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978-0-521-73187-4 - Global Citizens: Australian Activists for Change

Edited by Geoffrey Stokes, Roderic Pitty and Gary Smith

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Global Citizens

Australian Activists for Change

Against a backdrop of advancing neoliberalism and globalisation, this timely book examines nine prominent Australians from diverse backgrounds – ‘global citizens’ – who have each enhanced public life through promoting universal values and human rights.

The book charts over 50 years of campaigning, and espouses perennial causes such as peace, social justice, ecological sustainability and gender and racial equality. Ultimately, this inspiring volume sends a message of hope for Australian society and provides a benchmark for all proponents of change.

Geoffrey Stokes is Professor of Politics in the School of International and Political Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne.

Roderic Pitty is Senior Lecturer in Political Science and International Relations at the School of Social and Cultural Studies, University of Western Australia, Perth.

Gary Smith is Professor and Head of the School of International and Political Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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For April Carter.

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Thao Nguyen holds degrees in Commerce and Law from the University of Sydney, and has worked at the New South Wales Legal Aid Commission. In 2004, Thao was the Australian Youth Representative to the UN General

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Assembly. In the following year she was a member of the Australian non-governmental delegation to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. Thao has been Youth Chair of the Ethnic Communities' Council of New South Wales, and a member of the National Community Advisory Committee to the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

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Foreword

Carmen Lawrence

The stark division of community opinion in recent years over how to respond to people seeking asylum in Australia reveals a fundamental set of tensions in our society. As the numbers of asylum seekers increased in the late 1990s and the MV *Tampa's* sorry human cargo was repelled by armed Australian soldiers, media coverage illustrated the chasm that exists between alternative visions of how Australia ought to be linked with the wider world. Some Australians strongly hold that there are fundamental principles of respect for human decency which transcend national boundaries. Others fiercely defend such boundaries against the uninvited. Those who are able to see beyond borders regard the needs of the asylum seekers as deserving humane consideration. Those who see only the borders condone the prolonged incarceration of refugees as a warning signal to others who might otherwise follow. This gulf reflects the varying respect for human rights standards in Australia. There is a divide between those who see Australia as part of a common humanity, and those who see Australia apart from the wider world, and who would also exclude others on the basis of race, religion, and culture.

As this book reminds us, there are and always have been a good many Australians, although probably not the majority, who have a strong sense of global citizenship, just as there are those who are proudly nationalistic and defensive of narrowly defined 'Australian values'. Many clearly appreciate that, in the age of global warming, resource depletion, and burgeoning population, the big problems we confront simply cannot be solved in splendid isolation. Those who espouse a global perspective have, until recently, found themselves on the receiving end of derision and abuse, accused of caring more about 'those people' than their own. *Ad hominem* attacks on critics of narrow parochialism were commonplace. The abusive epithet 'un-Australian' was often used to denigrate those who try to show how the world can be re-imagined and remade.

In such times, it is challenging to work toward a world in which the precarious aspects of our common humanity are reaffirmed. Yet the increased vulnerability felt by many people in western societies early in the twenty-first century offers a challenge, which the American writer Judith Butler

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(2004: xii–xiii) has described as an opportunity. She says that this vulnerability ‘offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which violence might be minimised, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community’. What this book shows is that there are many strands of reason from which such a vision of an interdependent world can be created. Even during the Howard years, the voices of those who remained optimistic about Australia’s links with the wider world were not silenced. There is a strong tradition, celebrated in this collection, of using universalist values to criticise and reform institutions and practices in Australia, and elsewhere. This tradition has clearly informed contemporary campaigns for racial equality, global peace, women’s rights, environmental protection, and human rights more generally, as it did in the recent debate over asylum seekers.

The tradition of seeking to transcend parochial, nationalist, and populist politics drove Australia’s active participation in the establishment of the United Nations. This was based on the recognition, after two catastrophic wars and the annihilation of millions, that such destruction was possible only because of the failure to accord basic human dignity and worth to all humans. The Nazis built the ideological campaign that led to the Holocaust upon a pre-existing political culture of anti-Semitism, onto which they grafted propaganda campaigns that depicted the Jewish people as vermin, and as threatening the fabric of German society. To those in the postwar era, the combination of this representation of the Jews as less than human, and the extreme nationalism of the Third Reich, seemed to demand a global remedy, namely an international framework for the protection of human rights.

Amongst the instruments devised was the UN Convention on Refugees. This was adopted in 1951, and ratified by the majority of nations, including Australia. The convention was designed to prevent a recurrence of the scandalous treatment of the Jewish people fleeing Nazi Germany, whose claims for asylum were rebuffed and who were returned to certain death in the gas chambers of occupied Europe. While many Jewish refugees escaped this horror, like the young Herb Feith who arrived in Australia with his parents in 1938, many others did not. The Refugee Convention has come under strain in recent years, but it continues to provide an essential framework for protecting the rights of people fleeing persecution. It is one of the many institutional threads linking Australian society with the wider world.

Australia has become an increasingly reluctant participant in protecting people from persecution. Many of the recent changes to migration legislation, which were presented in terms of protecting our borders from vulnerable people, arguably violate the Refugee Convention. In clear violation

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of our commitments under section 33 not to send people back to a place of persecution, asylum seekers from Iraq and Iran have been returned to danger. There is strong evidence that some of them may have been killed (Corlett 2005). The former UN High Commissioner on Refugees (Lubbers 2001) has observed:

If refugees are sent straight back to danger – or are prevented from leaving their countries in the first place – then all the other measures designed to protect and assist them count for nothing. Under international law this should not happen, and blatantly ignoring international law is a dangerous path to tread.

By denying asylum seekers proper recourse to Australian law, while attempting to foist our responsibilities onto our impoverished Pacific neighbours, Australia has clearly reneged on its obligations and responsibilities under international law. If every country behaved in this way, there would be nowhere for people fleeing persecution to find peace, safety and security.

Australia's adherence to various UN declarations, conventions, and protocols has always been uneven, as has our willingness to subject ourselves to international norms and scrutiny. Indeed, in the past decade there was a fundamental reappraisal of our status within the international community. When he was Prime Minister, John Howard appealed to populist prejudice, and once referred to one UN human rights body as 'just a bunch of foreigners in Geneva'. Criticism from various UN human rights bodies has focused on Australia's failure to grapple satisfactorily with Indigenous injustice, the unprecedented turning away of some asylum seekers, and the indefinite detention of many others. In response to this criticism, the Howard government effectively banned cooperation with the UN Committee system, blocking future visits by UN inspectors, and further delaying routine reports. These defensive moves to protect Australia from adverse commentary attracted further UN criticism. In August 2000, the head of the UN Treaty section, Mr Kohona (quoted in Riley 2000), was openly critical of Australia:

The moral authority Australia enjoys will be dissipated by this peevish attitude towards these UN committees. [It] should be doing its best to protect its good record and using it to advance the cause of human rights around the world.

Australia's obstructionist stance gave a green light to repressive regimes with far worse human rights records than ours. China, for example, congratulated the Howard government over its outburst against the UN in 2000 when our mandatory sentencing laws were criticised. In claiming that the UN should reserve its criticisms only for the most odious regimes, the Howard government failed to appreciate that Australia has a crucial role to play

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in setting an example, by protecting human rights within and beyond its borders. It failed to rise to the challenge of an interdependent world.

Changes in government policy in the past decade meant that Australia reached a low point in our implementation of international human rights obligations. On every major issue – except trade – the Howard government played down the idea of Australia as an international citizen: from the Refugee Convention to global warming and the Kyoto Protocol, from Indigenous self-determination to disarmament, from joining the attack on Iraq without UN approval to breaking UN sanctions against Iraq in the lead-up to the war. Such actions led many Australians to feel ashamed of their government, particularly when travelling abroad. While many of these actions are being repudiated by the new Rudd Labor government, one lesson of the last decade is that Australians must not rely only on governments to respond to the global challenges of the current era. Given the urgent need to imagine a world based on non-violence and responsibility for others, direct action by Australians to address global issues has become vital.

This collection of essays provides us with a timely reminder that Australia has a strong tradition of such action to draw upon. Citizenship for Australians does not require excluding others, whether refugees or other victims of injustice around the world. It is possible, and increasingly necessary, to be an Australian global citizen, concerned about universal human rights, and determined to enhance Australia's positive engagement with the wider world. This book reveals a tradition of global citizenship in Australia expressed in the lives of quite diverse people, some prominent and others less so. All have responded to the challenges of an interdependent world, seeking to resolve Australian problems in accordance with principles of our common humanity. In these vulnerable times, there is much to learn from these Australian activists, about how we can broaden our perspectives on our place in the world today, and practise an active citizenship that is limited neither by borders nor by timidity.

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