the

nation, in country towns as well as the capital cities. However, they are expressed with particular forcefulness in western Sydney and in remote areas. There, these materialist pressures and sense of threat – as well as the factors that cause them – are experienced acutely. Employment is uncertain and hard to find. In western Sydney, housing is expensive. Reliance on public services such as housing and welfare is considerable. Life is difficult, and there is little sense that it is going to get easier.

Beyond the materialist anxieties, there are further concerns – not just in western Sydney – that asylum-seekers will live in ghettos, bring their old enmities with them, and are too different from “us” to fit in. In these ways they are perceived as representing a formidable challenge to the most fundamental requirement Australians place upon new arrivals, namely that they assimilate. In today’s Australia, where multiculturalism is a source of some national pride, this means that new arrivals will adopt Australian norms and customs while being at liberty to maintain their own cultural practices. It most certainly means not seeking to impose their own norms, customs and beliefs on Australia.

Many of these concerns are familiar from past waves of refugees and migrants, notably those that followed the end of the Vietnam War. However, there is now an historic shift in the ground on which prejudice is built.

In previous large episodes of prejudice against new arrivals – after World War Two and after the Vietnam War – the dominant driver of prejudice was racism. In the 1990s, when Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party was at the height of its powers, the concern was about the “Asianisation” of Australia.

Today the single most important driver of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers is religious prejudice, something entirely absent from previous episodes. It is expressed as concern about the “Islamisation” of Australia (Dunne 2003; Manne 2006).

There are two aspects to this phenomenon, and they feed into each other. The first is a view that Islam is an intolerant religion. In this view, Muslims demand that the rest of society tolerates Islam, but are not willing in return to show equal tolerance to non-Muslims. At the most extreme end of this line of argument is a conviction that Muslims wish to introduce Sharia law into Australia and eventually to subject everyone to it.

In some people's view, the process has already started. It is frequently stated that people can no longer send Christmas cards (instead sending "happy holiday" cards) and that schools and shopping centres are being prevented from putting on nativity plays and singing Christmas carols because Muslims find such things offensive. Respondents cannot point to first-hand or even second-hand experience of these oppressions, yet are unshakably convinced they happen.

The second aspect is that Islam is seen as inseparable from the threat of terrorism. The combination of these two aspects produces a potent fear about what Australia might be opening itself up to if it did not take stringent measures to screen asylum-seekers. The Lindt Cafe siege in Sydney is frequently cited as an instance of this threat being realised. The fact that the siege gunman had been in Australia for a decade or more only reinforces this concern: Australia might never know what it is getting, and no matter how much time passes, the threat remains.

Implicit in all this is the assumption that asylum-seekers are all or mainly Muslims. This leads to a syllogistic association in which asylum-seekers are equated with Muslims, Muslims with terrorism and therefore asylum-seekers with terrorism.

The role played by racism as a driver of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers is difficult to pin down. To begin with, there is very little knowledge about where asylum-seekers come from and hence what race they are. "The Middle East" is commonly cited as a major source, but there is next to no appreciation of the fact that the Middle East contains people of many ethnicities, faiths and Islamic denominations. When pressed, respondents are able to quote Afghanistan as a further source, and it too is associated with violent Islam.

The evidence suggests that to the extent resistance to asylum-seekers is driven by racism, it is racial prejudice of a generalised kind directed at people who are different from "us". However, it is certainly a less potent factor than the religious prejudice already referred to.

A third factor, reinforcing prejudice arising from religion and race but not itself an originating driver, is what might be called materialist anxieties: that asylum-seekers get preferential treatment for services such as public housing and welfare, receive government

handouts, and over the long term are likely to be a drain on the Australian taxpayer. This factor is most prevalent among people who are themselves struggling, and is to be found primarily among blue-collar workers and in western Sydney, where material pressures are acute, and to a lesser extent in remote areas.

Materialist anxieties are in turn reinforced by a quite widespread perception that not all asylum-seekers are genuinely fleeing from persecution, but are trying to get to Australia to make a better life for themselves and their children. While some, particularly better educated and more economically secure people, accept this as a justification and can see themselves doing likewise in similar circumstances, others reject it and are prepared to see such people sent back or turned around at sea. In this context, Sri Lanka is mentioned as a source of what people see as economic migrants, rather than people fleeing persecution.

There is widespread uncertainty everywhere about this question of whether the asylum-seekers who come by boat are fleeing persecution or simply seeking a better life. In fact, although many of the discussions on this particular topic begin with respondents drawing a clear distinction between “genuine” asylum-seekers and “economic refugees”, as many of the discussions progressed it is increasingly seen as a false dichotomy. Many respondents become persuaded that there is a common denominator between the two — desperation — as well as the natural desire to want a secure future for one’s children. Many respondents empathise with this, and say they too would pay a people smuggler to get on a boat if it meant giving their children a chance at a secure life and an escape from the horrors of their homelands. This shift in attitude was quite noticeable in many of the groups.

Views on the policies of boat turn-backs and offshore processing and their consequences range across a very wide spectrum. One respondent — himself an immigrant — went so far as to say he would let asylum-seekers who tried to come by boat drown, but this was immediately repudiated by others in his group, who were palpably shocked at the idea.

More representative is a view that turning back the boats has stopped people drowning at sea, and that for all the hardships and human rights violations that people accept as occurring in the detention centres, conditions there are almost certainly better than whatever the asylum-seekers left behind.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who advocate shutting the offshore processing centres and instead bringing asylum-seekers to Australia and assigning them in small groups to country towns where they could be screened and assessed while being able to work, contribute to the Australian economy, learn English and become acquainted with Australia's social mores. These people are appalled at the cruelties they see as being visited on asylum-seekers in the detention centres. They consider it a violation of the ideals they believe Australia stands for and a source of national shame.

In between these two extremes is a range of views that are an amalgam of compassionate concern for asylum-seekers, shame that Australia should adopt such a course, and disapproval of the secrecy that surrounds the implementation of the border-protection regime, set against deep concerns about the threats mentioned above, the necessity for Australia to have a strong screening process, and relief that — so far as they know — the deaths at sea seem to have stopped. These people would prefer a better system but are at a loss as to what it might be.

It follows that across a wide spectrum of the Australian community, support for the present policies is conditional on there being no other approach that would be fairer and more humane while retaining the deterrent that minimises deaths at sea and allows asylum-seekers to be properly screened. Only among a relatively small segment of the population are current policies accepted unconditionally.

It is the boat arrivals who excite the most attention, even though many respondents say they know that far greater numbers of asylum-seekers arrive by air and then overstay their visas. Those who don't know this have their interest piqued by the information, but it does not cause them to alter their generally negative view of those who come by boat.

The reasons for this are difficult to discern. Respondents are unable to say why they feel this way, beyond a vague sense that people who come by plane are probably more affluent and likely to bring skills or other resources to the Australian economy. At least they have come with their "papers", and their difference from "us" does not seem quite so marked. By contrast, people who try to come by boat seem very different from "us", seem less desirable, have probably deliberately destroyed their "papers" in

order to try to hoodwink the Australian authorities, and embody the threats described earlier.

The evidence suggests that successive Australian governments have done a thoroughly successful job of dehumanising boat people. In this they are assisted by the almost complete ignorance of Australians concerning Australia's legal obligations to asylum-seekers and a consequent readiness to unquestioningly accept labels such as "illegals" and "queue-jumpers". There is next to no understanding of Australia's obligations under the Refugee Convention or even awareness of the convention's existence.

Part of government strategy has also been to deny asylum-seekers a face and an individual identity by maintaining secrecy around the border operations and the running of the detention centres. Many respondents express their contempt for this, saying that they as citizens are being denied knowledge of important things being done in their name and of which some thoroughly disapprove.

This is one symptom of a wider disillusionment with national political leadership. Respondents do not draw party political distinctions here. They say that there is a lack of leadership on both sides of politics, and it causes them concern on many fronts, not just on this issue. They see an unwillingness to confront and develop policy responses to a range of issues, notably economic development, pressure on cities, and climate change. This criticism is particularly trenchant among the affluent group from north and inner Sydney, who are themselves economically secure but worry about their children's prospects, and among the young blue-collar group in Brisbane, who are anything but economically secure yet somewhat idealistic. This suggests a quite broad discontent with national political leadership across the community.

This disillusionment translates readily into a lack of faith that matters will improve in the short term, and this in turn feeds anxieties about the future and about employment prospects, thus reinforcing many of the materialist concerns that contribute to the formation of negative attitudes towards asylum-seekers.

For all that, respondents generally remain optimistic about their own and Australia's future, believing that somehow the country will muddle through, given its energy and its capacity to adapt and create new opportunities. Australia is still seen as the best country

in the world, and respondents are grateful to be living here and not in the places from which the asylum-seekers are coming.

Asked whether they think Australia is a fair society, many respondents say it is “too fair”. By this they mean Australia gives handouts to asylum-seekers at the expense of Australians who are battling. And it has a comparative aspect: that Australians who visit countries in the Middle East are forced to conform to the customs of those countries in ways that Australia does not demand of people from those countries who come here.

There is also an economic dimension to the perception of fairness: concern that the tax system is cheated by big companies and wealthy individuals; that inequality of wealth is getting worse; that employers rort the work-visa system to bring in foreign workers who accept lower wages than Australian workers

Similarly when asked whether Australia is a tolerant society, many respondents say that Australia is “too tolerant” and that this is not reciprocated by what are seen as intolerant Islamists.

However, a wide spectrum of respondents detect an element of hypocrisy in Australia’s preferred view of itself as a tolerant society, and question whether today’s Australia is as tolerant as its people like to think it is.

This is seen as being reflected not only in attitudes to asylum-seekers – where it is very widely observed – but in attitudes to marriage equality, to homosexual people more generally and to people of other races, including Aboriginal people. The booing of the AFL footballer Adam Goodes during the 2015 season, which led to his standing down from some games, is referred to as illustrative of this intolerance.

Even so, respondents believe fervently that Australia is the best country in the world and would not want to live anywhere else. People who came as migrants express deep gratitude to Australia for giving them a new chance in life. The obverse of this is that they cannot imagine why anyone would want to live anywhere else, even in their country of birth. As a result, many harbour a semi-articulated fear that unless Australia maintains strict and even punitive control of its borders, the country will be overwhelmed by millions just waiting for the gates to open.

Profiles of the groups

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

This group of seven consisted of four men and three women. All were born in Victoria except for two of the men, one of whom was born in Odessa and the other in Cape Town. Three were from what might be called the caring professions: a drug and alcohol support worker; a disability support worker, and a massage therapist. Of the others, one was a community bus driver, one ran his own metal fabrication workshop, one was a horticulturalist and one was a travel sales representative.

The metal fabricator, who had been born in Odessa, followed the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre on Facebook. For the most part, the others received their information about asylum-seeker issues from the mainstream conventional media, including commercial television, radio, and the *Herald Sun*. Some followed news outlets on Facebook.

The man who followed the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spoke at length about what he considered to be the principles on which good asylum-seeker policy should be based. He saw current policies as inconsistent with those principles. In this, the group as a whole concurred. Whilst there was some disquiet about letting asylum-seekers into Australia without some form of prior scrutiny, on the whole this group wished to see a more humane approach taken by Australian governments.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

This group of nine consisted of five women and four men. They were, with one exception, tertiary educated: there was a social-work co-ordinator, a musician with a PhD in composition, a social science graduate, a medical student, an architect, a psychology teacher-turned-lighting-designer, a patent attorney and a banker. The exception was a man doing an electrical apprenticeship.

All but two had been born in Victoria. The exceptions were the composer, who was born in Sydney, and the psychology teacher, who was born in London.

As a group they relied extensively on social media – mainly Facebook – for information about asylum-seeker issues. They were deeply sceptical about the reliability of the information available to them, and when asked what sources they trusted, they fell silent. In the end, it transpired that they had arrived at their opinions by triangulating a variety of sources.

They took a generally humane approach to asylum-seeker issues and considered Australian government policies to fall short of the standards they considered to be acceptable to the Australian community. At the same time, some participants were firm that Australia should not have porous borders and should take proper steps to see that prospective arrivals were screened so that Australia would know what it was getting.

Despite their level of education, they knew little or nothing about Australia's legal obligations concerning refugees and asylum-seekers, and based their opinions on general ethical principles.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

This group of eight consisted of five women and three men. All but one had been born in country Victoria, most of them in the Ballarat district. The exception was a woman who had been born in Canada but had lived in Australia for many years.

Two of the men were retired – one a former office manager and the other a former housing manager for a charity. The third man was a semi-retired financial investor. Among the women were a school integration aide, a nurse, an assistant at a university bookshop, and one who divided her time between being a hospital ward clerk and a business consultant. One of the women was a retired credit manager.

For the most part, they received their information about asylum-seeker issues from the established media – commercial television, the *Herald Sun*, the *Ballarat Courier*. Most did not use social media for information, although one or two used it for keeping in touch with their families. The Canadian woman, who was noticeably

more serious-minded than the rest, got her information from the ABC and *The Age*.

One participant said he had a relative who worked with asylum-seekers and that two of his children were members of the Greens party. Whilst he received a lot of exposure to asylum-seeker issues through these people, he regarded it basically as propaganda, and so, like the others in this group, was sceptical about the reliability of the information he received on this topic, seeing it as tainted with politics.

As with the other groups, they wanted Australia to be prudent in checking the credentials of asylum-seekers, but generally deplored the conditions under which this screening was being done, especially where women and children were concerned. They supported a more community-based approach, and some advocated bringing would-be asylum-seekers to regional areas and allowing them to work while their applications were considered.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

This group of eight consisted of four women and four men. Among the men there was a disability pensioner, a casual actor, a warehouseman and an IT product manager. Among the women there was a retired call-centre worker, a data-entry clerk, a retail merchandiser and a receptionist.

Three were born in Sydney, one in Albury, one in Singleton, one in Malta, one in India, and one – the daughter of Russian refugees from the 1917 revolution – in Harbin, northern China.

This group relied entirely on a mixture of the conventional media and word-of-mouth for their information about asylum-seeker issues. The IT product manager, who had been born in India, said he relied entirely on *The Australian* newspaper and believed everything he read there. The rest obtained their information from various combinations of the *Daily Telegraph*, commercial radio and commercial television.

An influential source of information for several in this group – especially those from Blacktown – was what their friends and

acquaintances told them. In Blacktown, there had been an influx of 5000, or was it 10,000, Sudanese asylum-seekers. These people, according to the testimony of their friends, had been given preferential access to public housing and a gift of \$10,000 per head when they arrived.

One participant – the IT product manager who had immigrated from India via the United States, and who relied on *The Australian* for his information – expressed the view that asylum-seekers who tried to come to Australia by boat should be allowed to drown. This clearly shocked the others, and the woman who had immigrated from Malta responded by saying, “That’s a bit harsh.” Another said, “Where’s the humanity in that?” Others were visibly unsettled.

Their general view was that Australia was a generous and naïve country that was being taken advantage of by unscrupulous people from poor or benighted countries who really just wanted a better life. They accepted that life was pretty difficult in places like Syria and that maybe some people were genuinely fleeing persecution, but Australia needed a tough system to screen them. They were unsympathetic about the conditions in the detention centres, saying they were almost certainly better than what the asylum-seekers had left behind.

They expressed concern that asylum-seekers would place further strain on housing affordability, the health system, traffic congestion and Australia’s capacity to sustain its population.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

This group of six consisted of four women and two men. One of the women was a driving instructor who turned out also to be a Christian proselytiser; another was a waitress, the third a student completing a diploma in beauty therapy at TAFE, and the fourth a retail sales assistant. Of the two men, one was a roof-tiler and the other a semi-professional soccer player. All but one were born in Sydney, the exception having been born in Perth, WA.

They were a quiet group. Like all the groups, they knew little or nothing about Australia’s treaty obligations concerning asylum-seekers. They were not avid consumers of news. They relied on

what they might chance to hear on the radio at work, or on what their friends and families told them about asylum-seeker issues. They did not use social media for information purposes. There was no particular source of information they trusted.

Almost by osmosis they had developed a sense of unease about the way Australian governments dealt with asylum-seekers but they couldn't point to any specific acts, incidents or policies to provide a basis for their unease. One of the men was a profound sceptic. He professed to believe nothing that he himself had not experienced. It became clear during the discussion that he did proceed from an assumption about asylum-seekers that it was impossible to be sure they were genuine. Therefore they represented a risk.

This group divided the issues about asylum-seekers into two categories: what happened to them before they got to Australia, and what happened to them after they got to Australia. On the first, they supported strict screening, but wanted it carried out under humane conditions, and they harboured an uneasy belief that this was not happening. On the second, they were concerned that asylum-seekers should not be treated in ways that disadvantaged other Australians, especially in respect of housing and employment.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

This group of eight – five men and three women – was unusual in that all but one of the participants was born overseas. Among the men were two who had been born in India, one now working as an IT change manager and the other in corporate administration. The other men were an Iranian-born facility manager, a Greek-born maintenance manager and a Philippines-born IT consultant. Among the women were a Hong Kong-born administrator for a telco, an Indian-born child care centre teacher, and a Sydney-born pharmacist.

With one exception they lived in the north-western suburbs – North Parramatta, Northmead, Baulkham Hills, Carlingford – which represent the more affluent part of western Sydney.

These were people who saw themselves as having made good by

taking the opportunities Australia had to offer to those who were prepared to work hard. However, their attitudes to asylum-seeker issues were markedly diverse.

A couple of the men were uncompromising about the need for asylum-seekers to play by the rules. Thus they were inclined to see people who arrived by boat as “queue-jumpers” and “illegals”.

Others, however, took a more compassionate approach. These people argued that unless one had walked in the shoes of an asylum-seeker, one was in no position to make harsh judgments about them. These people repudiated the use of what they saw as disrespectful terms such as “queue-jumpers”, “illegals” or “boat people”.

This dichotomy remained evident throughout the discussion, although they found common ground on the need for Australia to take sensible precautions while treating asylum-seekers humanely. In this they agreed that current policies were unacceptable. They also agreed on the need for asylum-seekers – like all immigrants – to assimilate and accept the principles of multiculturalism.

For this group, as for others, multiculturalism meant living together under a common law, respecting Australian social mores while at the same time respecting and enjoying cultural diversity.

They obtained their information about asylum-seekers mainly from the traditional media – commercial television, SBS – watched by several of this largely immigrant group – and one relied considerably on two of Sydney’s more high-profile commercial radio talkback hosts, Ray Hadley and Alan Jones. Many followed a few friends on Facebook and observed what they posted about these issues, and a few relied on online established news services such as Ninemsn and News.com. They did not consider what they heard on the grapevine to be reliable.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

This group of eight – four men and four women – consisted of a road-works traffic controller, a farmer, an abattoir worker, a self-employed cleaner, a service-station console operator, a carer, a pest-controller and a car-detailer. All but one had been born in Dubbo or its environs. The exception was a man who had been born in South Africa.

Several made self-conscious remarks about the fact that they had been born in Dubbo, were still there, and looked like being there all their lives. These people conveyed a sense of being trapped. They found it difficult to imagine life outside Dubbo. And yet two of them were having to contemplate leaving the town because their husbands had lost their jobs and, being middle-aged, saw few prospects for obtaining new ones. There was considerable resentment about this, centred on what participants perceived to be roting of 457 visas.

Thus there was a perception in this group that asylum-seekers represented a threat to employment. There were rumours that workers at the local abattoir had been employed on below-award wages, but this was not confirmed, even by the respondent who worked there.

Some participants also spoke of preferential welfare and housing treatment for asylum-seekers, while existing citizens struggled. This was information they had heard on the grapevine. Their more formal sources of information were mainly the *Daily Telegraph* and commercial television news. One or two obtained some limited information from friends on Facebook, but for the most part this group were not connected to social media.

They were people of modest economic means and, focused as they were on their own somewhat difficult and insecure circumstances, expressed pessimism about their own future and that of their children.

They did not lack compassion for the plight of asylum-seekers, but they could not see how this problem could be resolved without exposing Australia to a range of risks concerning not just employment but terrorism, disease and pressure on services such as the health system.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

This group of nine consisted of five women and four men. The women included a school volunteer who was otherwise occupied with home duties, a retired secretary to a corporate executive, a TAFE mathematics teacher, a retired technical administrator, and a self-employed business consultant. The men included the

owner of a photography workshop, a commodities broker, a retired project manager and a retired accountant who remained a member of several company boards.

Only one had been born in Sydney. The others had come from Kuala Lumpur, Spain, England, New Zealand, Moree and Lismore.

Overwhelmingly they obtained their information from ABC radio and television, SBS television, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and a range of online platforms belonging to those organisations. Only one said he was active on social media, and then to a limited extent. This man had worked in the tourism industry in Syria in an earlier part of his life, and retained friends there. He said he obtained a considerable amount of information from these sources on Facebook and trusted them more than the media.

None of them were blindly trustful of their media sources, saying they accumulated information on asylum-seeker from several sources and then made an assessment of the likeliest version of the truth.

This group's attitudes to a large extent transcended their own personal interests. They were mature, economically secure and optimistic people, although the Sydney housing market in particular made them concerned for their children's long-term material security. But liberated from daily anxiety about economic security, they focused on bigger-picture issues.

What they saw as the lack of political leadership on both sides of federal politics appalled them – not just in respect of asylum-seekers but in respect of many major issues they saw as facing Australia, including economic reform.

They wrestled with the moral dilemma presented by the asylum-seeker problem. They acknowledged that the "stop the boats" policy may have saved lives at sea, although because of what they considered the unacceptable secrecy surrounding these operations, they could not be sure.

At the same time, they considered the conditions in the offshore detention centres – again insofar as they had been able to find out anything about them – to be far short of what a country such as Australia should expect of itself.

They wanted Australia to have a proper screening process, but questioned whether the offshore processing arrangements represented reasonable value for the taxpayer's money. Some outspokenly said it did not, and that the money would be better spent processing people onshore and giving them the opportunity to work and contribute to Australian society. In this context, the arrangement with Cambodia to take four asylum-seekers at a cost of something over \$50 million was derided.

Others were uneasy about onshore processing – the Lindt café incident preying on some minds – but there was a general discontent with current policies, which were seen as politically motivated, playing to what they saw as the prejudiced attitudes of voters in western Sydney.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

This group of eight consisted of four women and four men. Among the women there was a hairdresser, a theatre-set designer, a public service administrative officer and a client manager for a ticketing company. Among the men there was a maintenance fitter, a waiter, a landscaper and a dry-cleaning assistant.

All but two had been born in Queensland – three in Brisbane and others in Ipswich, Gatton and Mackay. Of the others, one had been born in Melbourne and one in Scotland.

A few got most of their news and information from people they followed on Facebook, but one had become disenchanted with what she said was the relentless negativity of Facebook posts and she was using it less often. Others got their news from *Hack* on Triple J, or *The Project* on Channel Ten or the *Courier-Mail* website or ABC or commercial television. None read a newspaper.

They were a sceptical group but they were also idealists. They did not trust any one outlet but assembled information from a range of sources. Two of them had had direct experience of asylum-seekers, one through his church group and the other through her parents, who were also active in a different church group, which offered assistance to asylum-seekers. They very much preferred the information from their own experience to anything they saw in the media.

They did not trust politicians. They expressed disgust – and actually used that word – with the quality of political leadership in Canberra. They shared a view that Australia’s best hope lay in the future, when the current crop of politicians had moved on. They considered Australia a racist society, and that this was largely because of the attitudes of their parents’ generation. They said it was especially true of their parents who lived in country areas.

As a group they strongly disapproved of the way Australia was dealing with asylum-seekers but were struggling to think of how else the issue might be dealt with. They said that asylum-seekers did represent a variety of threats to Australia – disease, terrorism, pressure on employment and resources – but at the same time were convinced that most were genuine asylum-seekers who deserved a safe place to live, and if that place was Australia, so be it. Although they wanted them screened, they questioned why this could not be done in Australia.

They also expressed strong disapproval of the way the issue had been politicised.

Even though life was not easy or secure for them economically, they were optimistic about the future and counted themselves blessed to be living in Australia. They did not want to shut others out because of an accident of birth.

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

This group of nine consisted of five women and four men. Among the women were a pay clerk, a teacher’s aide, an accounts clerk, a pharmacy assistant and a music teacher. Among the men were a university IT client support worker, a business improvement manager in an explosives business, a local council property officer, and a food technologist.

All were born in Australia.

Aside from one participant who absorbed news from almost anywhere she could – newspapers, radio, television, online news platforms and Facebook – they obtained their information about asylum-seeker issues from a fairly narrow range of sources. For most – at least five of the nine – their main source of news was

The Project on Channel Ten. One relied on ABC television and radio, and the rest relied on commercial television evening news or random sources they picked up driving in the car or at work.

They wrestled with the moral dilemma posed by asylum-seekers. They were not abstract or imaginative thinkers. They looked for practical solutions: where could taxpayers' money be most effectively spent while at the same time protecting Australia from the threats posed by asylum-seekers?

Whilst they mentioned terrorism and economic pressure as among the threats, the main threat as they saw it was to Australia's multicultural society. As one participant put it, to general approval, Australian society was like a big patchwork quilt, but "they" – being Muslim asylum-seekers – wanted to be the big patch in the middle, with everyone else having to make way for them. They saw this as anathema to their ideal of multiculturalism, which was a society in which everyone reciprocally respected other people's difference, while being prepared to live under a common set of laws and social mores.

They were divided on whether Australia was a racist society. One participant asserted that Australia was not racist, but this provoked a strong response from several others who said it was. These people tempered their views by saying this was far more noticeable in country areas than in the cities.

Part Two: Detailed Evidence

Note on presentation style: Direct quotations from focus group participants are single-spaced and presented under a heading identifying the groups they belonged to. Where one quotation led directly to the next, the subsequent quotation or quotations are indented.

Sources of news and information

Established news outlets dominate the sources used by respondents to obtain information about asylum-seeker issues. In particular, the online platforms of the capital-city newspaper titles, of the public-sector broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, and of the Nine commercial television Network (ninemsn) are widely used for this purpose.

The hard copy versions of newspapers, as well as the on-air versions of the television channels, remain important. Ingrained media consumption habits, especially the habit of watching the evening television news, remain entrenched in many people's daily routine. However, the habit of reading hard-copy newspapers is not so ingrained, and is clearly giving way to the reading of newspapers online among all age groups and across SES classifications. The title-specific online platforms of the major newspapers (smh.com.au and the like) are widely used, as is the generic news.com site.

On television, there is a small number of programs, other than the nightly news bulletins, that are important. Chief among these is Channel 10's *The Project*. In one group of 31 to 50-year-olds, it was a major news source on asylum seeker issues for no fewer than five of the nine participants, and it was rare for it not to be mentioned by at least one participant in the other groups. It tends to be watched more by white-collar people in the young to middle-aged brackets, less among blue-collar and older people.

Other important television programs are the SBS series *Go Back To Where You Came From*, and the ABC's *Q and A* and *Lateline*. Notably, the commercial current affairs programs on Channels 7 and 9 do not rate a mention by anyone.

Only one radio program – Triple J’s *Hack* – is a significant source of news among these respondents, and it is confined to the under-50 age groups. One (younger) respondent listened to Fran Kelly and Philip Adams on ABC Radio National, but for the most part radio is a source of musical entertainment and is only incidentally important as a source of news.

Only two commercial radio talkback hosts – Sydney’s Ray Hadley and Alan Jones – were mentioned as sources of information about asylum-seeker issues, and they were mentioned only once or twice.

People’s reliance on social media tends to be wide but not deep. Unsurprisingly, people aged between 18 and 30 are more likely to use social media as a source of news about asylum-seeker issues than are older people.

Facebook and Twitter were the only social media platforms mentioned. Very few users nominated a particular information source or individual journalist that they used social media for. One respondent followed what she called “all the main newspapers”; another had “liked” the three commercial television news services so they came up on her news feed; a third said she followed *The Monthly* and a specific journalist, Luke Pearson, whom she described as an “indy” journalist. [Mr Pearson is the founder of the *IndigenousX* Twitter account and writes for *The Guardian Australia*.] A fourth said that she had seen material produced by a Facebook group called Australians Against Sharia Law, which she said was followed by her husband but which she described as “mainly crap”.

A few respondents have given up using social media for information purposes because of what they say is the relentless negativity. However, they continue to use their social media platforms for social interaction.

Otherwise, the information gleaned from social media comes from friends. In a few cases these friends are involved in causes or have political affiliations, but for the most part the material people obtain from social media is a random collection of whatever “pops up”.

With rare exceptions, these respondents are passive recipients of news. Very few go looking specifically for stories about asylum-seekers – or anything else, for that matter. They tend to read what their chosen outlets give them. A couple of respondents use the

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre website, but they are very much the exception.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

Sky News

Social media output from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Q and A, talkback radio – 774 (ABC) and 693 (3AW – commercial)

Facebook (followed no one in particular)

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

Facebook (friends' posts)

Social media (Greens' posts), *The Conversation*, *The Project*

ABC, SBS television, *The Australian*

Mainly the ASRC (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre) website

Twitter (follows *The Monthly* and Luke Pearson, an "indy" journalist)

New Matilda and social media

Social media (medical student programs about detention centres and the like)

The Age, occasionally Channel 9 news

Facebook (follows friends), *The Age* online

Go Back to Where You Came From (SBS)

(A few listened to music radio stations, and one listened to Fran Kelly and Philip Adams on Radio National)

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

Commercial television, *Herald Sun*, Facebook (what friends share, doesn't follow anyone in particular)

MSN

Commercial television and the *Herald Sun*, Facebook (ditto)

Commercial television, *Lateline* (ABC television)

ABC radio, ABC news online

ABC radio and television, SBS television, *Lateline*, *Insiders*, *Herald Sun*

SBS, ABC, *Herald Sun*, *Go Back to Where You Came From*

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

Commercial television

SBS and ABC

The Australian

Television news, local newspaper, what sister puts up on Facebook

2UE (commercial radio), Channel 7 news, *The Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*

Channel 2 (ABC), channel 7 at random, radio 2CH, *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*

ABC radio, 7 Yahoo

2UE, anything that pops up on Facebook (doesn't follow anyone in particular), *Russia Today*

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

Seven news; Facebook if something pops up

Q and A on ABC television, random television channels

News websites like news.com or ABC

Facebook – liked Seven, Nine, Ten news so they come up on R's news feed

Channel 9, channel 7 news, ninemsn

Radio 106 9FM (mainly music)

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

Internet news – ninemsn, *SMH*, *Daily Telegraph*, ABC; radio – Ray Hadley 2GB

MSN, channel 9, channel 7, Facebook (doesn't follow anyone in particular)

ABC Radio National, news websites like *SMH*, news.com, *Daily Telegraph*, news apps like ABC, SBS; Facebook (doesn't follow anyone in particular)

ABC news online, sometimes the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* at work, 7 Yahoo

News.com, *SMH*, Facebook (doesn't follow anyone in particular), SBS TV news

The Project, Facebook, *SMH* and *Daily Telegraph* online occasionally

Hack on Triple J, sometimes Twitter – politicians – “just the usual – Hockey, Abbott”

SMH, sometimes the *Daily Mail* (online)

ABC radio and television

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

Channel 9, ABC television, *The Daily Telegraph*

Daily Telegraph, al Jazeera, SBS

Internet newspaper sites – news.com

Channel 9

MSN

Facebook group, Australians Against Sharia Law (Husband follows, R says it's "mainly crap")

Prime (commercial television – Channel 7 regional), *60 Minutes*, *Dubbo Liberal*, *Daily Telegraph*

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

(Chorused "newspapers") mainly *Sydney Morning Herald*, one or two the *Daily Telegraph* if they found it in a café, *The Australian* at weekends; one read *The Age* and *Canberra Times* online.

ABC, SBS television

ABC and SBS television, ABC local radio

(Three more listened to ABC local radio 702)

2GB (commercial radio)

Today FM and 2GB (commercial radio)

Commercial television, mainly 9 and 10

(Some went online for SBS, ABC, *The Australian*, *Financial Review* and *The Guardian*)

(One used Facebook but did not follow any particular journalist or outlet, just friends)

(Most did not use Facebook or social media)

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

Facebook, used to follow individuals (acquaintances, not media people) but stopped because of the negativity

Television – commercial or ABC, whatever is on, follows *Courier-Mail* on Facebook

Mainly Facebook. Has friends who are activists in various causes, and whatever pops up on Facebook, such as Yahoo, *Hack* on Triple J

ABC television news every couple of days.

Facebook when things pop up and when uni friends advise of rallies for their social alliance group, *Q and A*

Twitter but doesn't follow anyone in particular

Go Back To Where You Came From (SBS TV), sometimes *The Project* or *Hack* on Triple J

Courier-Mail online and a bit of Facebook

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

Online – *The Australian*, *the Sydney Morning Herald* and *Huffington Post*; *Courier-Mail* delivered at weekends

Online, occasionally television

The Project, occasionally Channel 9 or 7, MSN

The Project, occasionally Channel 9 or 7 television evening news, local commercial radio

ABC 7pm television and *The Chronicle* (local daily)

Facebook and Twitter for real-time news. Follows all the main

newspapers, but no particular journalist

The Project and online news.com, commercial FM radio

The Project and follows *The Chronicle* on Facebook

Commercial television news

Sky News, news.com a little bit, the *Sunday Mail*, Channel 9 news now and again

Twitter, news.com, bits and pieces on ABC News, *The Project*, Triple J's *Hack* program

Trust in information sources

Consistent with the long-run pattern of research findings on trust in media among Australians, this research found that overall levels of trust are low, and that the publicly funded ABC is more trusted than either the commercial broadcasters or the newspapers. SBS also enjoys a generally higher level of trust than commercial media, especially on asylum-seeker issues.

Many respondents say that established media outlets of all kinds – including the ABC and SBS – present information in a way that conforms to their own agenda, but this is less often said of the public-sector broadcasters than of the commercial broadcasters or the newspapers.

One reason for this difference is that the commercial media are perceived to be driven by a profit-making imperative, and that in the present climate of disruptive technological change and consequent pressure on the traditional media business model, the “old” media feel impelled to sensationalise the news in order to grab and hold people’s attention.

Against this perceptual backdrop, people are cynical about the motives behind commercial media’s news decisions, not just about asylum-seeker stories but generally.

In addition to considerations of bias – presenting news in a way that conforms to the outlet’s own agenda – people perceive news content as having been constructed in order to manipulate the audience by seeking to artificially engage people’s emotions, or excite interest by making events seem more dramatic than they really are.

Many also see an effort to manipulate people’s views by only showing material that is calculated to make people think the way the outlet wants them to think.

Trust in social media content is also not high. It appears that the conventions of personal interactions on Facebook, where the parties to a discussion are known to each other, militate against

conflict or disagreement. People say it is generally considered good manners to be supportive of a post by someone who is a friend, or otherwise to remain silent.

By contrast, where social media exchanges are conducted on large sites among anonymous parties, the exchanges rapidly become debased to the point where people do not wish to participate.

Where a topic such as asylum-seekers is concerned, with passionate views on both sides of what is a divisive issue, these factors seem to apply with even greater force.

Thus social media is not seen as providing a useful addition to people's store of information on asylum-seeker issues; nor is it providing them with a platform for constructive debate.

The failure of media old and new to engender public trust is as nothing compared with the lack of trust in politicians. The commonest response to a question about trust in politicians on the issue of asylum-seekers is outright laughter, followed by an unequivocal rejection of the very idea: "You can't. No way. Absolutely not."

In this context, the notorious "children overboard" affair of 2001 is not forgotten. The details are lost to memory, but the impression of political deceit is retained.

Asked why they were laughing at the idea of trusting politicians, one respondent replied: "They're the ones that make the fictions."

There are a few exceptions to these broad patterns. One respondent said he believed everything he read in *The Australian* on this matter, and stated that journalists generally do a fine job of reliably informing the public. Another said she trusted Alan Jones and Ray Hadley, two Sydney talkback radio hosts, but did not trust the ABC on this question. A third respondent said she believed what politicians said when they appeared on the ABC.

A few people have first-hand information from friends who work in detention centres, and they tend to believe what they tell them. Others have family members who are active in politics and press their views upon them, but they take these importunings with a large grain of salt.

For the most part, however, people take in material

impressionistically from a range of sources – media, politicians, friends, family – and try to perform a kind of commonsensical triangulation to arrive at a position which they can conscientiously defend to themselves. As one respondent put it: “You assemble the information coming in, and you just, I think from your heart, you just make your own decision.”

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

It's a very complex issue, and I think that there's not one voice that isn't going to get it wrong sometimes.

I can't put my money on anybody and it's such a hard issue when people are so passionate about it that I find it difficult to discern. I don't even know where to begin.

It's a matter of cutting out the extremes and take some middle ground information.

Social media is where I think I'm getting the majority of believable information, but then I'm always sort of thinking I'm not physically there to see that this is going on.

Some friends are very passionate about this topic so they would have shared something and I would have a little read and without making any comments and make of it what I will.

In terms of politicians, I find that the ones that I will actually read on it and take seriously and consider tend to be from the minor parties and the Greens. The others are entirely too invested and sold out.

Politicians will just shape things to get votes, so they don't necessarily have to believe it themselves. If they know where the opinion polls are, that's what they'll support.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

It's a disconcerting response that when you mentioned who we trust, is how many of us just went completely silent.

I'm probably silly, but when you said trust, I was like, oh, I've never thought about not trusting the sources that I go to. Obviously even if I think they're being honest to me, they could be being fed other information. So I don't know. I was taken aback by the question.

I trust the facts, but I take, yes, understand that different outlets are coming from different angles. So, *The Australian's* coming from a particular point of view, and *The Age* and the ABC to a degree are coming from another point of view.

(The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre) use actual evidence from asylum-seekers. So I guess I'm more inclined to take more from actual people that have been through that process, as opposed to people reporting on those people

I suppose you would trust certain aspects of information from certain people. I imagine that there wouldn't be fabrications of incidences coming from, say my more left-wing friends on Facebook.

No-one wants to get into conflict on Facebook.

So long as you're anonymous, people are going to be fighting about anything. But when it's a personal post, nobody wants to say anything that isn't supportive of it.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

Whether it's coming from politicians, the ABC or *The Bolt Report*, you know they've all got their own political agendas. You just have to make up your own mind.

You assemble the information coming in, and you just, I think from your heart, you just make your own decision.

(The Greens) tend to feed this information out there without ever really checking on what the facts are. For that reason I don't particularly trust everything that they argue about.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

I trust everything that is printed in *The Australian*. Journalists and media channels, television, radios etcetera, what they are doing is they are reporting the news, objectively. And they do a great service to the community to report the news as they discover it. And I believe everything is objective.

I don't trust a lot of what I read or what I see. I try not to watch a lot of TV. They seem to sensationalise and change things around.

Discussions (on the ABC) with politicians, I trust them. They make the decisions, really, don't they?

I can't say that I trust everything I read or see. But it is interesting to see the Seven news with the boats coming in. I mean they say that cameras don't lie and they are there boarding boats all the time. So it makes you stop and think.

A few years back when something happened with boat people and something was said about it, I can't remember exactly what, the politicians said one thing and (there was) the discovery of a cover up or a change. It was political.

I don't care whether it is Labor or Liberal or whoever, I don't know, to me there is no trust there.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

Plain and simple doesn't sell. It has to be dramatised,

They only show you what they want to show you, what they want you to think, the mainstream news channels.

It's sort of like, manipulated in a way to get your emotive feelings in.

If you see something on the news, it's sort of easy to just think it

happened, and it may be true it happened, but it may not be the exact correct events.

I do hear (about asylum-seeker issues) from family and friends. They usually have very strong opinions about it, so no, I don't trust it.

Q: What about politicians?

You can't. No way. Absolutely not.

Q: And you're all laughing. What is it about politicians?

They're the ones that make the fictions.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

You can't trust anything 100% because it's all going to be biased. You go take it with a bit of salt, and you read between the lines.

I think ABC being non-commercial company, they tell the news as I guess they want people to know. Lately, you hear Tony Abbott saying they're wasting taxpayer money because he doesn't like the fact that they're reporting on certain issues.

SBS. It's not sugar-coated as I find Channel 10, Channel 7.

I can distinguish which one's telling the truth or not. I do trust Alan Jones and Ray Hadley. I do compare them with ABC and I don't trust ABC much because of their recent right-wing interviewers, the people that they interview.

A friend of mine used to work as a guard in Villawood and he does tell me some stories about people there. So I guess I would believe what he's saying.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

I trust the paper, that's about all. I don't trust TV. They stretch the truth a fair bit. Like last year, the bushfires on the mountains. There was nothing. I went through it. And it wasn't like that on the TV.

ABC and Channel Nine but also, there are some newspaper editorial people that do speak a lot of sense. On the other extreme, (there are some) that are just completely full of it. Andrew Bolt. He sticks out. He's absolutely completely full of it.

The ABC, I think is probably the fairest of them, and someone like Laurie Oakes on Channel Nine.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

No one.

I trust SBS, and ABC probably.

(And one respondent who had been based in the Middle East for work, said he drew on his own knowledge.)

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

I try and stick away from the news. They try and portray the wrong picture.

Rupert Murdoch is a massive supporter of the Liberal Party and he literally owns most of the mainstream media. Of course he's going to slowly drip-feed you what he wants you to believe.

Channel Nine has really taken a nosedive. A lot of it's really sensational. ABC seems a little more level-headed and controlled, so I stick to ABC.

The media is very fear-mongering and that they just trying to make everyone feeling very paranoid and get them scared and no one really knows the facts and are just believing that it's gospel. People are going to keep watching if they're scared, to find out more information.

I think for the commercial stations like Nine and Seven you can tell that they are a little more desperate than they once were. They're not getting the funding. More people are switching to online news now, and so you can tell with the headlines that they use

in the newspapers and stuff, it's really kind of attention-grabbing rather than stating facts or just certain situations. Whereas the government-funded stations like ABC they don't have to worry too much about how much money they are making.

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

A documentary, I think, is the only thing that I would sort of trust. Where they actually do their proper research.

The Project has gone very biased towards one way. They've gone very Labor-sided. I find it very pro asylum-seekers.

Language, labels and legitimacy

The vocabulary of public debate about asylum-seekers is littered with labels that are familiar to Australians and readily come to people's minds: "boat people", "queue-jumpers", "illegals".

For many people, each of these three terms contains a degree of truthfulness that gives it some acceptability, even among those who also recognise that the words are freighted with an underlying negative meaning. For instance, if people try to come to Australia by boat, it is seen as reasonable by some to label them "boat people" because it can be interpreted as merely descriptive of their mode of passage. Others see this as disingenuous, seeing the term as having a negative connotation bearing an underlying message of fear, constructed by some politicians for political purposes.

The term "queue-jumpers" is similar. Some people say that even if there is no queue – literally or metaphorically – in their countries of origin, nonetheless asylum-seekers who attempt to come by boat are trying to circumvent Australia's immigration processes and in that sense are trying to jump the queue of people waiting to be processed. This gives the term some legitimacy in their eyes and they tend not to accept that it has underlying negative connotations beyond that of trying to cheat. Others say there simply is no queue in any sense that we generally use the term, and that it is used just as a way of portraying people in a negative light, again for political purposes.

The term "illegals" is accepted by many people primarily because few have any idea about whether Australia has any legal obligations in respect of refugees or asylum-seekers or, if those obligations exist, what they are and where they come from. A few do understand that Australia is a signatory to the Refugee Convention and that this imposes legal obligations, but by and large there is no knowledge or understanding of these arrangements. Therefore, if someone in authority says that asylum-seekers are acting illegally, then with very few exceptions people accept it as true because they have no knowledge against which to test it.

Then there is a substantial list of other labels that are not heard often but proliferate almost exclusively among people in New South Wales: “terrorists”, “towel-heads” (a reference to Arab headwear mentioned by a participant in the Dubbo group), “invaders”, “imports”, “intruders”, “criminals”. They tend not to be positively endorsed by other people in the groups where they come up, but neither are they repudiated. So they sit in the lexicon ready to hand and, when used, go unchallenged. The reason for this is that aside from “towel-heads”, which is seen as a joke term, the other labels are seen as having just enough objective truth to make them not worthwhile arguing about.

This is based on a widely held perception – not just in New South Wales but everywhere – that there are “bad apples” among the asylum-seekers, and a belief that the collection of terms mentioned above probably captures most of the undesirables. This provides the basis for the passive acceptance – in western Sydney anyway – of terms such as “invaders”, “imports” and “intruders”, because these are seen as people who should be stopped at the border.

In addition, many respondents also think of asylum-seekers in more humanistic terms. “Desperate” is the one most commonly heard – and heard often – but also “oppressed”, “desolate”, “sad”, “fearful”, “victims”, “runaways”, “displaced”, “wandering around, belonging nowhere”.

The term “asylum-seeker” is rarely used spontaneously except by those who are more attuned to the topic or who are more highly educated. Clearly it is a technical term whose meaning is well understood but which does not come readily to mind. When people use a neutral term, “refugees” is the commonest.

It is also common to hear respondents argue against the labelling of asylum-seekers in these ways. Even people who do not disagree with some of the labels argue that labelling people is itself wrong in principle because unless someone “has walked in their shoes”, as one participant put it, it is arrogant and ignorant to affix labels to people. This sentiment is heard in many places.

A few respondents say that if they were in the asylum-seekers’ situation, they would be queue-jumping and taking boats too.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

(People in) refugee camps have put in the hard yards, done the time, waited for their position to come up, so they're a different batch to the illegal entries.

It is hard to put labels on people because we don't know their background.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

It has to be on a case-by-case basis. The fact that a large part of society can form a view and label (people) queue-jumpers, for example, doesn't ring true to me when it's completely individual circumstance.

I think there has to be a certain element of humbleness. I have absolutely no concept of what it would be like to live half of what their lives have been.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

I don't think they should be called illegals, which I think is often what happens to serve political ends.

I think they're all asylum-seekers. It depends on whether they're trying to do it legitimately – goes through what the government requires – or whether they're desperate.

There's an easy legal channel for people to go through, and I think that's forgotten.

There are queue-jumpers, there are boat people, and I would be one too.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

They are running from poverty, so they are really not asylum-seekers at all. I'm against people illegally entering the country, full stop. Absolutely under any circumstances they should not be allowed. There is no such thing as persecution, in my opinion, in the world. People are born where they are and if they want to go elsewhere, they should apply to go elsewhere and if they are accepted, go. The cause is the poverty and world population. I was born in India so I know how bad it is. So I would like to see these people drown rather than be rescued.

Geez that's a bit rough.

You are not walking in their shoes. I'm sorry, I am not saying that they should be coming in illegally, but you don't know what the situation is. There's all sorts of things in the world and I just think that is pretty strong.

There are different situations for everyone and to say I'd rather they drown, where is the humanity in that?

A lot of them say they have got money before they even come out, like ones leaving their country because their mothers have paid for it, uncles or family or someone have paid the extra money to the boat people to bring them out.

There are a lot of Australian's that are living in poverty, they are not getting the same handouts as the people who are coming into Australia.

I think a lot of them are genuine asylum seekers seeking political asylum. But if we refer to the boat people, they are usually ones with money because they actually paid for their passage. So I take them not to be genuine.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

As far as I know, if they're here, then I'm guessing they are legal.

But in a way, they might escape. Just like the refugee detention centre.

So they're legally able to be in the detention centre. Right?

Yes.

But if they escaped from there, then they are illegal.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

In general I think that they're coming here to make a good life.

I believe they're just coming for a better life. There was a recent picture of the father with the children on a boat. I'm not sure I even seen it on the news and he's really sad, like all the dad wants to do is just to give a better life for your child or maybe children. And that's all they want. It's for the kids. It's not really for them, for their kids.

The majority are, if you really ask them what they have gone through, they are genuinely refugee. But then you still got cases that they might make a story up to get through that process.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

You've got people that genuinely have to leave their homes because there is nothing left, because they're discriminated against or being exterminated, basically, in their own countries, then we do have an obligation to help people.

If they're coming through the right channel.

There's not always the right channel available if you're in those sort of things.

Yes, there's people that have to flee to random embassies etcetera. Trying to get through because if you're under some of the governments over there, you can't get [permission to leave].

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

Queue-jumpers, people who're trying to fast track the process, pay their way in. Avoid the normal checks.

I think it's the way the media uses that term. I think they use it in a negative way.

Every time I hear the word boat people I just think of desperation.

There's no queue, so they can't be queue-jumpers.

Well technically there is a queue of people to get into the country, the proper negotiation process, so they're trying to get in a different way, or faster. That's the way the term's come about. They've jumped the queue.

I think a lot of people now are incredibly desperate, so anything to put themselves in a situation where they can save their life.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

I'd like to think that they're escaping bad situations. Because if I was in their countries, I wouldn't want to be there either, having to go through that waking up not knowing if you were going to live that day.

I believe they're coming over for a better lifestyle.

I think they are generally trying to escape from a bad situation for a second chance really.

The amount of people that drown and die and the boats don't even make it, you know, it's too much of a risk for them to be doing it just for an upgrade.

There's got to be something there whether they're being forced out for political reasons or there's actually death threats or the area just isn't safe for them to be living there.

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

For somebody to go, here's my life savings, let me jump on board that boat that looks terrible, and take me half way across the world, they're escaping something terrible.

I see them as people who have been basically conned, but I do think the majority of them are fleeing either because it's war-torn or because they just want to get a better life for their kids.

I think most of them are generally trying to flee something. But there's also a portion where, like, they're trying to find something better.

I feel that if they have made the decision to do this, then it's out of desperation.

Australia's legal obligations

People's grasp of Australia's legal obligations concerning refugees and asylum-seekers is shaky, to put it mildly. Some believe Australia does have obligations arising from something to do with the United Nations. Others have a vague notion that Australia has some unspecified obligation to take a certain number or quota of asylum-seekers but have no idea how that is calculated or how the obligation arises.

Some older respondents hark back to the period after World War Two and recall that Australia entered into some agreement or treaty at that time to take refugees from Nazi Germany, but are unsure whether it applies today.

In this vacuum of knowledge, attitudes based on gossip, hearsay, suspicion, prejudice and instinct proliferate. Moreover, this lack of knowledge hampers the development of a mature understanding of what the term "asylum-seeker" means, and contributes to its status as a technical term, as mentioned previously in this report.

At the extreme – and it should be emphasised that it is the extreme – lack of knowledge about Australia's legal obligations compounds a strong underlying view about the sanctity of national borders and the rights of people to move between countries. In this view, there is no room for movement between countries that is not strictly in accordance with the host country's immigration procedures.

Confusion between immigration and asylum-seeking clouds this question, as it clouds the question about whether it is right to categorise people as asylum-seekers or economic refugees, already referred to. Some people regard the two as the same, and so suggest that Australia might accept a proportion of asylum-seekers on the basis that they were from war zones (and therefore assumed to be in need of Australia's assistance) and a proportion chosen because they could contribute to the economy.

A few people see Australia's legal obligations towards asylum-seekers as part of the law of the sea and the associated obligations to go to the assistance of vessels in distress.

One or two respondents enunciated a correct account of Australia's legal obligations, but others who heard them were not persuaded.

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

I don't even know that, I just know that there are a lot of people opposed and a lot of people are angry at politicians and there is a lot of fear. What's the process? What are the requirements that people need to meet? I don't know anything about that. I just know that people don't want people in this country for whatever reason.

Everybody has the right to feel safe, no matter what country you are from, and I think that every country has the obligation to take on asylum-seekers, not just Australia.

We're a global world. All around the world there are places for everybody. Remove them from that harm.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

Australia has obligations to itself to make sure it doesn't do anything to detriment itself. However, I think that the people, the individuals who run Australia as human beings have a duty to every other human being that they can possibly help.

Didn't we sign a charter with the UN, or we agreed to have like an intake of, I don't know how many but a certain amount of asylum-seekers, and we're not meeting that agreement? Didn't we?

I thought, for genuine asylum-seekers or people deemed to be genuine asylum-seekers I thought we had an obligation to take all of them.

I don't know if there is a legal framework in place, but I say that we've made some commitment.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

I suppose if you put it down to a human right, everyone has a human right to do whatever they need to do to preserve their family and their way of life. But as far as them having a legal right or permission to come into Australia, I don't see it as that being the case.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

If they're here, then I'm guessing they are legal. But they might escape the refugee detention centre. If they escaped from there, then they are (illegal).

That's the reason why we have detention centres. Just for them. If it wasn't for the boats, there obviously wouldn't be any detention centre in the first place.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

I think it's part of the Geneva or the NATO or the United Nations, sorry. They all have a quota or a responsibility to take on people that are genuinely fleeing persecution. And I think that's good, that's admirable.

I think there is a quota to take certain number of refugees every year.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

After World War Two, I think it was, the Government signed up what's known now as the UN convention to help out Europe with all of the refugees that were fleeing from Germany.

Germany and the fall of communism in the — what do you call it? — the Eastern Bloc. So yes. But it's then a case of where we have to take a percentage, whatever that percentage is. We have to take a certain percentage. I think it was Arthur Calwell was the one who signed off on it.

If they're coming through the right channel.

There's not always the right channel available.

Yes, there's people that have to flee to random embassies etcetera.

If they took in 50% of asylum-seekers that are coming from war-torn areas and then take in 50% of people that can actually improve your economy ...

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

I think there's a treaty.

We're signatories to a whole pile of national agreements, refugee conventions, human rights agreements, etcetera.

I can't quote it, but I'm pretty sure that we have to take so many per year.

No, no, no, it's not about numbers. It's an obligation to accept people if they meet the requirements of being a genuine refugee. Then you're obliged to accept them into your country, unless they can be resettled to a different country.

And we did that.

But we've also paid them to go back to their own country. The government has given them money, some of them, to go back to their own country, because they're stranded on Manus Island. And then they're supposed to be going to Cambodia.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

It's like 30,000 a year or something like that?

If you want to join the UN you have to meet certain standards and stuff like that to be part of that group and I think the 30,000 or some number like that is what you have to meet.

I believe there is a quota they have to meet, or something like that, every year.

Well, I think the kind of standard we should aim for is to look at countries with similar levels of economics and standards or whatever and kind of aim to take the same number of refugees as those countries do, or slightly more.

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

[Legal obligations arise] once they're in our waters, yes.

Some treaty?

I've heard they've got an obligation once they're in a certain distance.

I know in New York, they've got the United Nations. Isn't it something to do with that? Some sort of agreement.

Is it that? Or is it more if a boat is in distress, isn't there something in regards to saving that vessel, as opposed to treaty?

I thought legally we did have to once they reached a point.

You know, before that turnaround point.

I think then the pressure comes politically, anyway. To assist in some way. Because they know how bad it looks if you turn the boat away.

There's a moral and social obligation to do something about it. Whether it's legal or not, I don't know.

Risks, assimilation and national identity

Many are the perceived risks of accepting asylum-seekers into Australia: that they will be a threat to public safety, will bring their troubled past with them, will indulge in crime, will not assimilate, will not conform to Australian laws and social mores, will cow the majority into conforming to their wishes, will be a force for community divisiveness, will put pressure on the health services, housing prices, employment and government services, and will create injustices over the distribution of government assistance.

Above all, the biggest perceived risk is what one respondent called the Islamisation of Australia. Many others refer to this phenomenon without giving it that name.

This represents an historic shift in the underlying factors driving attitudes to new arrivals in Australia, a shift to religious prejudice.

Previously, prejudice against new arrivals – whether immigrants, refugees or asylum-seekers – tended to be based on race (Jupp 2007; Lopez 2000; Tavan 2005). The White Australia policy was by definition a race-based policy. The experience of post-War immigrants in their early years in Australia – as recalled again in this research – was that they were ridiculed as “wogs”, a racist term if ever there was one. In the 1990s, the founder of the One Nation political party, Pauline Hanson, campaigned against what she called the Asianisation of Australia.

In none of these cases was religious prejudice evident. If anything, the history of religious prejudice in Australia is centred on tensions between Catholics and Protestants and to some degree on anti-Semitism. Fears of “Islamisation” are therefore a relatively recent phenomenon.

This religious prejudice arises from a combination of fear, resentment and contempt. The fears are that Islam is a breeding ground for terrorism and that Muslims have ambitions to become the dominant religious and cultural force in Australian society. The resentment arises from the perception that in order to accommodate the religious sensibilities of Muslims, some institutions are watering

down Christian-oriented traditions. The contempt is engendered by a perception that Muslims are taking advantage of Australia's tolerance to assert their religious freedoms while practising a religion that denies such freedoms to others.

Suspicious about the ambitions of Islam to eclipse established Australian social, cultural and religious traditions are expressed through countless anecdotes – none based on first-hand evidence – that public places such as schools and shopping centres have abandoned Christmas carols and nativity plays in order to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities. A hairdressing salon is said to have cleared itself of all other customers in order to allow a Muslim woman to have her hair cut in private. Ordinary citizens are said to no longer send Christmas cards but “happy holiday” cards instead, also to avoid giving offence to Muslims.

Moreover, Muslims are seen as exploiting Australia's multicultural values to assert their right to be treated with tolerance, while practising a religion that preaches intolerance.

Commonplace events add fuel to these resentments and suspicions. It is seen as unjust, unreasonable and further evidence of Australia's weakness in the face of Islam that motorcyclists are required to remove their helmets before entering a bank, while a Muslim woman may enter with her head fully covered, save for her eyes.

Racial prejudice does play a part in some people's attitudes to asylum-seekers, but it is a generalised prejudice against people who are “different from us”, rather than a prejudice directed against a specific race or identifiable group of races. Most people have no idea where the asylum-seekers are coming from except that they come from “the Middle East” or “Asia”, and consequently have only the vaguest notion of what races they might represent. It is very definitely subordinate to religion as a driver of prejudice.

The perceived threat to public safety is seen as having many facets. Given the association of asylum-seekers with Muslims and Muslims with terrorism, it is not surprising that a commonly perceived threat to public safety is that of a terrorist attack. The Lindt Café siege once again is emblematic of this. But the perceived threat to public safety also has a more suburban and protean dimension: groups of asylum-seekers gathered in alarming knots on public stairways; groups of young asylum-seekers walking the streets at night, making them unsafe; increases in violent

and petty crime for which asylum-seekers are suspected of being responsible.

Allied to this is an assumption that asylum-seekers come from a lawless and violent background and therefore will have little understanding of, or respect for, the constraints of Australian law. So a story about a refugee refusing to pay for repairs to his car and stripping himself naked in protest at being asked to do so is recounted as an example both of incapacity to understand the rules of Australian society and resistance to assimilating into it.

For decades, assimilation has been a cornerstone of attitudes to immigration among Australians. By this Australians generally mean that newcomers must respect and adhere to Australian law, must learn English, conform to Australian social mores, leave old enmities behind and appreciate the gifts Australia holds out.

The respondents to this study are no different. What is different, however, is the existence of real doubt that asylum-seekers *want* to assimilate. On the contrary, because of the association of asylum-seekers with Muslims and because of a suspicion that Muslims have ambitions to become the dominant cultural and religious force in Australian society, many respondents see resistance to assimilation among asylum-seekers as a real and serious risk.

The old response to those who are thought not to assimilate is, "Go back to where you came from". In respect of asylum-seekers, some respondents reformulate it as, "Go somewhere with a similar culture to your own".

All these threads concerning assimilation may be summed up in the words of one respondent: "We have to change the way we are to accommodate them".

At the same time there is widespread acknowledgement that previous waves of immigrants have successfully assimilated, even though there was initial prejudice against them from within the Australian community. The post-War intake of refugees and immigrants from Europe is now celebrated as having provided the foundations of a multicultural society of which people are proud, and descendants of those immigrants are able to smile when they recall being labelled as "wogs" at school. The wave of immigrants from Asia and especially from Vietnam is seen as having enriched Australia not only with a broader cultural mix but

with people who are making a real contribution to Australian life.

These earlier waves of arrivals are seen as having taken place under firm government control, and there is a concern that the current refugee crisis is so large as to threaten the capacity of the government to maintain control. However, a likelier explanation for the acceptance of earlier arrivals is that the anxieties and uncertainties that attended them have become resolved with time, whereas the anxieties and uncertainties about asylum-seekers are very much alive and unresolved.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that virtually all respondents in this study express pride in Australia's capacity to successfully absorb newcomers from different cultures. It is seen as a defining national characteristic, reflecting adaptability, tolerance, willingness to take people on their merits, to live and let live, to get on as mates. This pride in, and recognition of, past successes has not engendered a belief that the same will happen with asylum-seekers – or at least not yet.

Among those respondents more sympathetic to asylum-seekers, current policies and publicly expressed attitudes towards asylum-seekers are seen as being in conflict with this aspect of our national identity, and as having some commonalities with the White Australia policy, which they repudiate as belonging to a bygone Australian era.

Among many respondents there is support for the idea of assisting the assimilation process and at the same time reducing the wrongs associated with offshore detention by bringing in carefully screened asylum-seekers and settling them in small groups in regional centres where they can be taught English, introduced to the Australian way of life, be kept an eye on, and be given opportunities to contribute to society by working on farms or otherwise helping out. There is a caveat though: the screening must be sufficiently rigorous to minimise risks to security and public safety.

There is a perception that in these ways the materialist risks – that asylum-seekers will be drain on the country's resources and put pressure on capital-city employment and housing markets – could be reduced. Such an approach is also seen as reminiscent of how post-War immigrants were introduced to Australia by being assigned to large projects such as the Snowy Mountains scheme.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

If they're coming from a lawless place and don't respect the laws of here, when you've got people out of control and then whoever is living next door is in fear of their own safety because next door's not toeing the line of being a nice person.

They gave Sudanese refugees housing and one of my friends does smoke alarms checks. They were given all these properties. Smoke alarms were all pulled down and used as ashtrays. The houses were not respected, they were all damaged and what's normal in their country is not normal here. There is so much that happened that is normal in their country, but they do like taking wheels off cars. There's a huge increase in that type of crime.

[There] should be a kind of induction process if we know there are going to be people not knowing the laws, and they should be educated properly in the laws which we abide by.

We're a multicultural country. We're known for chipping in and giving each other a hand and accepting. I mean it's been happening since the Asian invasion and it's a similar kind of vein I think, and I think we adapt and we put our arms around each other and just getting on with it.

It goes back to even when I was a kid. The concern was that the Italians will bring the Mafia with them.

Walking through Noble Park late at night, I wouldn't do that anymore; there are tough kids walking around and the different cultures and stuff like that.

With the cafe and things like that happening, likely more scary now, that we just didn't think of happening before.

A lot of incidents the media hypes up. It's an awful tragedy that it did happen, but it is a completely isolated incident and the likelihood of that happening as a regular occurrence is very slim.

Once you've worked with an immigrant or an asylum seeker or whatnot, and they're a fairly nice person, you got nothing to worry about.

I've heard of a lot of really saddening and disappointing acts of violence against people from other cultures and Muslim people and women.

The way I see it is be happy you are here leave the rest of it alone, and get on as mates.

It would be great if we could all just do that, but when you have been brought up and it's in your blood, that sort of struggle.

Ten years ago there was Muslim pressure on the local council to ban pork products from the local market, and they folded to it even though it's only a seven or nine per cent Muslim population there. And that lasted about six months before there was so much local resident response saying no.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

We are in this privileged position of being surrounded by water, so this is one of the very few things we can control. I don't agree with it, but I understand it. It's one of the last frontiers that we can defend if we need to.

If we had been in Europe, for example, and borders are what they are, I think this would be a very different. We probably couldn't ignore people knocking at our door,

I think one of the most important aspects of the fact that we are an island, is it controls our age as a quote, unquote civilised country. But we are only a few hundred years old, as a result of our inaccessibility, so our social identity is still in its adolescence. And I think that's probably one of the most important aspects of it. The asylum-seeker issue is something that is in one way or another threatening the stability of that identity.

I think one of the major considerations of this is the social identity we have as Australians. I know that if you travel overseas and you say I'm Australian, the idea that they get is that you're this laid back, cool person who doesn't do those sorts of things. America has this bad rap of being a country that would, but Australia, no.

I think part of it is that we are still in a way going through that stage of trying to find out who we are and what our social identity is. Part

of that is obviously multiculturalism, and then there is others who remember how Australia used to be, and who are indigenous here. And so all these are different, arguably true, identities of Australia and I think we are still sorting that out. The asylum-seeker issue is something that is in one way or another threatening the stability of that identity, even though it is unstable in itself.

National identity is always quite intertwined with border control, and the asylum-seeker policy I'm seeing today is reminiscent of the White Australia policy, where there's this idea of white Australia being a national identity. But then we always tag on multicultural at the end and that's not being reflected in a lot of our border control.

I think a lot of it is tied to the fear of refugees in the media being terrorists or something like that, and I think that's just kind of sad.

When we hear race sometimes we're actually hearing all of those fears, about what that might come with race.

There is this massive separation between us and the other. And the other is this kind of scary unknown thing.

Previously, intakes of different races was a choice or a policy of government — Italians, Greeks, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and so it. It was controlled with who was coming and how many. Whereas now, we don't know who the people, what their backgrounds are, so yes, I guess there is that fear of the unknown.

The criticisms you hear of, there are the financial, it's going to be really expensive when all these people come in, or they don't play well with others, they won't amalgamate or fit in. So obviously a lot of those are rooted in fear of change.

[In] media coverage, the bad things are highlighted and a lot of negative and extreme circumstances are highlighted, like acts of terrorism.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

The majority of people in Australia, if you were to ask them, would say, I'm all for bringing more people into Australia, as long as it's done the right way. But Australia has this political agenda.

We had the White Australian policy. We were scared that anyone coming into Australia wasn't white, and now we've got this ...

And now we've allowed the Asians in, and they've assimilated quite well, and I think we've had no problem recently with that. And I think it's up to the Government to say, let's bring more people in.

There are many, many country towns that are crying out for population.

And I think it helps with integration.

When you look at the Vietnamese, people like the Greeks and Italians after Second World War, they never came in under skill, they just came in because there was a need. And those people became fantastic contributors.

They were prepared to go and pick fruit, or to labour, or be brickies' labourers. So I think it would be good if they opened up more to the asylum-seekers, regardless of their skills, and gave them an opportunity, and said, as long as you're prepared to go pick fruit, labour, do whatever, decentralise, that would be great for the country.

I think a future problem will be population. Not that we've got too many; we're not having enough. They say with all the baby boomers retiring, the next generation — are they going to be able to support us?

I think people have a concern about some of the people that do come in. The Sudanese and whatnot. I mean, they've come from backgrounds where they've seen terrible atrocities and experienced terrible things themselves. And they come here and some people are saying there's a lot of problems because of it. They're not blaming the person directly, but there's a prejudice here because they think, are we going to be safe around these people?

They do have issues, and some have mental issues because of what they've experienced, and some people have a fear of that.

Marginalising them before they begin.

I know a lot of Christians who are very upset over the fact that there's been problems they have with the Muslims in France, with

the burqa and sharia law. And they look at it and say, "Sharia law has taken over. They've got their own banking system, they've got their own courts." They even put out brochures on it, amongst themselves, and they say that their objective is to breed, because they know that we're not breeding, and they're all going to have 12 kids and then they'll make the political system change to Sharia law for them.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

When in Rome ...

When in Rome do as the Romans do.

Adapt to the countries.

They bring all their problems here and ruin our country. Instead of assimilating and saying this is very cool, they are bringing their anger and their way of life, instead of trying to fit in with us.

I have a perfect example of a refugee, I don't know what sort of refugee, a Sudanese. A mechanic told me this, where he didn't want to pay. He said it is a free country, he thinks that we don't pay for things but police came to him after, when he disrobed completely, he said I am not paying.

Q: What, he took his clothes off?

He took his clothes and they just threw him in the back of the van and took him to the police station and they charged him. They made him apologise and pay the mechanic.

I am out at all hours of the day and night and you see them walking around the street with their bloody half bottle of wine. It is nothing to see 30 or 40 in one particular pub that I know of, playing poker machines all day and just sitting there drinking. I have had a few run-ins with a couple of them where they have blocked stairways. And you have got to tell them, "Hey, do you mind! Off the stairway." And they are like, "We'll kill you." And like, mate you are in Australia now and you aren't killing anyone.

But then I had the opposite where I met a lovely [man].

He was well educated and he had done a lot of management

work and he got himself up and I asked him about how is this for you. [He said] I just persevere until someone believes in me, because I believe in myself. And I really shook his hand. That's good to see.

I saw in Blacktown where this white fellow, a young teenage guy, was greeting his fellow school mate who was a Sudanese, obviously, but they greeting him with their custom which is kissing on each cheek. I thought, wow, that's a culture change. It was amazing to see. That was wonderful, good to see. He had accepted his culture.

I was born in Malta. We were always called wogs or whatever. Then you had the Asians, the Greeks, you had the Italians. In the beginning, they congregated together. Greystanes was all Maltese, you know. And what has happened, over the years it is all multicultural.

It takes time.

The beauty of Australia is the melting pot. That's the thing I love about it. You can do quirky and crazy whatever in all the different areas, all the different nationalities. I do actually love it.

But we were legal migrants. We came through the World Council of Churches. That's what I mean, you can have multiculturalism but they must come legally. We are talking about asylum-seekers who have been refused entry and they still come.

A lot of the schools aren't allowed to celebrate Christmas or sing Christmas carols. My daughter is actually a pre-school teacher and she said some schools — she teaches in a Catholic school — and she said in other schools they are not allowed to sing Christmas carols. If there happens to be a majority of Muslim, they don't celebrate Christmas and they don't want others to celebrate. So everybody is too scared that they are going to offend someone. That is the problem.

They were saying Bankstown Shopping Centre, I remember 15 years ago, they were going to try and stop all the carols because the Muslim's didn't want it. And everyone got on the radio and said that is crap, you know. Mate, this ain't right.

I am one of those people that believes in the homogeneous population. I think multiculturalism has seeds of disaster. It's conflict, extremes.

Q: So is it in Australia?

Of course. Where does terrorism come from? Somebody trying to impose his own version on the majority.

There are just too many people here now.

I know all of them down Ballarat way, a lot of asylum-seekers they gave them all houses, a whole town of them.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

Bring their past troubles here.

If you're coming from a country where things are tough and things are wrong, and you want to seek asylum here, then integrate, because we are a happy, free country. So don't bring your crap with you. You want to stay here, you must complete a language course, you must learn our language.

What happened at the siege at Lindt Café: They should have taken him out right then and there. He was supporting the ISIS. I mean, it was ridiculous.

If you're on a plane and the masks come down, you are told you put the mask on first, then you save everybody else. I think we have an obligation, we have a responsibility to look after what we have here, because it's good.

When they come here, they don't know much about the law. So for example — don't get me wrong, I'm not being racist — but when you see the Indian or the Asian drivers on the road, they're taking two lanes or not using their indicators. They just go wherever they want. It's not right.

Taking jobs, resources, all those kinds of things, from people who are doing it the legal way.

I think everyone deserves a chance as well. Starting a new life. Or discovering a new life.

But would they take that path? That's the risk we take, isn't it? We don't know whether they would or not.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

A lot of Muslim refugees are going in Europe and other boats coming here. You see a lot of places where they congregate, they don't assimilate, and it becomes like a desolate area. And they have ghettos where other people go in there and they feel threatened. In those cases, those people won't assimilate and they will never assimilate, so why don't they go to a country with a similar culture? If we go to Saudi Arabia, we ask to build a church, we will get knocked back. We have to live by their rules. When people come in here, they should be doing the same thing as what their country is. When in Rome, you do as the Romans do.

Okay, open the doors, let people in. Once people step out of line, send them back. You support the country, you work, you obey the rules, and respect the country. Once you don't, go back, or go to a country that is a similar background of you.

The key factor is to assimilate. To mix with other people. Yes okay, you don't have to marry other people if you don't want to, but you've got to respect other cultures. If you come here and you don't respect them, then you go to another country of the background that you are, that you can live happily with those rules that you want to follow.

We should accept everyone's culture and grow. I mean, you go back 100 years, there was basically the Anglo-Saxon culture here. Then slowly you had the Europeans, like the Greeks, Italians, Germans, French coming here, and it opened up a lot of other things. Then in the 70s and 80s you had a lot of the Vietnamese coming in, the Indonesians, Filipinos. They assimilated. I've got a lot of Vietnamese friends that were refugees. A lot of them have married other nationalities. I haven't married a Greek girl; I married another nationality.

Put them into towns in the less occupied regions in Australia, such as the Northern Territory or Western Australia, and just get them to assimilate into the culture.

The threat would be there's just so many of them coming. I recall in England where they took a few Libyan people. They started going through towns and damaging properties. There's some serious crimes, rape, murder, stealing. And I think Australia is sort of getting close to that. Not where I live, we live in a different area. But if you look around, you know, Mount Druitt area, Blacktown.

You can see it sort of starting. I have seen it.

Drugs in that area is pretty high. Unemployment is very high. I know a few people in Merrylands. They don't try to assimilate.

A lot of them are genuine, and yes, they need to be supported and welcomed. But there's also a lot of elements there that no matter what they will never assimilate and they just come here to take over.

We need to keep an eye on it that they are indeed working, assimilating, accepting the rules.

I see people as a form of human capital. So if you contribute to Australian economy, are productive in some way, okay. I don't see them as threat that way, at all. I think they can really contribute.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

Building mosques and things like that. Too many of them. If they're going to come into Australia, go under Australian rule, not their own rules. We don't have a religion where the woman's not allowed to show a bit of skin. That's not Australian. Just to see their eyes. We go into a bank and you have to have your face [visible] but they can walk in with their little slits in their eyes.

It's more non-tolerance. Basically, Australia's built on multiculturalism. They're (referring to Muslims) completely anti that, basically. It's the whole concept of jihad and everything else. That's not even the greatest risk. It's the fact that they're completely intolerant of everybody else while using multiculturalism as a banner [to say] you have to tolerate us.

I've read a lot of books about Islam about ladies that have fled those countries and they just dropped their religion altogether and become atheist. And it's really interesting because these ladies themselves say that Islam done in the way it's being done in modern days, is a very, very bad thing. They need to back to the essential roots of it. People don't get that. Today, it's such an emphasis on the way Islam is all twisted and the way it's ruled now. I think a lot of people see that side of it and that's not good.

There was a group down there [in Sydney] that were following an Islamic law.

And then there's the Lindt Café guy, who was clearly mad.

He was an asylum-seeker. He's lived in Australia for 15 years before he done this.

The interesting thing is, the Muslim community did not want anything to do with him. They had actually made complaints to the Australian Government about him and this was going on for about, what, five, six years. Didn't take any notice.

They're letting so many people in and the majority of them are good but some aren't. They're bringing in their own wars here — between each other and other cultures. I'm not saying any particular religion. I'm just saying in general they come and some of them don't leave it behind, they bring it.

You're not just looking at what they're bringing in, but the strain on the mental health... Like the mental health sector as well because you've got them coming in and especially if they've come from a war sort of area, you've got PTSD, you've then got depression.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

I grew up in the UK, and when I was growing up there was some 40 to 50 million people, there's now 100 million people. And still they keep coming. One of the big problems is, you can't just suddenly lump all of these people into some society and turn around and say, you don't speak English, you don't really understand the culture. One of the major issues is integration. It takes a long time to integrate. Australia's done a tremendous job in terms of multicultural, but it's not just happened overnight. And we don't have the ghettos ...

That's happening in Australia. If you look in Sydney, they've got the ethnic groups in their very segmented suburbs. [Chatswood] is 90% Chinese.

And everyone's leaving that suburb.

Marrickville, Lakemba.

The first generation that are here don't integrate at all. Then the integration slowly happens through time. I don't think you can change that.

The ethnic enclaves are getting stronger.

I think you're only referring to the Chinese, and they're absolutely everywhere through Australia and Sydney.

A lot of them [asylum-seekers] don't have any paperwork. And I'm very suspicious about that, because I really think if you were genuine you would keep your paperwork. A very good example is probably that Lindt Café guy. How the hell he got in is beyond me. He'd actually been a criminal in his own country before he even came to Australia.

Religious extremism ... which is exactly what you're talking about, and I agree with you. We don't necessarily want that in our country.

It seems to be Islam at the moment.

We can't even manage some of our own people who want to leave the country who've become Islam... They're doing that. So it's a growing situation of concern.

The economic cost. We don't know how long we're going to be supporting a great group. I'm all for basically humanitarian things, but at the end of it, by accepting in large groups of people who may or may not be productive in terms of being able to work, there's only a finite amount of money.

But it's much cheaper to support them here than in these camps.

Bring them here, rather than living in the camps.

Where a percentage of them do work, whether it's picking strawberries.

[Making a] contribution to our society.

And they're probably also developing themselves at the same time, and improving their whole general wellbeing as a result of work.

Crimes are being committed which in their own countries would

not be a crime, and they don't see it as a problem.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

There's different cultures coming in and could clash. They have grown up in different areas which may be a lot more violent and be used to that sort of stuff, and people think that it could be brought here, which is a pretty valid point.

Because they've got no money, they can't get a house, they can't get a job, they can't get nothing so they live on the street so it makes poverty rise.

Yes and no. I know for a fact when they come over they get more funding than a pensioner. I've seen it on Facebook. It was something like \$400 a fortnight or something for a pensioner and like \$800 or \$900 for a refugee.

Sharia law. It's pretty much inhumane treatment of females a lot of it.

I'm quite ignorant to what is actually involved within Islam to be honest, and the only stuff we get is quite often through the media, so your first instinct is a bit of apprehension.

I've looked a little bit at Islam and I think it's similar to Christianity in a way. I think the same way any religion that we've seen throughout history is that they just use that as an excuse for violence. Most of the religions have done it.

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

We go the Middle East. If we don't obey their laws, etcetera, you get into a fair bit of trouble. Australia is probably a little bit too accommodating, and therefore our rules, our regulations, everything just get watered down. A good example is, you're a motorbike rider, you go into a bank, you have to take your helmet off. There are some — and it's for religious reasons ... I can't remember all the correct terminologies, I think it's hijab, or burka, or that sort of thing. They're like, no we don't want to offend you, so therefore leave it on.

The same thing happens in hairdressing salons. These people get

their haircuts but everyone else has to leave the hairdressing salon.

You've got to respect that. I think you can tell them that you could make an appointment at a certain time when other people aren't there

How I see it is that we have to change the way we are to accommodate them. If we have a law here in Australia, it shouldn't be just for us as Australians. It should be for those who come here wanting to be Australians.

Over there, they have their rules. I believe that a woman can't wear a sleeveless top. If you take your jacket off in the Middle Eastern areas, two guards, two army guards are straight onto you. Put the jacket back on.

I think that if I was to go to a country, I'd be very respectful of what their customs were. And so I would abide by their requirements.

If people are coming to Australia, then the same principles should be followed here.

I think it was in Cairns where they put all the Christmas decorations up and there was a big uproar by, I think, the Muslim community. And they were all pulled down.

And people don't write happy Christmas any more; it's happy holidays.

Australia's response to asylum-seekers

On the whole, Australians do not unconditionally support Australia's current policies concerning asylum-seekers. Except among the relatively few people who are implacably opposed to having refugees or asylum-seekers come to Australia, support for these policies is broad but conditional, and is accompanied by considerable unease arising from humanitarian concerns. People holding these views wish there was a better way, and so for the most part their support for current policies is contingent on whether a better way can be found.

However, this broad spectrum of the community is at a loss as to what a better system might look like. Some say that however uncomfortable the conditions in the off-shore camps on Manus Island and Nauru, at least the asylum-seekers are being fed, housed and clothed, and in this respect are probably better off than they were before.

Some also question why asylum-seekers do not have proper travel documents, saying that if they did, the process would perhaps not take so long. Some suspect asylum-seekers of having deliberately destroyed their documentation in order to bamboozle a screening system that these respondents regard as essential if Australia is to know what it is getting when it allows someone to settle here. Some also regard asylum-seekers as trying to cheat not only the Australian immigration system but other people who are also trying to get into Australia but are going through the correct channels.

So for this broad spectrum of respondents, a better system would need to meet several criteria, in order to be considered acceptable. These criteria fall into two broad categories, what might be thought of as the "policing" category and the "humanitarian" category.

According to the "policing" criteria, the system would have to:

- deter, and preferably eliminate, people-smuggling and the associated risks of drownings at sea;
- demonstrate that Australia was in control of its borders;

- contain a screening process that meant Australia did not have an open-door policy in respect of asylum-seekers;
- minimise the risk that terrorists would get in;
- keep control of numbers in order to minimise strains on the health and welfare systems and on social cohesion.

According to the “humanitarian” criteria, the system would have to:

- deal with asylum applications in a reasonable time frame;
- be procedurally fair;
- minimise the harm caused by incarceration in offshore detention centres;
- minimise the risk of radicalising people or engendering hatred of Australia by indefinitely detaining them in harsh conditions;
- minimise the risk that Australia will one day have to foot the bill for health and social problems induced by the detention system.

These categories of criteria are not mutually exclusive among respondents. Many respondents express a preference for an approach that would include elements of both.

However, quite separately from this broad spectrum, there is another group of respondents – rather more numerous than implacable opponents to asylum-seekers – who regard the whole system as a national disgrace, grossly inhumane, destructive of Australia’s good name internationally, a huge waste of money and ultimately counter-productive. In their view, Australia will eventually end up taking a large number of these people, and when they finally get here they will have been further harmed by the system of off-shore detention, creating additional impositions on Australia’s health and welfare services, and perhaps contributing to radicalisation by breeding hopelessness and bitterness.

People who hold these views want the present system dismantled and asylum-seekers processed on shore, perhaps in country areas where they can be housed, educated and encouraged into the local community and workforce. Underpinning their attitudes is a commitment to the values of fairness and human decency that they believe define the Australian character and Australia as a nation.

The confusion and lack of knowledge about Australia’s legal obligations further complicates people’s assessment of Australia’s response to asylum-seekers.

There is virtually no understanding of the difference in legal status between asylum-seekers and immigrants. Whilst there is next to no understanding that a person fleeing persecution has a legal right to seek asylum, by contrast there is a solid bedrock of understanding that Australia has structured immigrant-selection process. This process is understood to have well-established selection criteria, such as for family reunion and for the importation of skills the economy needs. It is understood to be an orderly system that properly controls who is allowed to settle in Australia, how many are let in, and under what circumstances. It is the understanding so powerfully captured by the statement of John Howard when, as Prime Minister, he said, "We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come".

Australia's response to asylum-seekers is assessed against this understanding of how the immigration system works, with its underlying message reinforcing national sovereignty. Because of the lack of understanding about the distinction between immigrants and asylum-seekers, people start with a belief that all categories of arrivals – immigrants, asylum-seekers, refugees – should be treated alike: they should be subject to the same processes and to the same criteria for acceptance. With this conflation in mind it is easy to see how terms such as "queue-jumper" and "illegal" have become potent terms for those in the national debate opposed to a more open asylum-seeker policy.

Another factor influencing some people's attitudes towards Australia's handling of asylum-seekers is the phenomenon known as "downward envy", in which people who live in comparatively straitened circumstances object to assistance being given to those even worse off than themselves. This is particularly prevalent in western Sydney, where life can be tough in material terms.

In the context of the present study, the main symptom of downward envy appears in the form of assertions about the various types of assistance newcomers are believed to receive. These types of assistance are said to include new Nike shoes, cash handouts of \$10,000, incentive payments of \$5000 per child to encourage newcomers to have more children, free medical insurance and preferential access to public housing.

In the confusion over asylum-seekers and immigrants, there are disagreements and uncertainties about whether these alleged benefits are received by "legal" or "illegal" newcomers. But for those whose attitudes are coloured by downward envy, this is a

distinction without a difference. The point is, these “others” are being given benefits that otherwise might be enjoyed by battlers such as themselves. People who hold this view are content to see the continuation of a system that keeps asylum-seekers out of the country for as long as it takes, and minimises the numbers that will eventually be admitted.

Alongside these attitudes, however, runs a parallel line of thought that indicates a degree of cynicism among respondents about the way the issue of asylum-seekers has been framed and managed politically. This cynicism is stronger among those who disown the present system, but is evident too among people in the broad middle of the spectrum who offer the system conditional support.

The cynicism is revealed in remarks about how it seems that political and media attention is given only to those asylum-seekers who arrive by boat, while the greater numbers who arrive by air are largely ignored. Respondents explain this difference by saying that there is no political mileage to be made out of those who arrive by air because they come in dribs and drabs, have enough paperwork to get through Customs and Immigration and then disappear without trace into the wider community. By contrast, those who come by boat arrive in a large group, often in dramatic circumstances, attract government and media attention, and are therefore highly visible. As a result, they can easily be turned into useful political fodder.

The cynicism is also revealed in remarks about the secrecy surrounding Government operations against asylum-seeker boats, secrecy that most respondents object to on the grounds that they have a right to know what the Government is doing, and on the grounds that the secrecy is motivated by political and not genuine operational considerations. Occasionally, the policy of secrecy is defended as necessary to stop the generation of media stories, which are seen as arousing misplaced public concern about these issues.

A further objection to the present system, and another ground for unease among those who conditionally support it, is that the offshore detention centres are run by private companies to which the Government has outsourced the work. This is seen as an outsourcing of care and responsibility. Moreover, because it is understood that the companies need to make a profit, the outsourcing is seen as a contributor to what is perceived to be a lack of humanity in the way the detention centres are run.

The concept of the faceless and nameless “other” is also an important contributor to opinions about asylum-seekers. It is very common to hear asylum-seekers referred to in terms that suggest an imagined mass of faceless, nameless and numberless people fitting various feared stereotypes, lacking the individuality necessary for each to be seen as a human being.

However, when an asylum-seeker is given a name and a personal story, she suddenly becomes a person whom we should look out for as we would look out for anyone. This is vividly illustrated by the reaction of a group of younger respondents to a story told in their group by one of the participants about a teenage asylum-seeker who was allowed to attend high school, who was a conscientious and able student, escorted to and from her detention centre each day, and then eventually ordered to be deported because her request for asylum was refused. When this story was recounted by someone who had indirect personal knowledge of the case through a schoolteacher, the outraged disbelief of others in the focus group was palpable.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

I’m very much in agreement with a large part of that, but the process needs to be streamlined, because at the moment what we’re doing is breeding hopelessness, and that’s really, really bad. You want to radicalise people, you want to build up exactly what you fear in them, take a really long time and leave them sitting in a tent in the desert somewhere else feeling unsafe.

That sense of helplessness eats people. Now, I’m not saying throw the doors open entirely, but there needs to be a better and more reasonable system.

What concerns me is that we’ve still got homeless on our streets, and on top of that we’ve got these asylum-seekers in these crappy tents. My head boggles. We don’t have the resources for them as well when they come here. What’s wrong with these people? “We need to turn them back; we need to turn them back”. Where do we send them to?

I work in community service and it goes without saying that I

think everybody deserves a chance and a lifeline. But you look at things that are blown out of proportion, like the Lindt Cafe stuff.

I understand that people are afraid of whether or not we're going to have jobs, whether or not there are going to be criminals with links to ISIS or terrorism, that kind of stuff. It's not my personal feeling myself, and all the hype about it, it just smells of fear.

I think that the fear aspect of not knowing exactly who's coming in, their life history, associations, religion. If the wrong element is brought in, they get together and protest or start stirring up extra trouble that we haven't had in Australia. It becomes a daily fear of, "Is this bus going to blow up?"

I have friends who are mothers whose kids don't celebrate Christmas in school or sing Christmas carols because it's culturally insensitive and that's another fear that they have, that kind of stuff.

I think that the fear component is two separate things. One thing is not knowing who is coming in. The other thing is our unemployment's the highest it's ever been. The economy's bad, investment is bad, and unemployment is bad, and there is homelessness on the streets, there is a lot of instability and a lot of unknown.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

The way we've been treating when they do come into our waters I think is just probably slightly inhumane, going back to World War Two or something, imprisoning them. It's not fair for their mental state as well.

It's a tricky situation, but I think the current policy seems to be working. Obviously it's not ideal that you are locking people up, but the alternative is letting them continue their journey on water, which has potentially deadly consequences for them. In the end, they do get to settle in Australia. That's, that's a good result for them, even if it's slightly drawn out.

From what I've read it just takes too long.

They're not here, we can't see them, it's not such a big issue. "Oh

we'll just put them on another island, thanks guys. Take care of it." And so, I am lacking information. I don't know what happens in those camps, and I think that's really important that we should know.

I completely agree. There has to be more transparency. There needs to be more media access so we can actually know how they're being treated. I know that the same companies that are running our prisons are also running the detention camps.

Yes, and I think they're running them in the same kind of regime. I think that's kind of embarrassing for Australia. It's just appalling how people are being treated.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

A boat-load's obvious. Boat people. It's never plane people, is it? Because they're not coming in a mass group. It's a few people get here.

It [plane arrival] isn't hysterical. It doesn't gain any political ...

Is it that people (on boats) visibly breach our border security, whereas people who come through the computer system don't visibly breach it?

Well, the Liberals said, we're turning the boats back, there are not going to be any boats. So they were pretty strong on that point. I'm not politically aligned with any party, so it doesn't worry me, but they did the opposite to what Labor was doing.

Well it's also supposed to be seen as a deterrent to stop more people coming, wasn't it?

And has it worked?

Well, we don't really know.

We don't hear as much.

It's fairly clandestine, isn't it?

And I don't think government should be that clandestine.

They're supposed to operate on our behalf.

I don't think there's any way you can simply allow everyone to come into the country. So therefore there has to be some process.

(It's) the amount of time it takes.

And outsourcing their care.

It's really quite grossly inhumane.

And I think that it's done by private companies who want to make money. I think it contributes to the lack of humanity that's shown to people who are in that position.

We have a duty as a country to share the world's asylum seekers or refugees. We need to do it more quickly than we do, because the way we've done this is inhumane.

But we've got so many unemployed here. You've got to look out for your own backyard first. There's got to be a balance.

It's not helping the people who mostly are going to end up coming here. We're adding to their troubles rather than taking away from their troubles. So when they do come to Australia, if they do come to Australia, then we have a much larger bill for each one of them to try to integrate them into society, because they're even more damaged.

There has to be a process, but I think it's getting longer and longer and longer.

Australia seems to be the backward country. We're imprisoning people. In 2015 we're imprisoning parents and children. Is that our Australian culture? Can't we do it with a little bit of respect, or compassion, or something?

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

A lot of people associate asylum-seekers with boat people and only with boat people.

They bring them in on aeroplanes. Then they say welcome, here's

a house, here's some money and here's your bank account and welcome to Australia.

They are running around in new Nike shoes. They had all been given a place, you know. They've made it so they have a place to live. You have homeless people that haven't even got a place in Sydney, yet these people just walk in get a place, \$10,000, new shoes.

I know a Sudanese. She came in with her mum and family and they got some money and house and I don't know what else they got.

The ones that get \$10,000 are the legal ones, not the asylum-seekers.

The asylum seekers are being put into camps aren't they?

Some are.

Quarantine, yes. Not the legal ones.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

I have a lot of refugee friends from Africa, from Sudan, Brazil, a few from the Middle East, some from Asia. Hearing their personal stories and understanding the situation, not just from the little bubble that we're living in Australia where our problems are, you know, "my iPod charger broke". To hear their stories, their life battle, is pretty insane. And I think that the way that we deal with it can be a little bit unjust, cold, lack of empathy. But then at the same time, the Australian Government is very lenient, very accepting of things and can be easily bullied. So I think that there's a fine line between being compassionate with people who are in desperate need, but what we do with them is too lenient and allows a lot of abuse of the system.

Come in, get on welfare benefits, bring all your children, here's \$5,000 each for each one you pop out in the next, you know, nine months.

\$5,000 for each child.

Is it five, and then three for the second one?

So, (they) don't have to work: "You have trauma from your situation, or physical disabilities, whatever it is, so don't work. Here's a nice house. We're all going to put you into one suburb. It's going to be predominantly run by whatever that language group was, and then anybody else who goes into that group is classed as an outsider".

Q: Is that happening where you live?

Yes. Merrylands.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

I don't think to put them in prison is a good idea, because their life is stopped. They're stuck there. They can't work. They can't do anything. They're being fed and clothed and housed. But, they don't have a life. Have them somewhere in the country where it's pleasant. Give them opportunity to have work, or do work where they can actually earn a living. Educate them in respect to learning the language as best as possible. And then get them to learn a bit of the culture.

Put them into towns (in) the less occupied regions in Australia, such as the Northern Territory or Western Australia.

I'm not sure how you're going to apply that, like educating them. Might cost a lot of money. I think we are on the right track sending them to PNG.

Definitely their life should not be stopped in detention centres. They should definitely come out with something where they get to assimilate and mingle around and get educated and be a part of where they are.

The frustrations that I have heard from friends is all because of the taxpayer's money going to look after them.

If you're putting people in a detention centre, you're kind of criminalising and you're telling them that they are not welcome in society. And then when they do go through all of their paperwork and they're legitimate refugees and we're happy to have them in Australia, I think it would be very difficult for those people to switch from, you know, this country has thought of me as a

terrible person and now they want to accept me. So I feel that these people must have some ill-feeling.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

We've got too big of a border to patrol. It's been a constant threat with Australia. We don't have the population to match the size. If you can't monitor everything, you have to keep it offshore

I like the Government's got where they say it's an operational issue and they don't discuss it. I reckon that's the best thing, so then it's not emphasised in the media or dramatised and how many people and all that sort of stuff. That shuts up all these story mongers and could stop the snowball of the stories.

I'd rather see it done in Australia. That way we get to see what's going on instead of these camps they're living in Papua New Guinea. It's supposed to be like prison camp. That's not right. It's not humane.

Once you get here and claim refugee status, it is a hell of a lot harder.

They'll send them back on planes, don't you worry. They'll send them back on planes.

Yes but it's a much longer process once they get here and inside our waters and inside our obligations under the UN treaties than to keep the people off-shore, decide on whether they're coming here or going back there. And then you don't get as many ramifications. You don't get the appeals process that goes on for years that the Australian taxpayer pays for.

It's cheaper to house them out there, for a start, than it is to bring people here, have the media attention — the people at the fence cutting themselves and killing themselves because they're being contained in better conditions than they were in their own country.

They've got a roof over their head, they have food in their belly. They have clothes. Isn't that the basics?

How many asylum-seekers will there be if they see people come here? Will they ever stop? There are lots of people that are going

through hardship and poverty and wars over in the Middle East and in Africa. There's millions of people. How many can Australia accommodate? Where do you draw the line? If you start bringing them over here, a lot of them will suddenly become asylum-seekers because they see a free ride to Australia.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

Q: I wanted to ask you what your views were about Australia's response to this issue.

Terrible.

Appalling. They're ill-treated, they don't know what's happening to them. They've sort of been threatened that they're not going to be ... I don't know. They're just in limbo there.

Are they going to be deported to Cambodia? They don't know.

At a cost of \$55 million? Ridiculous, isn't it. Give them \$15 million each to set up small businesses. It would have created employment.

What a waste.

You're going to be sitting there waiting for someone to process...
Can't be much of a life

But they still feel they're better off, a lot of them. When I was watching some program, I can't remember, it was SBS probably, they were saying that they prefer that than being sent back, because you're going to get killed anyway if you go back.

Why do all these people arrive with no papers whatsoever, if they've got nothing to hide?

We don't know what happens when they go on the boat though,

I think they're told to throw them over the edge. Because you've got more chance of getting in without papers.

Harder to trace them and establish their identity. So it might

buy a bit of time, sow a bit of doubt, that sort of thing.

But the thing is that if you tell the boat people that they can come to Australia, there's going to be more. So I think in many respects it's a good idea to have this set in place, to deter them.

And they don't get in boats and drown.

There's the deterrent, which has been pretty successful as far as we know. It's more or less stopped the boats.

For political reasons, the focus is on boat people. It's largely driven by the perception of some in government that there are people in sensitive electorates in the western part of Sydney and Melbourne that believe that refugees and asylum-seeker people are taking away jobs. That is what it's all about. That's the essence of it. And the government is pandering to that perception.

They've obviously worked out their polling, and they've worked out this is going to be votes for them, and it'll keep them in government heartland in the middle of Sydney out there. But the other thing I think why it's become an issue is because people get killed at sea. And they don't necessarily get killed when they come in through planes. They get killed at sea, and that becomes an emotive issue. And that drives the emotional news items.

I read an interesting article the other day about someone in Europe was talking about Italy, and specifically talking about the massive number of people now flying to Europe. And he or she was talking about all these little villages and regional areas of Italy which are basically devoid of people now. And they're suggesting, why can't we set up people in these villages and create new economic vibrancy in those spaces. Now, we hear about Australian farmers not being able to get pickers for vegetables and fruit, etcetera. We have a similar situation where regional parts of Australia are in decline. Why can't they go there?

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

Just Turn Around And Stop The Boats campaign really, that's all I've seen. I haven't seen anything positive like we welcome these people in or anything.

A lot of people I've spoken to say, what's the navy doing about it? Why do we have a navy if they can't stop it?

There's all these rules. Then these people just sit there in detention centres for ages.

It's always the exact same stuff — turn the boats around. We don't know what's happening to those people, where are they going to or about the people who are currently in detention centres.

It's disgusting. Just yesterday I was told on *Hack* about the girl in Narangba High got taken out of school. One of my mates is her drama teacher and I heard that from him and I didn't get that much information, but then I heard a lot about it on *Hack* yesterday.

[This respondent then gave the following account.]

Narangba Valley High is a high school just on the south side of Brisbane, so 15 minutes from the city, and this girl, I can't remember her name, she was in a detention centre. She came here from a detention centre and then was allowed to live in the community and then started going to the school once she was 18 in grade 10. And then she did school then had to go back into the detention centre but the school petitioned for her to keep doing her study.

So she had to come for I think it was the last year in grade 12. She had to be escorted to school and back home from school by guards. Then one day, I think it was two months ago, she got ripped out of school saying that all her visa applications have failed so now she has to go back into detention full time. They can't force her back to Iraq, because Iraq won't take her.

I heard a bit of it as well. She's actually married to a guy that's here in Australia but they said that if she goes back then she'll be arrested and they'll never hear from her again.

And then also how you hear that they are only now just trying to get children out of detention centres, even though it's been like four or five years that these kids have grown up in detention centres.

I just think it's wrong.

I can't actually come up with a better idea. I think that a better

idea needs to come about but, but if they just open up the doors and let everyone in, it's really hard as it is to get work and to find a place. When I've been to look for a place to rent, there's maybe 30 other people there, and if we just had the doors open and let everyone in, that would be a problem economically.

Where there's more people there's more economy.

I finished my apprenticeship four years ago and when I went for my job there were six positions available. Fifteen thousand people went for those six positions. So if we've got open borders then we've got every Tom, Dick and Harry coming in and instead of 15,000 you've got 40, 50,000 trying to go for a job. The same with houses. How are young people like us supposed to buy a house when there's no land?

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

It's funny how that dominates the news, people coming in by boats. Whereas some of them come in by plane in the normal way as well.

We just don't hear about it, because you see the boats physically. But planes come and go all the time.

What I don't get about this is, why would you not bring your papers if you're genuinely scared and need help? If you have your papers you'll get in quicker.

They probably get their paperwork taken by the people (smugglers).

But on the news, you constantly hear that they didn't bring their papers, or they've ditched them on purpose. Why would you do that if you're genuinely seeking help and you want to get away from that?

Maybe they don't have papers to start with.

But what are the papers?

A birth certificate, or a marriage certificate. Something to identify yourself?

Life in contemporary Australia

The Australians who participated in this research are, on the whole, more likely to be optimists than pessimists about Australia's future, and more likely to feel economically secure than insecure. But these generalities mask some important variations. People living in western Sydney and in regional areas are less optimistic than those living in the big cities and in more affluent areas. And older people tend to be less optimistic than younger people.

People's optimism or pessimism tends to correlate with their sense of economic security: the more secure they feel, the more optimistic they tend to be. However, there is a caveat here too: older Australians who are optimistic and secure themselves worry about their children. They see them struggling for security of employment and to be able to buy into the housing market, especially in Sydney, where this is seemingly a universal preoccupation.

People's grounds for optimism are that Australia, whatever its faults, is still a lucky country – democratic, blessed with resources, and capable of being innovative. For these reasons, the optimists believe Australia will find a way through the challenges of the present and the future. Some also say they feel optimistic just because they are Australian, optimism being part of the national character as they see it.

People's grounds for pessimism are that jobs are increasingly insecure and hard to find; that housing is increasingly out of reach; that the country is more exposed to security risks than it used to be, and that the Muslim influence is likely to make matters worse.

In addition to these specific questions about personal outlook and economic well-being, respondents were asked a range of more general questions about contemporary Australian society. Their responses are reported in this chapter, under four headings:

1. Challenges facing Australia
2. Exposure to the world

3. Australia as a fair society
4. Australia as a tolerant society

Challenges facing Australia

There is no shortage of challenges facing Australian society, in the eyes of the respondents to this study. The major challenges are perceived to be about employment, housing, and pressure on health and welfare services. However, while asylum-seekers are seen as a contributing factor to those challenges, for the most part they are not seen as the major factor or even as an important factor, except where people's attitudes are coloured by prejudice or downward envy. As has been seen, these influences are strongest in western Sydney and among blue-collar workers, where personal hardship tends to influence these sentiments.

Otherwise, the challenge concerning employment arises from perceptions and observations about old industries disappearing – the car industry is specifically mentioned – technological change, foreign workers taking jobs because they are prepared to work for lower wages, and structural change. Asylum-seekers are seen by some as adding to the competition for jobs, but this is very much a second-order consideration and tends to be limited to blue-collar workers.

In fact, when asylum-seekers are discussed in relation to employment they are more likely to be perceived as unemployed and unemployable, and therefore a drain on the welfare system, rather than as rivals for jobs. In this view, they are seen as likely to add to the burden on the welfare system caused by an aging population, which is itself seen as a significant challenge. This perception about asylum-seekers burdening the welfare system is more commonly held among people whose relatives are pensioners or who see themselves as becoming welfare-dependent, either through reliance on unemployment benefits or on an aged or disability pension.

More widely still, asylum-seekers are perceived as likely to be a drain on the health system, especially the mental health system. While some see this through the negative light in which they view asylum-seekers, others see it as the fault of successive Australian governments in maltreating them and therefore either inducing mental health problems or exacerbating pre-existing disorders.

Housing is, on the whole, an issue the causes of which go well beyond the asylum-seeker question. The main way in which the housing issue touches on the question of asylum-seekers is in respect of public housing. Once again, people who are themselves dependent on government housing or who are familiar with others who are, express concern that asylum-seekers are being given preferential access to public housing, and are putting additional pressure on a supply that is already under strain.

More broadly, the concern about housing is that young people are being priced out of the market, making it much harder to realise what is still seen as the Australian dream of home-ownership. In Sydney particularly this is a big issue, where the main perceived cause is the influx of Chinese buyers who are seen as driving up prices.

Beyond these dominant issues, other challenges concern:

- climate change, which is seen both as an environmental challenge and an economic challenge as the world shifts away from coal, with consequent economic risks to Australia;
- Government debt;
- relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians;
- increasing economic inequality, and
- poor national leadership, of which politicking over asylum-seekers is seen as a symptom.

Population is also seen as a challenge, one on which there are two opposing views. The old “populate or perish” idea is still alive and the relative few who hold this view say Australia needs more people to sustain its society. Others say there is already too much strain on the environment and that the big cities in particular cannot stand large population increases. However, this is not an issue raised by many, and not an issue that is decisive over attitudes to asylum-seekers.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

On the radio today they were saying kids at a certain age level shouldn't be studying the things they are studying because in 20 years' time those jobs just won't exist anymore. So just basically due to technology our jobs won't be that safe down the line.

It's not so much that people are worried jobs, they are worried about welfare, that people are going to come and drain our resources.

And with the job market shrinking because of technology, robotics and whatnot, you will hear of companies closing down, so mixed into the fear of losing jobs is more people. That's not going to help.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

The whole Australian dream of the 50s and 60s of owning your own house has become a lot more difficult.

A primary industry country, coal-based, transitioning to green energy and stuff.

The relationship with Australia's first people.

Definitely employment seems to be a really big issue and probably the number that are unemployed.

Education in terms of the system for foreign students to study here. It's incredibly expensive and as a result they end up having to take jobs that make their quality of life incredibly depleted and almost to the point where they are unable to study enough in order to pass. And it ends up being two or three years of their lives wasted.

There is a growing lower class of poor and there is very large number of homelessness.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

I think a future problem will be population. Not that we've got too many now, we're not having enough. They say with all the baby boomers retiring, there's like five million baby boomers will have come out of the workforce in the next ten years or so. And the next generation coming up behind them, you know, are they going to be able to support us.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

Housing. It's not very affordable just for the normal person, so I feel if people are going to come in from overseas and they are going to get housing, I don't think that that's fair.

Health. You are waiting and people are being sick for years and it's a long waiting list. You go to hospitals, emergencies, only this morning ambulances are taking longer. So there is pressure on all sorts of things in health and I think going to the doctor's, medicines. I don't know if they get free medication and all that sort of stuff. I would suppose they would. I suppose in that sense there is pressure on others.

On pensions on superannuation. Their old age. A lot of people are applying for pensions. These people wouldn't have super unless they come here very young, so that would be another thing the government has to supply.

Group 5: Sydney West blue-collar aged 18-30

House prices.

Being financially stable.

Safety. Do I want to catch a train? Do I not? I'm talking about personal safety, I'm talking about safety of what's happening in our childcare systems, I'm talking about, you know, schools, I'm talking about on the road. Safety against sexual harassment. That's not just because of asylum-seekers.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

The cost of living.

Government debt.

Employment. They've got a lot of Chinese people that work out there [at a local factory] and my brother, he's been trying to get on out there for years and he goes out every week with a different application form and he doesn't get a look in. They just put the Chinese people on because they take the lower money.

The 457, whatever you call it. A lot of Koreans, Taiwanese, Chinese, a lot of them are coming here now, as well as Europeans, as workers.

My husband was a cleaner. They'd been promised five years. They just started the five years and they were told, no, sorry, you're all made redundant. There were four of them.

And they brought in people from overseas.

The health system. That's a really big one. You're not just looking at what they're bringing in, but the strain on the mental health sector as well because you've got them coming in and especially if they've come from a war area, you've got PTSD, you've then got depression. And that's on top of everything else when there's others that need it and don't get that level [of care].

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

Violence and the guns out west [Sydney's western suburbs].

Drugs. It's really bad out west, it's been like that for years, and every murder every night you used to hear, and it was always out west.

Drugs. I would be very scared at night time to go over to Lakemba, but I'd have no problem at all, at ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, going over to Neutral Bay and walking down the road.

An aging population. The long-term cost of our taxes supporting our aging population.

The government is cutting apprenticeships.

The biggest issue is the total incoherence of government. Not only government itself, but the opposition as well. It's an absolute lack of leadership. Absolutely no economic strategy, no vision, nothing.

The Chinese money that's coming in here is going to really make things very difficult for those that are already living here. A lot of Chinese money coming in. Do you know Macquarie Hospital's going to be sold? Have you seen the land out there? It's fabulous. Can you see all the Chinese putting these great big buildings up?

It's the unaffordability of housing for young people.

Our grandchildren, forget it. It's all one million plus in Chatswood alone, just for a two-bedroom house now.

I think the biggest problem we've got is the serious amount of debt that Australia's putting itself in. The quality of life we've had, unless something starts to happen with it, it won't be the same for our children. On the one hand it's fantastic that Australia is able to play with the big boys, and every time there's a problem, America jumps in and asks us, or England jumps in and asks us, but the reality of it is, we've got 25 million people, and we really don't have that much income. And all of a sudden that debt is going to continue to keep growing. So we've got to basically start reigning in, get our house back in order, then you can start talking more about the asylum seekers and how we can assist.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

Climate change for sure.

Jobs.

Economy. Coal's going down the hill, sugar's up, cattle's down.

There's three mines I think up north, supposed to be, one big one for 3,000 jobs which should be in the next couple of years.

Healthcare.

A lot of immigration that I don't like. Climate change is another huge one and also our economic standing, like how many under-the-table deals they are doing with China and how much they are not telling us about what they are doing.

Lack of trust with this government.

All the broken promises.

Not using Australian products.

Exposure to the world

There is a widely held perception that Australia is no longer remote from the world's trouble spots nor immune from the consequences of those troubles. Not only has air travel brought the world within a day's travel time, but social media provides instantaneous exposure to what is going on everywhere. The instantaneous nature of this exposure creates an illusion of spatial and personal closeness to events, even though they might be happening to strangers thousands of kilometres away.

With this comes a heightened sense of awareness of what is happening in the world and this in turn is translated by some – though by no means all – into a more acute sense of risk in everyday Australian life. This appears to be especially true among young women. While they acknowledge that there is little objective reason for making this translation, nonetheless it makes them warier than they might otherwise be about personal safety.

In general, this appears to have only a limited and indirect influence on people's views of whether asylum-seekers pose a risk to individual safety.

However, the aspects of social media that are related to asylum-seekers and do concern people are its use as a tool of radicalisation and its capacity to disseminate sensationalist content which is seen as unfairly colouring people's views of asylum-seekers.

In addition to the influence of air travel and social media, people see Australia's involvement in the wars of the Middle East and

Afghanistan as dragging Australia into the world's troubles, and for the most part this involvement is seen as unnecessary and unwise. The wars are seen generally as none of our business, although there are some who say that we do have a duty to help keep the world peace and to help our allies.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

Between improved communications and the fact that we now hear about everything that happens, as it's happening, and ease of travel, and any number of things like that, we're basically now one of the global players, and we weren't before.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

I would have thought the internet, mostly the advent of the ability to communicate information as the country would inflame this issue. And I presume 30 years ago there wasn't as much information, so those boats, yes, the collective outrage would have increased, just through the information increase.

And a great way for us to assess ourselves against the world standard. The outer world is getting smaller now that we can access every part of the globe via technology so it's a great way that we can compare ourselves in a world setting.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

The current situation with the Middle East — we're going in and fighting in their war, where we don't belong. It shouldn't up to us to fix those problems. It should be up to other countries in that area of the same background to get involved and fix their problems.

You get a lot of the home-grown terrorists. Young men in Melbourne, I think it was, the Australian guy went to Pakistan and blew himself up. It's quite scary, because he's getting brainwashed to do certain

things. Social media, all this stuff that's out there, it's not safe.

But, I think as a part of the world we have a bit of a duty for world peace.

Through social media, everything can happen and you hear about it straightaway and we react to it straightaway as well.

Nowhere is safe. There's no need to poke your nose when it's not needed.

I think we do things that make [us unsafe] – terrorists, terrorism.

Group 7: Dubbo blue-collar aged 31-50

I don't think we're a long way from anywhere now.

Flights are quicker here. Boats are quicker here.

Something happens overseas and it seems to be reported on the phone. You can see the bombs going off.

It's almost instantaneous. These days, everyone is a reporter.

That just heightens everyone's awareness a bit more because everything is so instant. Facebook, your social media — I think I find out more on there before I actually see the news.

I guess because you're made more aware of it. I know, for myself, it does make me a bit more cautious.

Once upon a time it was a news article, it was a newspaper. It's not a video somebody's taken that's being shared and shared and someone's personal experience. That's what sort of brings it closer.

Terrorists were in action movies when I was a kid. They weren't real. Now it is.

It's all concentrated in Afghanistan or something like that. Then you hear about a boat-load of people coming from Afghanistan or something like that, you think, oh my goodness, what's getting in here?

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

America and Britain and whoever else comes along and says, hey guys, we need a hand. Somebody should say, well sorry, we can't afford to give you a hand. I don't think, for instance, that we should go into Syria.

We did do it for one reason as well though: we have a rather large country just to our right hand side over there with over a billion people, and we're only a small island stuck out in the middle of the ocean, and so basically, you might need a reasonable size friend one day.

Australia as a fair society

While there is a broadly held view that Australia is a fair society in the sense that it provides people with an opportunity to have a good life if they are prepared to work for it, there are important reservations about this generally benign belief.

One set of reservations concerns economic inequality. There is a quite widely held view that the taxation system is rigged in favour of the wealthy. Another, especially among blue-collar people, is that the working visa system is rorted or ill-designed so that local workers are unfairly displaced by foreign workers prepared to work for lower wages. A third is that overall inequality of wealth is getting wider, even though Australia has a generally good social safety net, and that this reflects an increase in unfairness. There is also concern that people's children and grandchildren will be worse off than the present generation, principally because of the cost of housing.

In considering asylum-seekers there is a view that Australia is not behaving as a fair society should, and that Australians generally proceed on an ill-based assumption that asylum-seekers will be a burden on the economy rather than contributors to it, as all previous waves of new arrivals have proved to be.

A completely different view is of Australia as "too fair" and "naïve". Hence it gives handouts to asylum-seekers at the expense of Australians who are battling, and spoils asylum-seekers by succumbing to their demands for such things as flat-

screen television sets.

There is also a comparative aspect to this perception that Australia is “too fair”: that Australians who visit countries in the Middle East are forced to conform to the customs of those countries in ways that are not required of people from those countries in Australia. Women’s dress codes are given as the paradigm case. So, in this view, the lack of reciprocity means that Australia is being unfair to its own people by extending a tolerance to people from the Middle East that Australians do not enjoy there.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

From a community service level I see a lot of effort being put into giving people a fair chance, and not just a fair chance, a good opportunity with a lot of support and resources to do it in. I do think that we are a progressive country, and a progressive culture and I think that that’s part of the fair go as well.

I think we’re too fair compared to other countries. If you go to Dubai or another Middle-Eastern country, even on holidays, you have to cover your arms, cover your legs, and we adapt a lot to their customs here, like the pool thing (a reference to special arrangements by a municipal swimming pool to allow Muslim women to swim without being observed by men). They wouldn’t do that if a whole heap of Australians went to live there.

There are also other wage-related issues, and the contentious one at the moment is that women don’t get paid as much as men. That’s a huge one, and the other one is how really valued services and professions don’t get paid enough, like disability workers, teachers, people in health care.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

We have a good life here. But in terms of accommodating asylum seekers, no, we’re not fair.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

The growing gap between the haves and the have-nots ...

We have five educated children, and I can't see how three of them, three younger ones, are ever going to buy a house. And they've got professional jobs.

I think everybody's got an equal opportunity. I mean, you get where you get with hard work.

We try to feel that we're fair. We give people a fair go. But there are big discrepancies between rich and poor.

The big companies pay less taxes, small businesses pay more tax. But I still think that in a lot of ways we do try to be fair, we do try to give people a fair go, in an uneven society.

There are very few countries with better welfare systems than Australia.

Group 4: Sydney West blue-collar aged 51-plus

We are all assuming that these people [asylum-seekers] will be just a hindrance to our society, but they will work, right? They will contribute, you know, if we provide the chance for them as well. Like the rest of the migrants: we've come here, we have worked, we didn't get any handouts. If they embrace our lifestyle, they will contribute, they will work and they will be part of our society.

I think it is a fair country, but you have to do the right thing.

Look what we are offering them. I mean we are giving them every chance to prove themselves and a lot of them just don't want to. They just want to freeload.

It is the people that are giving them that stuff that are the wrong ones. Like giving kids baby bonuses. Why are they getting all that money? If I was given \$10,000 for doing nothing, I don't think I am going to say no. My grandfather when he came out to Australia, he worked in the cane fields, and worked for what you've got. They are sort of creating a situation where they don't have to work.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

We have people that are struggling. You don't have anything to help. Yes, there's the dole and things like that. You get people that are homeless in Australia, they've got no chance, or it's very difficult for them to recover. How many people do you hear, you know, going on the streets daily. You get illegals or refugees or whoever are coming in and then you hear they get interest-free loans and, you know, all that sort of stuff. So you get a bias.

And recently this group of refugees they were deemed mentally unstable that they had to hire a bus and take them to the city, rent out the whole cinema, take them to the beach. And some of them, they were rioting inside Villawood because they wanted Xbox. They wanted, you know, flat-screen TVs, and I go to the city, you see these Australians, they were on the floor. They got no food, no blankets.

They [the homeless] choose to live there, though. If you're homeless, there's a place for you to live. Those people choose to live there, the reason being they don't want to live in an accommodation because there's no alcohol permitted there.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

We're fair in terms of our wage structure, [although] there's variations in that. But we're fair in the people, we're fair in our lifestyle. We treat people generally equally. We generally tend, in broad terms, in humanistic terms, how we operate day to day, to respect each other.

I think we can be too fair. Quite often we're quite gullible I feel.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

Definitely not. Getting back to like pensions, all our grandparents and older, they've fought for our country and they get kicked in the guts.

Our taxation systems it's absolutely ridiculous. How giant multi-corporations can just jump through beautiful loopholes made

for them just to not pay any tax. I've worked for three different companies. The amount of times I've heard, through either the dude who owns the company or from people close to him how he jumps through the hoops to not pay tax. It's just ridiculous.

I think they're pretty fair compared to where my parents come from and what they have experienced. Even compared to America. I think we get a lot of help compared to other countries.

Everyone gets a fair chance to get on their feet. It's not impossible for you to go out there and do something.

Australia as a tolerant society

A wide spectrum of respondents question whether today's Australia is as tolerant as Australians like to think it is. A few see it as a generational issue, with older people seen as less tolerant than younger people, and others see it is a geographic issue, with people living in country towns and rural areas being much less tolerant of difference than are people living in the big cities. But more generally there is a view that Australia is showing intolerance in a variety of ways.

This is seen as being reflected not only in attitudes to asylum-seekers – where it is very widely observed – but in attitudes to marriage equality, to homosexual people more generally and to people of other races. The booing of the Aboriginal footballer Adam Goodes is seen by some as symptomatic of the latter, although it is also noted that in the town of Moree, with its long history of racism, much progress has been made in overcoming racial prejudice.

Some celebrate instances of tolerance that they have witnessed and approved of. It reinforces their belief that Australia remains committed to diversity and multiculturalism, and is illustrated by the availability of Halal meat pies or exposure to Indonesian language and culture in schools, or provision made for Muslims to pray and to adhere to their religious requirements in other ways.

But this last is contested territory. Discussions tend to open with disapproving references. More often than not, this disapproval is reinforced by remarks from other participants; rather less often, these references provoke a response that argues in favour of

tolerance, and seeks to look more deeply into the case.

For example, one respondent stated that as an instance of Australia's tolerance, the local municipal swimming pool had set aside a fixed time of the week during which Muslim women can swim without being observed by men, and that the council had spent money installing blinds in order to preserve the women's privacy. This was related in a tone suggesting disapproval. Another respondent familiar with the pool said in reply that in fact the Muslim community had contributed to the cost of the blinds by conducting fund-raisers.

Many respondents detect an element of hypocrisy in Australians' approach to tolerance of difference. This view was summed up by a young white-collar man in Melbourne who said, "We try very hard to be tolerant, to seem tolerant, but not necessarily tolerant all the way through."

There is a widespread sense that in its treatment of asylum-seekers, Australia is failing to display the level of tolerance that the nation likes to think it adheres to.

Against that, however, is the view that "Islamisation" represents a clear and present danger to Australian society – to its safety, its cohesiveness and its mores – and that tolerance of Islam is therefore misplaced. Some also see Muslims as seeking to shoulder aside others in the community. One such respondent used the analogy of a patchwork quilt to illustrate this point. He said that Australia was a patchwork quilt but that Muslims wanted to be the big patch in the centre.

Some respondents admit that while they have always thought of themselves as tolerant, their fears of Islam is confronting them with the uncomfortable realisation that they are perhaps not as tolerant as they thought.

What the groups said

Group 1: Melbourne south-eastern suburbs blue-collar aged 31-50

There are a lot of Australians who won't admit it, but there are a lot who aren't very accepting. And this is highlighted in the fact that, take gay marriage, asylum-seeking, globalisation and

carbon tax, those would be the main issues at the moment. And with gay marriage if we can't accept one another for who we are, how are we then going to be willing to accept other people?

I would say the older generation isn't quite as tolerant. Maybe the sixty-plus tend to be a little bit more fearful of immigrants. People waiting just behind me in the queue at a shopping centre, "Ah things are no good these days ...". They really are very fearful of immigrants.

The country is accepting, because things like Muslims with their praying, there are schools that have put aside rooms for their five-times-a-day praying, and my local pool which has something to do with their hair not being shown to men they have actually invested money for these blinds and there's a morning that only Muslim women can swim. I think it's Tuesday morning 10:00 to 12:00 or something. The blinds are down because their country doesn't like men looking at their hair.

It is an excellent gesture, but more to the point I think you would have found that the local [Muslim] community raised money for it because they had fundraisers. That used to be my son's old swimming pool for his swimming lessons, and, yes, they actually held fundraisers and things like that and that was an ongoing thing for about two years.

I went into 7-Eleven the other morning and it's got the normal Aussie meat pie and next to it it's got the Halal meat pie. So you can buy a Halal meat pie now. I thought it was fantastic.

The White Australia policy has totally disappeared, and more immigrants came in. I think we have become fairer over time, or accepting.

At primary school one of my son's language options is Indonesian, fantastic, fine, but here's the thing: the Indonesian culture has an entirely different philosophical base, and as part of learning language in grade two and three, they are also getting exposed to some other interesting philosophies to compare to the philosophies they encounter as part of Western culture. Suddenly they've got a picture of a much bigger world.

Group 2: Melbourne inner white-collar aged 18-30

I think the majority of people would be considered tolerant and certainly would appear tolerant and I think there's enough sort of social rules in place now that enough understand what to say and what not to say, even if you think otherwise.

Really? They just have to go to a football game and see how that, what is his name? [Adam Goodes], that football player that's being booed. I think Melbourne's an anomaly in Australia. It's usually like the most liberal.

I think we try very hard to be tolerant, to seem tolerant, but not necessarily tolerant all the way through.

Group 3: Ballarat white-collar aged 51-plus

The boat people, I see them as very sad, desperate people, and locking them up —

I just think it's awful.

A lot of Australians may have forgotten that they all came here in the way we're denigrating the people who want to come here are trying to use.

Locking them [asylum-seekers] up for three years is not giving them a fair go.

On the whole I'd say we're accepting. But some people that don't want asylum seekers, they see them as terrorists.

I think it's generational. The baby boomer generation in Australia is more prejudiced. You still hear it today when they talk about the Japanese, because of the war, the Aboriginals. But I think the younger generation, my son, now he's a lot more tolerant. The younger people who have been brought up with the Asians, with the Aboriginal situation, they're a lot more tolerant and a lot less prejudiced than our generation.

Group 6: Sydney West white-collar aged 31-50

Islamisation. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to brand everyone the same, because there are good people everywhere. But the biggest thing that I see is that they don't accept anyone else. If you're not of that religion, or maybe of that strand, you shouldn't live.

I tend to disagree. I don't think Islamism is going to be a huge threat. I think if you look at the statistics, those who believe in the Islam faith are minute in Australia. You're looking at single-figure digits.

Channel 7, Channel 10, and Channel 9, worst TV stations ever. They get one story and they just magnify it.

I've got a lot of Muslim friends, like I said before. I've got really good friends, really really bad friends. And I have seen my friends who are Muslims in their home. When people are getting killed or Christians are getting killed, cops are getting bashed, you know, like in local news, they are cheering. They would jump up in their seat. And for me, I couldn't say anything. I just observed. But I have seen it first-hand in Villawood [detention centre].

The hate-mongering.

I disagree, I'm sorry.

Yes, this is a very limited. In general it's only few of them. But they're the few that actually persuade others.

Group 8: Inner and northern Sydney white-collar aged 51-plus

I'm a migrant, so I think they're very tolerant towards lots of people here.

I just think tolerant as well, but I think I'm a bit prejudiced now. The people from Islam. I've got a problem with it. My granddaughter has somehow got such a problem, and as soon as she sees these men with scarves on and things, she grabs hold of me and pulls me across the street. And when we had that thing in Martin Place last year [the Lindt Café siege], I took her in to see the flowers.

All the way, every time she saw someone with a scarf on or something like that, she thinks they're a terrorist or something.

When I say tolerance here in Australia, it's unbelievable when I watch so many kids. They'll play with ... It doesn't make any difference whatsoever. It doesn't matter about the nationality, doesn't matter where they come from. I've got three boys myself, and I've seen it in the various schools. They don't bat an eyelid. I've been here 30 years. Australia's a very tolerant country.

I think we've changed. I grew up in Moree. Now if you want to see a place that's prejudiced, you go to Moree back when the Aboriginals weren't allowed to go to the hotels, they had separate swimming pools. The freedom ride in 1965 changed all of that. So that's how far we've come, because now the Aboriginals, they won the rugby league competition, they've got their own team. So they've actually done a hell of a lot of change there.

I have a thing about racism in this country. I think there's a big percentage of the population that is quite racist. And for me, because I travel so much, I'm actually embarrassed by it. My parents are a prime example. My father was in the army, we lived in Asia for years. I was born in Asia. But they talk about the Asian Invasion to this day.

Group 9: Brisbane blue-collar aged 18-30

Growing up in a country town, there's lots of rednecks and people are very racist. [But] I think that we're not a racist country.

I was brought up in a small country town too and so if this guy has hair past his ears, he's gay. You've got a facial piercing, you're a lesbian. It doesn't make sense. They are just so ignorant. They are raised like that and it's just small mindedness. It's like you're different to me and I don't like it so it scares me.

I experienced [racism] in my younger days: at school mainly. If I was to have an argument with someone, mainly males, they'd come back and say well why don't you go back from where you came from?

Group 10: Toowoomba white-collar aged 31-50

It might depend on the demographic, but generally speaking, I think we're pretty horrible. I think we are racist.

There could be a woman my age, just all of a sudden, step out and abuse somebody. And just let all of these racial slurs come out. And they have no problem doing it. I've seen it on social media. People sit there and record it. It's just horrendous. I think, generally speaking, yes, I think, we are. I think we're quite racist.

I agree there are pockets of that and there always will be [but] do you see a white Australian get up and give a seat to a Muslim lady who gets on a train or a bus with three kids? Have you ever seen that on social media? Because it is not sensational,

I grew up in the country. And I don't believe we're a racist family, but [among] a lot of the people that we employed there was a lot less tolerance to people coming in from outside the country.

Living in town or in large cities, that's where the bulk of the population is in Australia. I find the people who live in town are a lot less racist than that. Or not racist at all.

Can I suggest that as a nation, we're not merely racist, we're actually very prejudiced. It's not just about race. We're prejudiced against religion, we're prejudiced against sexuality, we're prejudiced against people's backgrounds in general.

I would actually hesitantly say we're actually mostly prejudiced against Christian religions these days. We seem to be bending over backwards to accommodate people from other faiths.

I was just going to say I totally agree with that because The Project makes Christian jokes until the cows come home and no one kicks up a stink. But if anyone on TV said a joke about a Muslim or Islam, my goodness, lock the doors, and run for your life or something.

We think of Australia as a patchwork quilt, you know, Italians and Greeks and Japanese, and all that.

A patchwork quilt is a good way of putting it. It started with what we had, you know, when they all came out in the fifties,

in the forties. But it's like the current ones want to be the centrepiece of that quilt and everyone has got to try and work around that. It's not another little square in the quilt.

I'm a bit torn about it. I think we really do have to respect where they're coming from with religious beliefs. I mean, I think you really do have to give them that. In relation to the burkas and stuff like that, I think they should be free to be able to wear that if that's part of their religious culture and whatever. But then I don't think we should be tearing down Christmas decorations, either.

Watching what we write on our Christmas cards in case of offence. I know people who will write happy holidays because they're so petrified of offending or causing inflammation.

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Appendix 1

Asylum-seeker research focus groups

Discussion outline

Record first names, area of residence, occupation and where born.

1. As you know we are going to talk about issues relating to asylum-seekers. Where do you get most of your information about asylum-seekers? (Probe: ABC/SBS/Commercial television, ABC/SBS/Commercial radio; talkback radio; newspapers; online sources).
2. Who do you believe most on this question? (Probe: The Federal Government; other politicians; people in the media; talkback hosts; your friends or other people you speak to.)
3. What are the terms you hear used to describe asylum-seekers? (Probe: Asylum-seekers; refugees; illegals; queue-jumpers; boat people.)
4. What do you think about those terms? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
5. Where do you believe most of the current asylum-seekers trying to come to Australia are from? (Probe: War zones in the Middle East and Afghanistan; the sub-continent; south-east Asian countries.)
6. Do you think that most asylum-seekers are genuinely trying to escape persecution or that most are just trying to come to Australia to make a better life? (Probe: What makes you think that?)
7. Does Australia have any particular obligations to take asylum-seekers? (Probe: Because Australia is a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention? From places like Iraq and Afghanistan, where we have been involved militarily?)
8. What is your view about the way Australia has been responding to the asylum-seeker issue over recent years? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
9. What, if anything, should we do differently?
10. I'd now like to ask you a few questions about your views of Australia's place in the world. For many decades, a lot of us have thought of Australia as a country far away from the world's troubles. Is that still the position, or has it

changed? (Probe: Why do you think it has changed — the internet; globalised economy; the threat of terrorism.)

11. Thinking now about life in Australia: What are the main changes you see happening in Australian society at the moment? (Probe: Population growth; city congestion; changes in ethnic or religious composition.)
12. How do you feel we as a society are coping with these changes? (Probe: Are there aspects of life where we are under pressure? For instance, are our health and education services keeping pace?)
13. Are we a fair society or not a fair society? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
14. Do people generally feel secure in their jobs or do they not feel secure? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
15. Australia often describes itself as a multicultural country. What does the term “multicultural” mean to you? Do you see it as a positive or a negative aspect of Australian society? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
16. On the whole, is Australia a tolerant or a prejudiced society? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
17. Is Australia a safe place to live or is it not a safe place to live? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
18. Do asylum-seekers represent any threat to Australian society? (Probe: Security; social cohesion; unwelcome religious beliefs or practices; disease; employment.) (Probe: Why do you say that?)
19. Finally, do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about Australia’s future? (Probe: Why do you say that?)



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