

Vietnam Generation

Volume 3

Number 2 *Australia R&R: Representation and
Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam*

Article 8

1-1991

International Factors Influencing Australian Governments' Responses to the Indochinese Refugee Problem

James E. Coughlan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coughlan, James E. (1991) "International Factors Influencing Australian Governments' Responses to the Indochinese Refugee Problem," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol3/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

International Factors Influencing Australian Governments' Responses To The Indochinese Refugee Problem

James E. Coughlan

Introduction

The year 1975 was an important year for Australia: the economy had plunged into a severe recession, with high unemployment and interest rates, the worst since the 1930s depression; the Government was rocked by ministerial involvement in a major illegal international loans scandal; and a variety of other significant political disruptions, which culminated in the most serious constitutional crisis in Australian political history—the dismissal by the Governor-General, Queen Elizabeth's representative in Australia, of the elected Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. There was one significant international event in 1975 which would have major political and social ramifications for Australia over the following decades: the revolutionary changes in the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Governments.

The communist victories in the three countries which used to comprise French Indochina triggered two types of large-scale population movements: the forced deurbanization of Cambodia and government population relocation programmes in Vietnam on one hand, and the exodus of over two million Indochinese asylum seekers on the other. Although the magnitude of the exodus of Indochinese asylum seekers over the past decade and a half is smaller than some of the other contemporary refugee crises, its direct effect on the international community has been substantial, largely due to the influence of the United States Government. For Australia, the decision to admit almost 150,000 Indochinese refugees and immigrants in the decade and a half since early 1975 has had a significant direct and indirect impact on the social fabric of Australian society.

The aim of this article is to discuss some of the international factors which have contributed to Australia's Indochinese refugee policy formulation since early 1975, with only passing attention given to domestic considerations. The article also seeks to show that the overwhelming determinant of Australia's Indochinese refugee policy has not been domestic or humanitarian considerations, but rather the political desires of the Australian Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (the Australian equivalent of the US Department of State) to improve Australia's relations with Asia, especially with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and

Thailand. Thus, like the United States of America, Australia's recent refugee policy has been more of a foreign policy tool than an implement of Government humanitarian concern.

The following section will provide a short background to Australia's overall refugee policy, which will be followed by a discussion of the international factors which have contributed to Indochinese refugee policy formulation in the three Australian governments since the beginning of 1975. The final section presents a brief discussion and conclusion of the issues raised.

Background

Australia is a signatory to the 1951 *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, and thus accepts the definition of the term refugee encompassed in these United Nations instruments. However, in more recent times Australia, as well as other countries involved in Indochinese refugee resettlement and the southeast and east Asian countries, has narrowed its interpretation of the term refugee. At the same time, Australia is incorporating more stringent procedures in the determination of refugee status. This *modus operandi* has been adopted not only in order to separate the genuine political refugees from the economic migrants amongst the asylum seekers, but more importantly to justify publicly the rejection, and possible mandatory repatriation, of asylum seekers who, the Government determines, are non-refugees.

Australia's response to specific refugee situations takes into account such factors as the magnitude of the specific refugee problem, the region in which the problem occurs and the strength and nature of Australia's relationship with that region, with particular importance placed on the relationships with the country of origin and country of first asylum of the asylum seekers. As with the USA, Australia's refugee policy was until recently based upon ad hoc responses to specific refugee crises. After a considerable amount of domestic and international pressure in 1978 the Liberal Government of Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, introduced a regular refugee component into Australia's annual immigration programme. The formulation of a formalized refugee policy in the late 1970s was due to a number of factors, the most important of which was the growing number of refugee crises around the world and the increasing pressure placed on Australia by various governments and organisations to resettle refugees.

Australia is in a similar position, with regard to the Indochinese asylum seekers, to the other Asian countries, and unlike other Western countries, in that it is both a country of first asylum, that is a country where asylum seekers initially seek refuge, and a third country, that is a country of refugee resettlement. Australia commenced resettling Indochinese refugees in 1975, when slightly more than one thousand were resettled, though a substantial resettlement programme was not in

place until 1978, when over seven thousand were accepted. In late April 1976, almost a year after the communist take-over of Saigon, the first boat carrying Vietnamese asylum seekers arrived on Australia's northern shores, heralding what would be the arrival of over fifty boats of first asylum Vietnamese boat people during the following five years. In addition, since late 1989 three boats carrying Cambodian boat people have successfully landed on Australian shores. The unannounced arrival of Indochinese boat people on Australia's northern shores has been a significant factor in the creation of Australia's policy towards the Indochinese refugees.

As a final background issue, at the beginning of 1975, as part of the Colombo Plan of which Australia is a member, there were over five hundred Indochinese students sponsored by the Australian Government attending educational institutions in Australia. The majority of these students were from South Vietnam, but also included 19 students from North Vietnam and six high school students nominated by the Pathet Lao faction in Laos. The Labor Government under the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, had established diplomatic relations with North Vietnam in 1973, and had actively worked to improve relations between Australia and North Vietnam. Following the changes of government in the three Indochinese countries in 1975 Australia continued to provide a small amount of developmental and humanitarian aid to Laos, although similar aid and cultural exchanges between Australia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were suspended in early 1979 following Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, influenced by the perception that Vietnam was both profiting from and forcibly expelling Vietnamese boat people. However, since 1983 Australia has been involved in providing bilateral and multilateral humanitarian aid to Vietnam, and there have been a small number of cultural exchanges. Australian businesses have also been active in assisting Vietnam.

The Whitlam Government's Neglect: 1975

At the beginning of 1975 Australia maintained diplomatic relations with the four nation states of Indochina and was providing developmental aid to these countries. The diversification of Australia's relations with Asia, following the election of the Whitlam Government in late 1972, was part of Whitlam's belief that Australian foreign policy should not be restricted due to ideological and military considerations, but should also include cultural and economic facets, and that Australia should seek to expand its relations within the Asian region.

As part of the desire to restructure Australia's foreign relations, an important initiative of the Whitlam Government was the formal abolition of the White Australia Policy and the adoption of a policy of multiculturalism initiated by the Minister for Immigration, Mr Al Grassby. The White Australia Policy was the common name given to the *Immigration Restriction Act, 1901* which sought to restrict non Anglo-

celtic immigrants from entering Australia. The historical background to this Act is similar to that of comparable regulations enacted in Canada and the USA during the latter part of the nineteenth century. There were some provisions within the *Immigration Restriction Act, 1901* which permitted some Asian people to immigrate to Australia, though their numbers were very small.

Since the end of the Second World War there had been a growing awareness on the part of some Australians that Australia's restrictions on non Anglo-Celtic immigration were presenting a negative image of Australia internationally and hampering Australia's effectiveness in international forums. Upon its election the Whitlam Government moved rapidly to formally abolish the White Australia Policy, which resulted in a marginal increase in the proportion of Asian-born immigrants settling in Australia during the early years of government. However, the first significant test for the non-discriminatory nature of Australia's new immigration policy was to come with the first Indochinese refugee crisis of early 1975.

In the spring of 1975 Whitlam perceived that Australia was not in a position to accept Indochinese refugees, and was in essence unwilling to grant entry to Cambodian and even Vietnamese nationals with Australian connections. This perception arose due to a number of factors. The Labor Party in Australia at the time was more ideologically aligned with the North Vietnamese Government, as well as the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge and the Pathet Lao factions, than the American-backed regimes in Indochina. At the same time, some of those involved in the labour movement expressed concern at the possibility of having a large number of Vietnamese workers in Australia, which could threaten the level of wages of Australian workers, and thus the welfare of Australian society. The Government was concerned at a possible electoral backlash from both conservative forces in society and its own supporters if Indochinese evacuees and refugees were settled permanently in Australia.

During April 1975 the Australian Labor Government did not plan to follow the US example of extracting Cambodian and Vietnamese nationals who had connections with Australia or who were perceived as being at risk after the communist victories. The Whitlam Government, and especially some of its senior ministers, appeared concerned with two issues at this time: the desire not to offend North Vietnam by seeming to meddle in the internal affairs of South Vietnam through accepting Vietnamese nationals fleeing the advancing communist forces; and concern at permitting the entry of a large number of conservative South Vietnamese who it was felt might seek to disrupt Australia's relations with North Vietnam. By the time the communist forces had entered Saigon less than a hundred Vietnamese nationals had arrived in Australia from Vietnam under special consideration. Up to the end of April 1975 the Whitlam Government's inaction in getting the remaining

families of Vietnamese already in Australia out of South Vietnam, prior to the communist take over, brought it substantial criticism from the opposition political parties, humanitarian organisations, some academics and the general community.

After the communist forces entered Saigon the Whitlam Government experienced a substantial amount of condemnation, both domestically and internationally, directed at its lack of response in bringing out South Vietnamese nationals with Australian connections. The Whitlam Government had incorrectly interpreted the general feeling of the population towards the situation of the Vietnamese in Australia, and underestimated the international criticisms it would be subject to. Australia soon came under pressure from the United States and the ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia and Singapore, to participate in resettling some of the 130,000 American-assisted evacuees and refugees who had fled Cambodia and Vietnam. As a result of this pressure, two immigration officials were sent to Guam, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore to interview evacuees and refugees for entry to Australia. At the end of this exercise in mid-1975 just over one thousand Vietnamese were selected for entry into Australia. This token response was not received enthusiastically both domestically and internationally, and was viewed by some Asian countries as an indication that the White Australia Policy was not dead and buried as the Whitlam Government had announced, while in certain domestic quarters it added to the growing public discontent with the Whitlam Government. However, the domestic political situation within Australia was about to change and by the end of 1975 the Whitlam Government had been sacked by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, and a new conservative (Liberal) Government under Malcolm Fraser had been elected.

In summary, the position of the Whitlam Government towards the Indochinese evacuees and refugees in early 1975 was that it did not wish to offend and damage relations with, the newly victorious government of North Vietnam. However, after a significant amount of domestic and international pressure, mainly from the ASEAN countries and the United States, the Government acquiesced and accepted a token number of Indochinese evacuees and refugees. The policy towards the Indochinese refugees during 1975 was initially determined by some powerful members of the Whitlam Government, who largely ignored the requests of domestic and international pressure groups. The views of some other Government members who thought that Australia should do something to assist the evacuees and refugees were largely ignored.

The Fraser Government's Initiatives: 1976—1983

The first concerted attempt to develop a refugee policy within the framework of overall immigration policy came in 1977 under the Fraser Government at the instigation of the then Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Michael MacKellar. In the formulation of an Indochinese

refugee policy the task at hand was to balance various domestic and international considerations, while at the same time attempting to project to the international community, especially the Asian region, the image of Australia as a responsible member of the Asian-Pacific community. The Fraser Government, like the Whitlam Government before it, recognised the importance of developing more substantial relations with Australia's Asian neighbours.

During the late 1970s an important feature of the development of refugee policy within the overall immigration programme was the formal structural incorporation of the then Department of Foreign Affairs, now the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, into refugee policy formulation. Though the Department of Foreign Affairs had had input into Australia's ad hoc refugee policy determination previously, there was no particular section within the Department which had responsibility for this matter. As an aside, it is important to note that since the onset of the Indochinese refugee phenomenon the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has consistently recommended a higher intake of Indochinese refugees than the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade believed that if Australia resettled a large number of Indochinese refugees, then it followed that Australia would be perceived as being a responsible member of the Asian region, and this perception in turn could be used as a tool by Australia to improve its regional relations with the Asian countries, especially the ASEAN countries, and, probably most importantly, Indonesia. As a result of the perceived importance of the Indochinese refugees in Australia's bilateral and multilateral relations, a "refugee section" was established in the Department of Foreign Affairs in early 1981.

In addition to raising Australia's status and prestige within the Asian region, another matter which also prompted the Australian Government to take a more active role in the Indochinese refugee issue was the arrival of just over two thousand Vietnamese boat people in 51 boats on Australia's northern shores during 1976-1981, the largest proportion arriving between 1978-1979. The arrival of these refugees sparked a heated debate in Australia, and in some quarters old fears of an Asian invasion of Australia resurfaced. The Government was concerned with these unannounced arrivals for two reasons: fear of the domestic political backlash if increasing numbers of boat people were to arrive unannounced in Australia, and the problem posed by genuine refugees who would have to be resettled by Australia, although they would not have been selected via normal migration procedures. The latter issue was of concern to the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs as Australia normally accepts the majority of its immigrants before they enter Australia; in selecting refugees outside of Australia immigration officials had the ability to select refugees who, they thought, would be able to integrate successfully into Australian society. This power of

selection was not available in the case of genuine refugees who landed in Australia without prior selection, and thus the element of controlled selection was absent.

As a result of the unannounced arrival of Vietnamese boat people on Australia's northern shores, the Government made special advances to the Indonesian Government in an effort to persuade the Indonesians to hold any Vietnamese boat people who wanted to travel on to Australia. If this request was met, Australia promised to take a greater number of Vietnamese boat people from Indonesian camps. Similar advances were made to the Malaysian Government, and in mid-1978 the Australian Government approached the US Government and requested their assistance in persuading the Indonesian and Malaysian Governments to stop boats of Vietnamese refugees planning to go to Australia, in return for Australia taking more refugees from Indonesian and Malaysian refugee camps. This action would thus help the United States resettle Indochinese refugees, while at the same time reducing the number of refugees in Indonesia and Malaysia, but most importantly it would permit Australian immigration officials the opportunity to select the refugees Australia wanted to resettle. In early 1979 when the Indonesian Government offered two islands as possible sites for an Indochinese refugee processing centre, the Australian Government was immediately supportive of this proposal and offered to meet part of the cost of establishing such a centre.

The Australian position in 1978-80 was essentially to try to stop Vietnamese boat people from coming directly to Australia by accepting a large proportion of its Indochinese refugee intake from the countries from where the Vietnamese boat people would most likely attempt to continue their journey to Australia, *viz.* Indonesia and Malaysia. During the late 1970s and early 1980s when the refugee camp populations in Indonesia and Malaysia were declining, and those in Hong Kong and Thailand increasing, Australia continued to take the majority of its refugees from Indonesia and Malaysia, with most of the intake from the other Asian countries consisting only of those refugees who had immediate family members in Australia who were in a position to sponsor them out of the refugee camps.

During the late 1970s, despite what it perceived as its adequate response to the growing Indochinese refugee crisis, the Fraser Government came under increasing international pressure from the first asylum ASEAN countries, as well as the USA and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to resettle more of the growing number of Indochinese asylum seekers arriving in Asian first asylum countries. On the domestic scene, the growing media coverage of the plight of the Vietnamese boat people and the horrific images of emaciated Cambodians entering Thailand raised public consciousness and sympathy, thus permitting the Government, now also under increasing domestic pressure, to raise more readily its intake quota of Indochinese refugees.

Also in the late 1970s the Vietnamese boat people situation changed markedly with the arrival of a number of large freighters in Asia with thousands of Vietnamese asylum seekers aboard. It soon became apparent that the majority of people on these freighters had paid the local equivalent of thousands of dollars to leave Vietnam, and that their departure from Vietnam had been arranged with the assistance of corrupt Vietnamese Government officials. With the growing number of Vietnamese asylum seekers arriving on the shores of Asian countries the Australian Government, mirroring the US Government, announced in early 1982 that it would examine each asylum seeker's claim for refugee status on a case-by-case basis, rather than giving refugee status to all Indochinese asylum seekers. Shortly after the arrival of the large freighters in southeast Asia a new term began to be bandied around—the “economic refugee”. At this time for many resettlement countries it became fairly clear that a sizable proportion of Indochinese asylum seekers, especially amongst the Vietnamese boat people, had fled their countries for economic rather than political reasons, and thus were at best economic, rather than political, refugees.

Also in 1982 the Australian Government took the first immigrants from Vietnam under the Orderly Departure Programme (ODP) which was initiated in 1979 following negotiations between the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the UNHCR. Unlike in the United States, all Vietnamese leaving Vietnam under this programme, which in Australia is now termed the “Vietnamese Family Migration Programme”, entered Australia as immigrants and not as refugees. The almost three year delay between the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the UNHCR and the Vietnamese Government, and the first arrival in Australia of emigrants from Vietnam under the ODP was due to the finalisation of procedural matters. However, it should be noted that between 1976 and 1982 several hundred Vietnamese nationals were able to emigrate from Vietnam to Australia under normal migration channels, although it should be noted also that the majority of these people had been given entry visas to Australia prior to 30 April 1975.

During the late 1970s under the Fraser Government, Australia's principal goals with respect to the Indochinese asylum seekers were: firstly to improve Australia's image internationally, especially with the ASEAN countries; and secondly, to act to prevent adverse domestic opinion which arose each time Vietnamese boat people arrived unannounced on Australian shores. When reports began to emerge in the late 1970s that boats carrying Vietnamese refugees had been pushed off from the shores of some of the ASEAN countries, the Australian Government did not publicly condemn these actions as strongly as did other Western governments, and indicated that the problem was with the Vietnamese Government, and that the international community should be more understanding of the difficult position of the developing ASEAN countries. Such action on the part of the Fraser Government was

to indicate its condemnation of the Vietnamese Government and support of ASEAN's position on the boat people, which would assist in improving Australia's relations with the nations of the region. The adoption of this position was to ensure also that Vietnamese boat people would be prevented from arriving in Australia unannounced, and would ensure that the Fraser Government acquired both domestic and international benefit. The Fraser Government took account of both domestic and international factors in determining its Indochinese refugee policies, while at the same time approaching the issue with some semblance of humanitarianism.

The Hawke Government's Disengagement: 1983-1990

By the mid-1980s the world's attention had drifted away from the plight of the Vietnamese boat people and the Cambodian refugees along the Thailand-Cambodia border. The world's media had not bothered about the situation of the Lao and Hmong refugees in Thailand. America's war in Laos has been labelled a "secret war" and thus very few people in the West knew about the existence of Laos or America's military involvement there in the early 1960s. At the same time, the principal Indochinese refugee resettlement countries of Australia, Canada, France and the USA began to experience what has become known as compassion fatigue, their desire to resettle enthusiastically, an apparently never ending stream of Indochinese asylum seekers, especially Vietnamese boat people, waned significantly. This decreased enthusiasm may be measured by a gradual decline in each country's Indochinese refugee quota or ceiling. Australia was not an exception to the gradual disengagement of resettling Indochinese refugees. However, through its then Minister for Foreign Affairs, and now Governor-General, Bill Hayden, Australia strongly sought a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Cambodia, which was perceived as an important first step in the resolution of the Indochinese refugee problem. Indeed, from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s the situation of the Indochinese refugees had moved from a crisis to a problem that refused to go away.

In its desire to play a leading active role in seeking a settlement to the Cambodian problem, and in an effort to obtain substantial regional support for its initiatives, Australia accepted fewer Indochinese refugees, but the proportional decrease in the Australian intake was not as high as that of the other principal resettlement countries. A policy of gradual disengagement was implemented in order to use the Indochinese refugee issue in discussions on the Cambodian situation with the ASEAN countries. In an effort to be in a favourable position to take the initiative in the resolution of the Cambodian problem the newly elected Labor Government, under Prime Minister Robert Hawke, decided in 1983, under a recommendation of the Department of Foreign Affairs, to resettle a greater proportion of Indochinese refugees from Thailand, where the majority of the Indochinese refugees were to be found.

Another of the Hawke Government's principal foreign policy objectives was to substantially improve relations with Vietnam, while at the same time strengthening relations with the other Asian countries. Both of these objectives were achieved over the following seven years, though it is important to note that Australia's initiatives towards both improving relations with Vietnam and seeking a solution to the Cambodian conflict, somewhat damaged relations with the ASEAN countries, especially during 1984-1986. Another damaging issue was what has come to be called the Asian Immigration Debate, or, the Blainey Debate, so-called after the Melbourne University historian, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, who initiated the debate in March 1984.

The very emotional, public Asian Immigration Debate was essentially about the perceived high level of Asian immigration to Australia. During most of the 1980s about 35-40 per cent of Australia's annual immigrant intake was comprised of Asian-born immigrants, a level which some Australians perceived as being too high. One of the international repercussions of this debate, which was widely reported in the Asian media, was that Australia was again being perceived as a racist country, and the notion of the officially defunct White Australia Policy was mentioned occasionally in the Asian media. The debate on the level of Asian immigration has waxed and waned since 1984, though the damage done to Australia's image in Asia was perceived to be substantial enough to warrant action. One initiative taken was to maintain the intake of Indochinese refugees at a reasonable level, while concurrently not changing immigration policy in effect to decrease the overall level of Asian immigration to Australia. Such action was perceived by the Government as demonstrating to Asian countries that Australia was not racist, and was still willing to resettle Indochinese refugees at a fairly constant level at a time when other resettlement countries were reducing their intake of Indochinese refugees. This action together with Australia's reaching a consensus with the ASEAN countries on the Cambodia conflict assisted in Australia regaining its influence in the ASEAN region, indicating as they did that its initiatives on the Cambodian conflict were for the benefit of the Asian region and demonstrating that Australia was not a racist country.

Partly as a result of the Asian Immigration Debate and other domestic factors a non Government committee was convened in late 1987 to report to the Government on future directions for Australia's immigration policies. The Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policies, which was chaired by Dr Stephen Fitzgerald, Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China and an internationally renowned Sinologist, reported to the Government in mid-1988. One of the reports recommendations was that Australia should gradually disengage itself from Indochinese refugee resettlement. This recommendation appears to have derived from a negative image of Indochinese, especially Vietnamese, refugees in Australia and a growing

opposition to ongoing Indochinese refugee resettlement within the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs. However, the Hawke Government was quick to indicate that it would not follow this recommendation, a decision which was taken in response to substantial pressure from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

During the late 1980s Australia began working very closely with the ASEAN countries on a solution to the Cambodia conflict. Associated with a resolution of this conflict was the Indochinese asylum seekers issue. By early 1989 Australia had essentially reached a consensus with the ASEAN countries both on the method of resolving the Cambodian conflict and the problem of the Indochinese asylum seekers. During 1989-1990 Australia continued to liaise closely with the ASEAN countries on the resolution of the Cambodian conflict. At the July 1989 Geneva conference on Indochinese asylum seekers Australia, with the ASEAN countries, voted "for" the mandatory repatriation of Vietnamese asylum seekers, opposing the Governments of the United States, the Soviet Union and Vietnam. During subsequent international meetings on the issue of the Indochinese asylum seekers, Australia and the ASEAN countries continued to oppose the United States on the issue of mandatory repatriation of Vietnamese asylum seekers.

An important outcome of the July 1989 Geneva conference was that Australia committed itself to resettling 11,000 long-term Vietnamese boat people during 1989-1992. This initiative came from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, not the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs. While this decision obviously pleased the ASEAN countries, as well as Hong Kong, not all sections of the Vietnamese community, and some of those involved with resettling Indochinese refugees, are pleased with this decision. Currently most of those providing services to the Indochinese communities have severely over-burdened work loads, and the prospect of settling 11,000 long-term refugees, the majority of whom have been in camps for over five years and do not have relatives in Australia, is daunting.

In late 1989 a new problem appeared on the horizon of Australia's Indochinese refugee programme; a boat load of Cambodian asylum seekers landed on Australian shores, and by mid-1990 two additional boatloads had arrived. Australia was quick to dispatch envoys to Indonesia in an attempt to persuade the Indonesian Government to hold any Cambodian boat people who sought asylum in Australia. With an increasing number of Cambodian and Vietnamese boat people arriving on Indonesian shores, many of whom have been pushed off from Malaysia, and a decreasing number of refugees being resettled in third countries, there is little incentive for the Indonesian Government to hold Indochinese boat people headed for Australia, as it has done in the past. At present, there are also strong indications that Australia will stop accepting refugees from Laos (as of September 1990). Australia's decision to resettle 11,000 long-term Vietnamese boat people during 1989-1992 may end up causing more problems than it solves for the Government.

Since the Hawke Government came to office in 1983 Australia's policy on the Indochinese asylum seekers has been very closely associated with the desire to find a solution to the Cambodian conflict and improve relations with Asia, especially the newly industrialising ASEAN countries. Despite growing domestic opposition to resettling more Indochinese refugees, both on the part of the public and from within some Government departments, Australia's annual intake of Indochinese refugees has remained around 6-7,000 persons per annum for most of the life of the Hawke Government. During this time, international political considerations have been the paramount driving force behind Australia's Indochinese refugee policy, with domestic and humanitarian factors being seemingly less important over time.

Discussion and Conclusion

The changes in Australia's Indochinese refugee policy since early 1975 have been influenced by a variety of international and domestic political considerations. On the domestic side such factors as community attitudes to the acceptance of the Indochinese refugees, the general economic situation and various public debates relating to immigration in general, and since 1984 Asian immigration in particular, have been of concern. Internationally, Australia's response to the Indochinese refugee problem has been based on developments in the three Indochinese countries, the refugee situation in the Asian countries of first asylum, the attitudes of the other principal Indochinese refugee resettlement countries, especially Canada and the USA and the subsequent pressure placed on the Australian Government by the Governments of the US and the ASEAN countries. Since the mid-1980s the perceived damage done to Australia's reputation in Asia as result of the widely reported Asian immigration debates in the Asian media has also been a factor for consideration. Thus the determination of Australia's Indochinese refugee policy has had to take into account a complex, and at times contradictory, set of international and domestic considerations, often with the strength of the international factors out-weighing the politically sensitive and potentially damaging domestic considerations. Indeed, it may be said that there were times when the Australian Government's Indochinese refugee policy was in direct confrontation with domestic political considerations. At the same time, Australia's policy towards the Indochinese refugees, especially the Vietnamese boat people, has been diametrically opposed to Australia's refugee philosophy and other aspects of the government's overall immigration policies.

Australia's apparent reluctance to take Cambodian, Hmong and Lao refugees extended from a belief that the majority of these refugees were of rural or unskilled backgrounds, and thus would find it nearly impossible to integrate into industrial and post-industrial Australian society. Those refugees from Cambodia and Laos who would have been suited for resettlement in Australia, that is the educated and the skilled, were perceived as probably having a knowledge of French rather than

English, and thus would be more suitable for resettlement in Canada or France. There was a perception also that the majority of the Vietnamese boat people were from the urban localities in southern Vietnam, and thus would be able to integrate readily into Australian society. It was also the opinion of some policy makers that refugees from Cambodia and Laos would be willing to return to their homelands once the economic and political situations in these countries stabilised. Not only was this position all too vague, but it also exhibited a lack of understanding of the complex socio-historical situations in these two countries, especially with respect to Laos.

The country of origin of the refugees to be selected was the subject of discussions, as well as strong disagreements, between the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The acceptance of many of the Cambodian refugees in the early to mid-1980s appears to be a victory for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs perceived that the Cambodians, as well as the Lao, were largely unintegratable due to their poor level of human capital. From an economic perspective these perceptions were to be proven wrong, as data from the 1986 Australian Census of Population and Housing indicated that Lao-Australians were the most economically successful of the Indochinese refugee communities, with the Cambodian-Australians only marginally less successful than the Vietnamese-Australians.

The decision to select Indochinese refugees from specific first asylum countries was determined by a complex set of economic, geopolitical and historical factors, foreign governmental pressure and perceptions of which refugees would most readily integrate into Australian society. Under international pressure in the mid-1970s, primarily from the UNHCR and the US Government, Australia accepted the majority of its Indochinese refugees from Thailand. With the commencement of the major exodus of Vietnamese boat people in 1978 Australia started taking a large number of refugees from Malaysia, again mainly due to international pressure and Australia's historical Commonwealth and military links with Malaysia. After a number of Vietnamese boats arrived on Australian shores in 1978-79 a significant proportion of the Indochinese refugee intake came from Indonesia. In the early 1980s, as international pressure mounted to assist the resettlement of the growing number of Cambodian refugees, Australia again redirected part of its attention to Thailand, though Indonesia and Malaysia remained the main source of Indochinese refugees. These three countries were to continue through the 1980s as being the main source of Indochinese refugees for Australia. From the beginning of 1990 about 37 per cent of the Indochinese refugees resettled in Australia came from Malaysia, 30 per cent from Thailand (of which about one-third were Vietnamese), 16 per cent from Indonesia, six per cent from Hong Kong and four per cent from the Philippines.

In the early 1980s Australia came under some criticism for only taking the cream of the refugees and rejecting the elderly and uneducated. Indeed this practice had been going on since the late 1970s, and for a short period during 1978-79 some Australian immigration officers working in Malaysia deliberately split families in order to select young single females for entry to Australia. After increasing criticism of Australia's acceptance procedures from some first asylum governments and Australian community groups actively involved in the resettlement of Indochinese refugees, the Government decided that a small proportion of the refugees to be resettled would be difficult to settle cases. However, the majority of these difficult to settle cases had family members in Australia who were able to assist with their resettlement.

In conclusion, the main driving force behind Australia's policy towards the Indochinese refugees over the past decade and a half has been international political considerations, especially based on the relations between the Australian Government and the ASEAN countries. However, the main factor limiting the level of Australia's response to the Indochinese refugee problem was domestic political considerations, especially the potential domestic political backlash if too many refugees were accepted. Only in a few instances have genuine humanitarian considerations come into play. This is highlighted even more when one considers the recent decision to accept 11,000 Vietnamese long-stayers from Asian refugee camps, at a time when domestic resettlement resources can just cope with those resettled in Australia, and when Australian unemployment is increasing and unemployment within the Vietnamese-born community is in the order of 30-35 per cent.