



Manipulating Child Refugees: The Baby Asha Scandal in Australia

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The Australian government has little time for the huddled masses who seek to transit to the shores of its continent girt by sea. Its entrenched gulag system spanning centres at Manus Island and Nauru continues to throw up a host of nasty instances of maltreatment, the latest being a case involving an infant by the name of "Asha".

Baby Asha was being treated in Brisbane's Lady Cilento Hospital for burns suffered while in detention on Nauru. The hospital staff insisted that she would not be released until a suitable home environment had been located.

Australia's reactionary press smelt blood, and duly exhibited its investigative worth by questioning the mother's motivations. *The Courier Mail* on Tuesday suggested that the baby's mother had admitted on being interviewed by police that the child was purposely burnt as a means to get to Australia. She proceeded to refute the claims when interviewed in hospital last Friday as the Queensland police finalised their investigations.

The records from the hospital itself contradicted any such claims. For one, the harm occasioned by the scalding water showed "no evidence that the burn injury is non-accidental". The account from the staff goes on to observe that, "The injury occurred when [the child] pulled a bowl containing recently boiled water off a table onto herself." [1] The situation had been exacerbated in the absence of running water and poor accommodation facilities on the island, comprising meagre accommodation tents.

There is much ghoulish precedent on the subject. Asylum seekers, Australians were told by officials of the Howard government, could not be trusted as they made their way across treacherous, life-threatening waters. Their suffering, distorting in its pain, could only be evaluated by the vague, middle class standards of "Australian values".

The scandal of the "children overboard" affair revealed the truth denying complex that had taken hold of the Australian immigration and naval authorities. When it comes to describing the fate of asylum children, governments down under have some form.

On October 7, 2001, as a scrapping Howard government began readying itself for a polarising election, political officials from the Prime Minister's office, to that of the Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, and Defence Minister Peter Reith, suggested that cowardly, calculating asylum seekers had attempted to cast their children from the *Olong* into sea. The exercise was supposedly meant to get them swift passage to Australia.

The vessel, deemed a Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel (SIEV) 4, was carrying 223 asylum

seekers and intercepted 190km north of Christmas Island by the *HMAS Adelaide* on October 6, 2001. This only happened after the Australian vessel had fired shots across the bows of the *Olong*. The delicate vessel subsequently sunk as it was being towed by the *Adelaide*. Waiting orders from Canberra, Commander Norman Banks, in the sharp words of David Marr, “aimlessly towed them around the Indian Ocean.”[2]

The subsequent Australian Senate Select Committee charged with investigating “a certain maritime incident” found that no children had been put at risk, a fact known by the government prior to heading to the polls.[3] Pictures taken of the incident, supposedly featuring children being cast into the water, were actually of two sailors attempting to assist stranded asylum seekers.

Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, despite admitting that that no children had been thrown from the deck of the *Olong* in October 2001 would continue to claim that he “did think that if somebody had done that, it was a pretty bad thing to have done – and they did after all sink the boat, didn’t they?”[4] The world of vicious hypotheticals ever so often deters reality.

The case of Asha is no different, the child’s fate exploited and writ large against the cold hand of Australian refugee policy. Australian doctors themselves, such as Steve Stankevicius, argue that letting an infant injured in an offshore detention centre onto Australian soil “sets a risky precedent,” a sort of green light for empathy seekers. This vapid suggestion is only given credence because, as always, we must be careful about those mendacious asylum seekers locked up with nowhere else to go. The default position is, as ever, a lack of trust.

For Stankevicius, writing in *The Age*, “Though the public’s intentions [in protesting for Asha] have been noble, the precedent that has been set is a concern.” The reason being that people, including parents, take risks, often co-opting their children in the process. “While Asha’s injury was accidental, this decision may motivate others to exploit illness or injury to replicate the outcome.”

Having taken a tactical dump on the case of exploitation, Stankevicius suggested that children were the most notable conduits for heart stirring exploitation. Take, he considers, those child-beggars operating in impoverished surrounds. “Though one’s dollars may prevent the hungry child in front of you from being beaten that day, the success of that enterprise ensures the industry will continue on.”

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has voiced concern on several occasions on how Australia’s refugee policy tends to demonise, rather than evaluate, those seeking asylum in Australia. In 2011, it urged Australia’s political parties “to take a principled and courageous stand to break this ingrained political habit of demonising asylum seekers.”[5] But demonisation has not merely become the rationalised condition of Australian policy; it has become its driving, fetishized rationale. To deny it, to buck it, to attempt to defeat it, is to endure defeat itself.

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Notes:

- [1]
<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/peter-dutton-accused-of-dirty-politics-after-report-suggested-mother-deliberately-burnt-baby-asha-20160222-gn0wif.html>
- [2]
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/truth-overboard-the-story-that-wont-go-away/2006/02/27/1141020023654.html?page=fullpage>
- [3]
http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/scrafton/report/c02
- [4]
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/truth-overboard-the-story-that-wont-go-away/2006/02/27/1141020023654.html?page=fullpage>
- [5]
<http://www.smh.com.au/national/stop-demonising-refugees-says-un-20110927-1kvh4.html>

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