

INHUMANITY REPEATED

The treatment of asylum seekers in Woomera detention centre is a cameo rerun of Australia's treatment of its aborigines. Current arguments and emotions may inform us about both events. Instead of a rerun of our traumatic history, we may control it for our benefit.

Detention camps like Woomera are Let me quickly say that there are differences between the two events too. Detainees' lives are being preserved, their ethnicity is not attacked, and their children are not removed. But there are sufficient similarities for us to learn from history and not let it repeat itself.

The most pertinent common thread between aborigines and asylum seekers is hostility born of threat. The aborigines were feared because they might fight for their land, hunting grounds and spiritual sites. Pauline Hanson stoked similar fears that aborigines will take back their land, and our wealth (through royalties on mines, compensation if there were a treaty, welfare payments). She also stoked fears of migrants who would take our jobs.

These fears were given a major twist by the Howard government. Reconciliation was squashed, and asylum seekers were portrayed as the thin edge of the wedge of the millions who would pour into this country if the government did not take protective measures. This played on the yellow hordes fears of old, where the overpopulated Asian countries would burst into the underpopulated Australian continent.

In each case once the group has been identified as irrevocably dangerous, a number of things followed. First, the dangerous out-group and the threatened in-group were definitively delineated. For instance, no concern was necessary for tribal distinctions among aborigines (they are still all lumped together), and no distinction was made of ethnic and religious backgrounds, age, gender, perpetrator or victim group of the refugees.

In both cases those who saw the other group as humans like ourselves were ignored, or labelled as naïve, with bleeding hearts or misguided charity who did not know the facts.

Both aborigines and asylum seekers have been vilified (as violent e.g., refugees linked with terrorists, manipulative, cunning, and criminal); demonized (as wanting all, ready to displace us); and dehumanized (dirty, diseased, subhuman as evidenced by them not caring for their children, and called by numbers in detention centres).

Once the dangers and the groupings have been defined, the rest follows. If not actually eradicated, dangers have to be resited, pushed out and isolated. Both groups were subject to disproportionate force, and those already in the country were isolated in its distant and harsh parts. Both were abused and humiliated in remote areas, out of sight of most of the population. Both groups were subject to special laws not applied to the rest of the population.

The consequences of such treatment were similar in both groups. They included demoralization, depression, despair, aggression, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour. Children in both groups lost a sense of security, care, education, and respected role models. They became demoralized like their parents, and subject to physical and sexual abuse.

***the morality in both cases

That there is a bridge between the two situations is reflected in Pauline Hanson linking aborigines and migrants as problems to the population, as well as John Howard's unsympathetic attitudes to both. That Australians generally are involved in these issues was reflected in them being used as electoral planks.

The fact that those responsible for the Woomera policies see no reason to say sorry for past mistakes confirms the truism that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. No need for shame (though it helps), rather recognition that our minds feed on information and wrong appraisals - - > wrong actions. Pride that we can have this discussion, democratic learning about ourselves.

The current treatment of asylum seekers is traumatic history in the making. It is shaped by Messrs Howard and Ruddock who feel that the traumatic history of the aborigines should be forgotten. But they demonstrate that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it.

In a concentrated way we see the consequences in refugees akin to what developed in the indigenous population over many decades.

In both cases leaders pampered to endemic fears and gained politically. In both cases were absent compassion, even to children. In both cases existed an ethnocentric view of past and current history. Disinformation prevailed. Currently detainees are called illegal, criminals, tainted with terrorist identity. They and staff are punished for speaking up and the media are denied access to detention camps. Those advocating for the groups are ignored or called bleeding hearts.

In both the population may be passively corrupted. One of the most painful visions in the asylum seekers' crisis was seeing Kim Beazley corrupted before our eyes. His eyes galzed over and his mouth said what was necessary to gain power, even while he was losing his heart and soul.

At the International Forum on the Holocaust in Stockholm in 2000 at which I was an Australian delegate, Dr Michael Naumann, German Minister of State for Cultural Affairs warned that nations should be alert to certain common precursors of genocide and reverse them while there is time.

The precursors were the following. A specific group of people are identified by the government and blamed for current political and economic problems. Government proclamations demonise the group and its members are labelled as dangerous. All members of the group are equally stigmatised and lumped into one entity. The group's culture is ignored and denigrated. Members of the group are identified by racial features or identity cards. The group is placed outside laws and rights applying to everyone else. The group is isolated by special markings and is constrained geographically. The group is undermined economically with seizure of land, property and denial of work. They are dehumanized, called animal names, and if incarcerated they are identified by numbers not names. If these precursors are not remedied, matters may progress toward the final solution – be rid of them.

Once others are demonized or dehumanized, compassion is out of the question, as it is for monsters or germs. That is why we have not had a skerrick of compassion voiced by Mr Howard or Mr Ruddock for refugees including children.

Once moral principles and taboos are broached, the course is set. Without blinking an eye and in a calm apparently reasonable voice, amazing things are said as if they were commonplace. The father of three drowned children cannot have his wife come to Australia, and if he visits her in Indonesia he cannot return. A young depressed child has not suffered from his environment, actually children should be strip searched.

It is incumbent on us to reverse the process. It is harming the refugees, their carers who are themselves dehumanized and demoralized, and the population generally who are corrupted through disinformation and wrong definition of threats to them. We should obey international human rights laws. Yes, weed out human rights abusers and put them under international jurisdiction, but help genuine refugees. If we are to learn from Germany, and the bulk of European nations who have said sorry for their part of commission or omission in the Holocaust, we can say sorry where we have done wrong, and not do it again. It does not cost so much. Victims want acceptance of their humanity and recognition of their suffering, and a fair go. They do not want others' livelihoods.