

**TOOWOOMBA CHRONICLE**  
**TUESDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> APRIL**  
**ANZACS AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS**

As I've listened to and watched the news and read newspapers over the last week or so a number of things have been exercising my mind. Questions arise about the hows and whys of things that happen, the way they are presented to us and the responses that are evoked from the broader community.

In particular I have been thinking about Anzac Day and Asylum Seekers. It is a stretch to see the connections, I agree. I've begun to think that the connection is somewhere in how we understand the concept of freedom and what we are prepared to do to assure ourselves and others of the experience of freedom.

Those we honour on Anzac Day are men and women who have lost their lives in the line of military duty. They and their families have paid a high personal price for their beliefs. I have to admit that, personally, I see many elements of nationalism creeping into our remembrance of Anzac Day, and I worry about the glorification of war and violence with which it can sometimes be tinged. And yet, I do respect the fact that men and women who have left our shores as members of Australia's Defence Forces are people of good hearts and courageous spirits and a firm commitment to and belief in the possibility of freedom. We need to acknowledge their efforts and the risks they have taken, honour their memory, and continue to support their spirit.

So what of those who come to our shores seeking a safe place to live? I cannot even begin to imagine the pain involved in their decision to leave their families and homes, and set out on an uncertain journey to a land where they know neither the language nor the customs, where their skills are likely to be unrecognised and where the only sure thing they can see in the future is a fulfilment of their longing for freedom. Such people are more likely than not to be people of good heart, courageous spirits, and a firm commitment to and belief in the possibility of freedom. They must also be ready to take enormous risks for the sake of their families, risks that most people would hesitate to take.

And what of the wave of boat-loads of asylum seekers that we are warned are heading to our shores? It is always important to check the figures. In 2008, almost 4800 people claimed asylum in Australia. About 180 of these arrived by boat, the others coming by air on valid tourist or student visas. Of the boat arrivals nearly 90% were successful in their bid to claim refugee status, while only about 50% of those submitting claims after arrival by air were similarly successful. One hundred and eighty people a year is hardly an invasion!

But they are here illegally, I hear some reply. There is nothing illegal about what these people are doing. They have every right to claim asylum when they believe that their lives are at risk in their own country. Australia, as a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention, agrees to assess the refugee claims of those who are fleeing persecution in their own lands. The fact that there is no possibility of them approaching an Australian embassy in their own country or other countries

through which they pass, is not the fault of the asylum seeker. Perhaps this is a clue to alternative paths our government might follow to respond to this global situation.

Of course, we can't leave the people-smugglers out of the picture. While I was disturbed by our Prime Minister's desire that they should "rot in hell", it seems to me that it is they who are manipulating the situation to make a profit out of the distress of needy people. On the other hand, perhaps we can't make too many judgements about their motivations, either, just as we can't always make judgements about the decisions soldiers make in the heat of a battle campaign.

Freedom is one of the basic human rights. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights assures us that we all have the right to be free. And so, we honour the memory and the efforts of courageous and generous people who in the past, and to the present day, have risked their lives to defend their belief that freedom is possible. But let's not miss the insight this might offer into our understanding of those other courageous people who arrive on our shores seeking the freedom that others have defended.