Looking for solutions in seeking asylum in Australia

Anne Tuohey

The human tragedy of so many asylum seekers drowning as they make their treacherous journey to Australia continues to be a scourge on our collective conscience. As I write this, another leaky boat has been forced to return to Indonesia, and many more will keep coming.

Many Australians have lobbied the government - indeed the parliament - to embrace a compassionate response to asylum seekers, whose desperation drives them to take these dangerous journeys.

The latest tragedy in June which saw 90 people drown spurred Independent Rob Oakeshott’s private member’s bill. The Opposition and the Greens would not support this version of a Malaysian solution. Regardless of one’s view, it appeared to be a genuine attempt to end a terrible impasse as more and more people risked their lives. It wasn’t perfect, but it was an attempt to prevent further loss of life, as Fr Frank Brennan pointed out in his excellent article Australia’s 20 year search for the right asylum policy at http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=32044.

The Prime Minister has now appointed an expert panel to consider measures to prevent asylum seekers risking their lives. The panel will confer with others in the community and the cross-party reference group. The Prime Minister assures us that she is open to any well-conceived solutions.

If this is correct, will those who hold the balance of power in the Senate also be open to change? Very few seem prepared to give any ground to make anything change tangibly and for the better. Is this the time for high principles? Surely there is an argument for a crisis response to what is happening now, as well as for developing plans for the longer term.

And, if proposed, would the government support people’s claims for asylum being processed in Indonesia and advising them of waiting times before they could resettle safely in Australia? This is one idea proposed by Julian Burnside as a way of preventing people embarking on unsafe boats in the first place.

We have a critical and immediate issue that needs urgent attention. We also have a global problem of more than 60 million displaced people seeking a new, improved life somewhere else. Yes, we need to do more, much more in terms of the number of asylum seekers and refugees we accept through our humanitarian program. We are a large country, and we are also part of an international community, sharing responsibility for protecting these people.

Dr Race Matthews
Cooperatives, social equity, & participation

Wednesday 25 July 7:30pm

A prolific writer on cooperatives and how they might contribute to an improved economic life in Australia, Dr Race Matthews has studied what we could learn from one of the phenomenal cooperatives at Mondragon in Spain, particularly to develop enterprises which enhance equity and participation.

Could you live on the $35 a day NewStart provides?

Dr Philip Mendes
Australia’s income security system & the abandonment of equity

Coming in August
Kevin Peoples’ account of the Catholic Rural Movement

Anne Tuohy

Kevin Peoples knew he had a fascinating story to tell that would provide a personal first-hand insight into the world of the National Catholic Rural Movement and Bob Santamaria. As with any great story, it needed the right structure and treatment in order for the telling to do it justice. Kevin spent 6 years writing Santamaria’s Salesman: Working for the National Catholic Rural Movement 1959-1961.

Those who braved a particularly cold June evening to hear Kevin speak were rewarded with a fascinating story. He interwove aspects of the history and purpose of the movement with his own perspective on growing up Catholic in the 1950s in the small country town of Terang. The result is a book which engages the reader emotionally and intellectually.

Kevin had been brought up an active participant and supporter of the Young Christian Workers (YCW). He was a committed Catholic actionist when, at 22, he joined the National Catholic Rural Movement (NCRM) led by Bob Santamaria.

He was given the high-falutin’ title of National Organising Secretary and the use of an FC Holden which he nicknamed ‘Powder Blue’. He related well to country people, and was good at collecting the money. He joked that the subtitle of the book could have been Confessions of a money collector.

Imbued with a strong sense of responsibility to act, and feeling capable of achieving a great deal thanks to the personal formation he gained from YCW, Kevin soon realised that his and Santamaria’s understanding of Catholic Action differed greatly. Over time, Santamaria’s rejection of the orthodox view of Catholic Action would lead to serious consequences for the Church and for politics, and contributed to the eventual failure of the rural movement, which became, in Kevin’s view, little more than an anti-communist organisation.

Kevin watched as Santamaria became increasingly out of step with the Vatican. As Santamaria reshaped traditional Catholic Action in favour of his own hybrid version, his actions seemed to Kevin to become more and more divisive.

Santamaria’s fundamental error was thinking that all action should be geared to political change. He became totally obsessed with mobilising what he called “the best people” into a political force whose main objective was fighting communism, even when the Vatican decreed that this was not what Catholic Action was or should be about.

Kevin took the audience on a potted history tour of a particular time from the point of view of an insider. He captured the social mood of the time, and he also reminded us that the ideas of Joseph Cardijn embedded in the YCW still have great relevance, while inspiring hope that now is the right time to recover some of these ideas.

Kevin’s book does justice to the whole story, and is a compelling read. It offers much more than an account simply of the NCRM and Santamaria’s leadership style. It tells of the getting of wisdom of a young man who had to make sense of a world which he thought he understood, but which ended up not as he had imagined.

**Books available from SPC**

- Santamaria’s Salesman: Working for the National Catholic Rural Movement 1959-1961 by Kevin Peoples
  Special discount $40 plus postage

- Sufficient for the Day: Towards a Sustainable Culture by Geoff Lacey
  $20 plus postage

- Towards a Better World by Arthur Gibbs
  $15 plus postage

**Network events**

**Leaving refugees in limbo**
Public meeting held by Refugee Action Collective (Vic)
Wednesday 11 July 6:30pm
The Multicultural Hub, 506 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne
refugeeactioncollective@gmail.com or Chris 0403 013 183

Speakers: Declan Murphy (Refugee Action Collective)
Niromi de Soyza (Author Tamil Tigress)
Harvey Stern (President Labor for Refugees)
Brian Walters SC (human rights lawyer)

Some 60 refugees, including families with young children, are facing indefinite detention on the basis of adverse security assessments from ASIO, with no right to appeal. This public meeting will call for their release into the community.

**Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez (President Caritas Internationalis) with Fr Frank Brennan**
Indigenous peoples of the world
Sunday 19 August 5pm
Newman College, 887 Swanston Street, Parkville

**New on our website**

The podcast of Kevin Peoples’ 20 June talk at SPC on his book Santamaria’s Salesman: Working for the National Catholic Rural Movement 1959-61.

Bill Friary’s article on US drones - are they ethical?