

A Gungalidda grassroots perspective on Refugees and the recent events in the US

Not all Aboriginal people agree with the views on asylum-seekers expressed by ATSIC bureaucrat Marion Hansen (C/T, 22/9/01). I wonder if working for the Government has affected her views. People working for the Government have a job to do, but maybe she is just saying what the government wants to hear. Maybe she is talking about the views of those Aboriginal people who have believed the myths the government has put out about the asylum seekers.

But we know that what the Government says about Aboriginal Peoples is wrong, so we are not going to believe similar statements like "the asylum seekers will take Australian's jobs." These are just myths to turn the public against refugees in the same way that public sentiment has been whipped up against Aboriginal people and their rights.

If we as Aboriginal people are true to our culture and spiritual beliefs, we should be telling the government that what they are doing to refugees is wrong! Our Aboriginal cultures do not allow us to treat people this way.

I am a grassroots Gungalidda Elder and I happened to be up in the Gulf of Carpentaria attending a funeral when it came over the radio that the Tampa people had arrived at Christmas Island. It was very disturbing to hear what was happening to those refugees. All of us old people were so sad about the refugees on the Tampa. We have our own issues to deal with but the refugees are fleeing hunger, deprivation, persecution and war. And now they are caught up in a situation with the Australian Government in which they are powerless.

The refugees were coming here, to OUR country, which we as Aboriginal people have a spiritual connection to. Our culture teaches us that we are all connected, to the land and to everybody else. Our Spirit Creator and our ancient law and culture would not stand for how these refugees are being treated. But no-one will listen to us. (Except the Greens. They realise what's happening to this land.)

So it saddens me when I hear any Aboriginal person stand up and talk about money before human need. Ms Hansen is talking about the "money side" of the asylum seekers arriving, but my Gungalidda people were talking about the human side. We should be talking about human need first and realise we have a roof over our heads, we know where food's coming from. Those people were out on the water. The old women where I come from said "Look at this big river, where we're fishing, look at this big land."

There's room for all of us, if we learn to live simply, within our country's means. This land is crying out for us to stop being so materialistic. We should be learning our lesson. Cutting down on the way we live, saving the land and embracing others in need. Giving them refuge. This is a spiritual country and we are a spiritual people, we are ready to embrace other people in their need. We should only be using the things we need to survive, and not keeping everything for ourselves, and living well at other people's expense.

Before Europeans came here, (illegally), in the Aboriginal world, we were all different, speaking different languages, but we all had the same kinship system for all human beings, in a spiritual way. Our religion and cultural beliefs teaches us that everyone is a part of us and we should care about them. We can't separate ourselves from other human beings - it's a duty.

The first thing we have to stand by is our belief of caring for each other. People can come here, if they respect our land, and treat our land as it should be treated. And if they don't interfere with us, and if they respect our differences, because we've been interfered with enough!

I am appalled that even as I write this, laws are being made in the Parliament, to keep refugees away from this land. I always wanted to believe that the majority of people in Australia weren't racist, but the polls supporting John Howard's actions against the refugees have showed me that I was sadly mistaken. John Howard's popularity jumped, but I can see that he is doing to the refugees the same things that have been done to Aboriginal Peoples. I can identify with what is happening to the refugees, especially to the Moslems.

As a black woman I recognise the racism and arrogance that is projected against the refugees - because that same racism and arrogance has been directed against us for over 200 years. We know what it's like to suffer religious persecution, because we have not had freedom since we were invaded.

I believe we are all from the human race and we should take heed of the great evil that happened in New York and Washington and let it be a global warning to all of us. I see the hungry children of the Middle East and Africa, (and the people dying of preventable and treatable diseases), on television; they are starving, living in 3rd and 4th world conditions, sick and dying slowly. There is little difference between sudden death (even though I don't condone what happened at the WTC for a minute) and the slow deaths of the children of Afghanistan, Iraq and other poor countries. In fact, if anything, a sudden death is a kinder death than living a life of hell on earth, and wondering when the powerful of the world will recognise the humanity of those suffering people.

Many nations live on this planet, some have enormous might and others feel powerless in the face of that might. But the wealthy countries like the US, the UK and Australia, they became rich in the first place from either taking someone else's country, or from what they took from the poor countries, and now they have to take stock. Instead of being just all out for themselves, and causing so much suffering in the world, they need to be honest and admit what they are doing to other human beings. Then we can turn this great evil into something good.

I see this as an Elder from the Gungalidda Nation. The wealthy countries have to start respecting everybody, even if they are different and start treating everybody as a human being. This journey, from the cradle to the grave is too short not to embrace other people in need. We shouldn't be turning people away, on the high seas, putting their lives in danger and the lives of their children. We should feel ashamed at what has happened to those refugees. They came from war-torn countries, and had to flee through no fault of their own. They are different to us, with different languages, different religions and different cultures. But they should be accepted as equally important to us because they are human beings.

And Bush, he is a loose cannon. Australia is a little country mindlessly playing "follow the leader." If we follow the US we will destroy ourselves as surely as the US is destroying itself. Bush thinks he can reach to the sky with his missiles but he can't even see hungry children right in front of his eyes. He is disconnected to other people's suffering.

Remember, Bush is the world "leader" who had the arrogance to refuse to sign the Kyoto protocol. He said he was going to put the US economy before the global environment. But his words are the words of a fool, because if he destroys the planet, where is he going to get jobs for the people of the US?

What will happen to the economy of the US then? And remember, the US recently walked out of the UN World Conference Against Racism and refused to listen to any criticism of US foreign policies.

In regards to the people who did the bombing in the US, we have to think about what could have made them so angry and desperate. Desperate people can be driven to desperate acts when they are not treated equally and their needs are not taken into consideration by the wealthy countries of the world.

I can understand their feelings because Aboriginal Peoples have never been accepted in this land, even though it is OUR land. We have never been treated as equals. I will finish by reminding everyone that this is not John Howard's country, it has been stolen. It was taken over by the first fleet of illegal boat people. We need to remind the world that the Aboriginal people who have stayed true to themselves, to their land and to their spiritual beliefs do not have the same views about refugees, about the US or about a war of retribution that John Howard does.

Wadjularbinna,
Gungalidda Elder

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