

Essay:

The trouble with empathy

Author:

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No doubt the finite and meagre nature of our feelings does prevent us from extending our sympathies to those whom we have not seen in the flesh. It should not be so, and would not be with one who had nurtured his heart with the proper care.

- The Reverend Mr Crawley, in Anthony Trollope's
The Last Chronicle of Barset (1867)

Future historians might do worse than to term them Australia's empathy wars. I'm talking about the historical moment that began with appearance of the MV Tampa on the fringe of the Australian immigration zone in August 2001, and which took a new turn with the appearance of those terrifying, inexorable waves across the coastlines of South Asia on Boxing Day 2004. This was the time, more than any other in recent memory, when where you stood in Australian politics was defined by a single symbolically charged political issue - how you reacted towards the sudden influx of hundreds of foreign nationals into our immigration zones and our detention centres.

In practice, there seemed to be only two choices, and each was cut out in high relief. Depending on whom you talked to, the detainees were either a threat to our national sovereignty or a challenge to the nation's conscience. We needed either to reach out to them or steel ourselves against them. Their presence called either for a willed exercise of imagination and sympathy or for the deliberate refusal of such an emotion, suspected as a phoney political "stunt". It was impossible even to agree on a description of the detainees: they were either refugees or "illegals" - even though such empirical evidence as is available seems to suggest they are probably a mixture of both. As with all great wars, there was no room for a middle ground, because the battleground was the uncompromising tissue of the human heart.

Each side mustered its supporters for the emotional tug of war. On the one side, talkback radio hosts opened the airwaves to an outpouring of anxiety, suspicion, frustration and resentment. On this view, the detainees were frauds who had jumped the

immigration queue and were clinging to their ill-gotten refugee imposture by a series of emotional ruses. And their professed supporters were a motley collection of interested individuals, plying a trade in caring for professional advancement, or else a coterie of self-gratifying “compassion junkies”. In either case the plea for sympathy had to be resisted as a snare. In this respect, conservative intellectual opinion and popular criticism dovetailed to a surprising (and, to conservative intellectuals, no doubt, gratifying) degree.

On the other side of the trenches, there was less interest in the precise legal status of the detainees than in the purely human aspects of their plight. One’s capacity to respond to another’s imagined suffering was the key. From this side of no-man’s-land, it seemed the problem lay not with a few malcontents, but with the soul of the nation itself. There was something about Australians that simply constrained them from an empathetic reaction towards their fellow humans in distress - a point of view that inevitably recalled the now-traditional sense of alienation of Australian intellectuals from the mundanity of ordinary suburban family life and its values.

In 2002, as part of the research for a short book on the “Western Sydney factor” in Australian politics, I surveyed the social-attitudes data on the asylum-seekers crisis. My resource was the Australian Election Study (AES), a lengthy questionnaire administered to a random selection of voters after each federal election. I was investigating the claim - then widely advanced - that outer-suburban voters in Sydney and elsewhere had been much less sympathetic to asylum seekers than Australians more broadly. As it happened, the claim seemed to be true enough, so far as it went. If the figures were to be trusted, Western Sydney residents were less sympathetic - by a margin of between 10 and 20 per cent - than were Australians generally, to the proposition that asylum seekers were all refugees and to several related propositions. This was more remarkable because, as a general rule, occupation and socio-economic status had only a limited impact on Australians’ views on these issues. It seemed that when it came to anxieties about illegal immigration, where you lived was more important than how much you earned or what you did for a living.

Even more striking, however, was the range of factors that disposed people to being more sympathetic than average towards the claims of asylum seekers. From the point of view of statistical significance, the outstanding group of people who were more than usually well disposed were those who had received university educations of some kind. Indeed, university graduation was at least twice as good a predictor of one’s views on the matter as income, occupation or even location. Subsequently, returning to the AES figures after a period of reflection, I found a couple of other variables that disposed people unusually favourably towards the claims of the detainees: regular church attendance and membership of an arts or cultural association. To put the matter at its simplest, the

possession of a tertiary education, strong religious principles or an artistic bent seemed to affect a person's views on the bona fides of asylum seekers roughly twice as strongly as any other variable (bearing on either side) I could find.

Pondering these figures, the possibility occurred to me that many well-intentioned commentators might be approaching the "refugee question" the wrong way around. Perhaps the really significant question wasn't why so many people across the length and breadth of the country were more or less unsympathetic to the detainees' claims. Rather, it might be why a strongly sympathetic posture towards the detainees - in terms of the debate, asserting them to be asylum seekers rather than "illegals" - was so strongly associated with being a particular kind of person. Why did the overwhelming and insistent appeal to empathy on the part of asylum-seeker advocates touch a profound chord with specific categories of people, while leaving so many others entirely cold?

In one respect, the social-attitudes figures ought not really to surprise. After all, they tally more or less precisely with the public face of the asylum-seekers debate. Human-rights lawyers, social workers, the left wings of the mainstream Christian denominations, artists, writers and playwrights - these were all of them the main battalions of the pro-asylum-seeker cause as it presented itself in the electronic media. Was it possible that the rather lavish representation of such individuals on the "pro" side of the asylum-seekers impasse had shaped the manner in which the issues were publicly presented and understood? (Just as, perhaps, the public face of the Australian Republican Movement had served to shape the republic debate?) Was the "politics of empathy" even in certain respects a socio-culturally delimited way of looking at the problem? And - most unsettlingly of all - could it be that there was something to do with the instinctual resort of such people to an empathetic approach that might have actually contributed to the reluctance of many other Australians to follow their lead?

In recent years, cultural and social conservatives have devised an ingenious parlour game that involves tagging their leftish opponents as members of a cultural "elite" - an elite at once unworldly and interfering, out-of-touch yet strangely sinister. Given the numerical inferiority of conservative intellectuals nowadays, victory in this parlour game may be as much a matter of bolstering morale as of political strategy. In turn, "progressive" intellectuals have responded to the taunts obligingly - either taking refuge in familiar marxisant homilies about the "real" social elites supposed hiding behind the conservative intellectuals' backs, or else portraying themselves winsomely as the true intellectual outsiders in a *mundus* dominated by "free-market" cultural philistinism.

And yet, in truth, the cultural conservatives - for all their unedifying rancour and spite - do have a point. For an intellectual culture supposedly steeped in critique and "reflexiveness", in the critical interrogation of almost every received fact (or "fact"), it's

striking how little self-reflection, how little “auto-critique”, really happens among our academies, in our theatres and at writers’ festivals. Harold Perkin observed, in his massive study of the “rise of professional society” in England since the late 19th century, how the university-educated professional classes, despite their ceaseless efforts to classify (and often parody) the commercial and administrative wings of the property-owning classes, incorrigibly “forgot themselves” as a class, even as they imagined for themselves a “special place” as “the guides and mentors, the Platonic Guardians of society”. In this respect, perhaps, not too much has changed.

At the same time, I don’t want to urge self-reflection purely as a moral principle: there’s a pressing political problem here. For an important - albeit partially-hidden - element in the debates around elites and public opinion has been the complicated game of appeal- and counter-appeal around what has to be called, for want of a politer term, “cleverness”. Cultural conservatives have appealed to public opinion on the grounds of social egalitarianism: the elites simply think they’re cleverer than the rest of us. A not insignificant number of asylum-seeker supporters often seem to agree with them. When the former Labor Party President Carmen Lawrence recently commented, “If people use their brains and just a modicum of decency I think they’d reach the conclusion that the [mandatory detention] regime that’s in place now is unconscionable and must be changed”, she perhaps unwittingly summed up a submerged point of view.

And yet the cleverness argument - however gratifying it may be to protagonists on both sides - surely misses the point. Political astuteness is rarely a direct product of intellectual training, however rarefied. (Indeed, intellectual stubbornness not infrequently leads the highly-trained to quite heroic feats of political self-delusion.) The more important point, presumably, is that intellectual training of different kinds has the capacity to generate a shared moral and even emotional culture, with the capacity both to attract and repel, according to one’s relation to it. Once - in a no doubt more culturally inegalitarian age - the existence of cultural differences of this kind was taken as a simple matter of fact. (And so it was simply assumed by the Victorians that ‘the gentleman’ was a special kind of moral creature, on account of his peculiar and demanding code of conduct.) Nowadays we feel compelled to turn our eyes from them - even as we enjoy the sense of belonging, in some obscure way, to a very particular moral family.

In the 1950s, the eminent English historian Noel Annan sketched out a social history of the distinctive stratum - the “intellectual aristocracy” - with which he identified himself and his kind. His is one of those “classic” essays far more often cited than read. Indeed, today, it’s most commonly footnoted by scholars as an arm-waving gesture towards the cunning survival skills of social elites, regardless of the sands of social change.

Annan's purpose had been quite different. He was concerned to show how it was that a particular culture - that of the modern liberal professional-academic classes - had emerged at a relatively precise moment, out of quite specific human material, and then how it had developed and maintained a cohesive ethos and style of life through the course of several generations. Among the chief elements in this style of life were the habit of incorrigible intermarriage, a stubborn inter-generational reproduction of social position (Annan was struck by his subjects' almost entire absence of upward social mobility), and an ingenious capacity to recreate habitual modes of thought and moral argument into new terms. And in contrast to almost every other scholarly account of intellectuals, Annan's was frankly biographical and even autobiographical - right down to the detailed genealogy of individual intermarriages and affinities, rendered (in Annan's inimitable fashion) after the manner of a triumphant fox hunt.

The morally charged and highly literate individuals at the centre of Annan's account were brought together in the first instance by a shared education and training. They emerged out of the bosom of the modern university-educated professions of the middle third of the 19th century and were solidified into a cohesive social grouping around the developing professional principles of competitive entry and promotion through merit. Yet "the magnet which drew them together" as a cultural force was moral rather than occupational: it was the practice of philanthropy and the cultivation of what would become known as the social conscience. And this, in turn, grew out of their religiously driven "sense of dedication, of living with purpose, or working under the eye, if not of the great taskmaster, of their own conscience". For evangelicals, as one of their historians insists, conscience was "the principal guide to action". Initially, it had demanded a critical attention to the moral scourges of alcohol and gambling. Yet, by the last decades of Victoria's reign, it had softened its heart and opened its arms. This was the moment of the case worker and the participant-observer, when moral reformers deliberately chose to live next to slum neighbourhoods and to walk daily among the objects of their solicitation.

Whether Evangelical (as were the great majority of their first generation), Quaker or Unitarian, these "intellectual aristocrats" shared an ethos of personal moral duty and high-minded intellectual seriousness. They were bookish and preoccupied with political and philosophical debate; they were deliberately neglectful of their personal appearance and utilitarian in their tastes in furnishings and interior design; they held no truck with polite manners or social niceties and were contemptuous of their social superiors (and, as they saw it, intellectual inferiors). Repelled by the casuistical puzzles by which Anglican clerics like Cardinal Newman justified their skilful doctrinal compromises, they valued honesty and sincerity of belief in spiritual matters above all else.

Like their much later descendents, they were preoccupied by causes. Rather than

apartheid, their great humanitarian scourge was the Atlantic slave trade; instead of East Timor they had Bulgaria; instead of “national liberation movements” they had “national self-determination” ones. And they were constantly aware of their religious and social marginality as dissenting Protestants. Just as the baby-boom academics of the later 20th century would envisage themselves as first-generation critical intellectuals in a new democratic era of tertiary education, the “intellectual aristocrats” of the latter 19th century had a keen self-consciousness of being the first generation of religious dissenters allowed into a previously sectarian university system.

Over the course of three or four generations, the outward beliefs and formal moral codes of these families altered with remarkable swiftness, yet the tone persisted. If the first generation was earnest and evangelical, the second was still earnest but of an interior religiosity; by the third and fourth generations the evangelical impulse and liberal political outlook had been entirely subsumed within an interiorised spirituality that was perfectly compatible with atheism, Fabian socialism or even Marxism. One generation’s Christian anti-slavery activist bred the next generation’s liberal social reformer or austere Fabian pamphleteer; by the fourth generation the young might be singing the *Internationale* and signing up for Spain.

Perhaps most striking, though, was the way that an interiorised religiosity gave way to deep and abiding preoccupations with the inner life, and with psychology and psychoanalysis. Here the limit case was perhaps the Bloomsbury circle, that self-absorbed gathering of Edwardian descendents of almost all the original “aristocratic” families. Casting themselves adrift from the religious belief and social commitment of their ancestors, the youthful Bloomsberries clung to a philosophical credo within which the highest achievements were interpersonal intimacy and “beautiful states of mind”. “Conventional morality” was disdained, and moral judgement deputed to the intuitive faculties of the interior self. And yet, as JM Keynes later recalled, the result was not pure immorality: rather, the acolytes were by turns Calvinistic in their austerity, Platonic in their loftiness and Romantic in their high miserableness. They did not abolish morality so much as aestheticise or psychologise it: according to Virginia Woolf, one came by one’s morality “by reading the poets”. And while they disdained the mundane world of party politics and public service, they maintained a lofty global consciousness. In 1914, they all became instinctual pacifists and anti-patriots, sympathised with like spirits in all countries and described the war as a “crime against civilisation”. The effect was one-part Edwardian dandyism and one-part 1960s counter-cultural oppositionalism.

Annan was writing in the years after the Second World War, when the situation of the old propertied classes had changed irrevocably, yet he seems to have assumed that the world view of his “intellectual aristocrats” would flow on forever, like some

warbling country brook. And yet his story still has a prescient feel. For if, in one respect, the “aristocrats” were curios of the days of upstairs/downstairs, in another respect they were cultural pioneers. Their intellectual independence, social cohesiveness and disinterest in conventional morality helped define the styles of life of the new liberal professionals and para-professionals of the postwar decades. Like their antecedents, these groups necessarily became accustomed to living with a high degree of “cultural capital”, but limited reserves of “real property”, in a moral universe defined by complex compounds of private conscience and global concern, where sternly meritocratic professional principles coexisted with globally humanitarian personal ones. And where Bloomsbury and their contemporaries had rebelled in an almost Oedipal fashion against the moral earnestness and social conventionality of their Victorian ancestors, so did the liberal professionals of the 1960s and later rebel against the morals and conventions of what they liked to term, with crushing vagueness, “the fifties”.

For the old “intellectual aristocrats”, attention to the demands of conscience - whether personal or social - was, in effect, a private matter, to be pursued in the amateur spirit before and after office hours. For the new tertiary-educated professionals and para-professionals of the 1960s and later, however, this amateurism and separation of spheres was a relic of the gentlemanly, hierarchical social culture of past times and they strove to imbue their professional work culture with an ethos derived from their private and intellectual lives. A professionalised notion of empathy played a very significant role in this. To imagine (as the Christian moralists had done and, in large measure, still do) the globe as an unseen community of human souls, reaching out to others in distress, smacked of Victorian do-gooding and high-mindedness.

The term empathy hardly existed in common discourse prior to the 1960s - and even more rarely was it used in a sense familiar to us. Previously, the term had been part of the private language of classical psychoanalysis, where it was usually used to denote one or other of two related psychological maladies - either the tendency to project one’s own personality onto another, thus subsuming him or her into oneself, or to subsume oneself into the other, by imagining his or her experiences to be one’s own. (Indeed, this sense still lingers on today in the Webster and Oxford dictionaries, even where it has fallen out of common usage.) Freud’s famous discussion of Hoffman’s fairytale about the “Sandman” - where the hero projects his fears and longings onto an inanimate doll, with tragic results - was a classic treatment of the theme, even though Freud himself never used the term. To this day, Kleinian analysts employ the parallel concept of “projective identification” as an all-embracing explanation of racism and intolerance, even as they allow for empathetic “projections” of a more positive character.

Our sense of empathy - as a heightened capacity for interpersonal sensitivity and understanding - is actually quite recent. Indeed, it really dates back no further than half a

century at most. Culturally speaking, it belongs to the new generation of psychology-trained liberal professionals who have graduated from university since the 1960s and early 1970s. More specifically, it may reflect the strongly felt need of liberal and radical therapists and counsellors in the 1960s and after to dissolve (theoretically, at least) the “hierarchical” boundary that separated therapist and client, and to create (imaginatively, at least) the sense of an egalitarian relationship between the two, appropriate to the intellectual equalitarianism of the new first-generation entrants into the university-trained professions. Indeed, the term was sought out precisely because of its implied contradistinction to the ordinary notion of “sympathy” - a term which was felt to have an unworthy history in charity-mindedness.

It’s remarkable how many apparently diffuse and spontaneous cultural movements rely, at least initially, upon the hidden efforts of one or a few individuals. In the case of the professional culture of empathy there is one single name that recurs in almost every significant volume on the subject - that of the mid-century American psychologist and educationalist Carl Rogers. In a series of books beginning with his *Client-centered Therapy* from 1951, and especially in his much-cited (if perhaps less often read) essay on “The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change” from 1957, Rogers more or less single-handedly created a new conception of the counselling process as an empathetic relationship between counsellor and client. In the 1970s, Rogers could still visualise the day he first delivered his paper on “therapeutic personality change” to an audience of academics and clinicians at the University of Michigan some 20 years earlier. “I know that I shocked many by stating that ‘special intellectual professional knowledge’ is not essential in psychotherapy ... [and] that a psychological diagnosis is only helpful in making the therapist feel secure,” he recalled, with evident satisfaction. The audience knew well “that traditional views had been sharply challenged”.

The key tenet of Rogers’s controversial new attitude to therapy was what he himself termed the “client-centred” approach, but what many of his later supporters liked to call, more grandly and globally, the “person-centred” approach. In Rogers’s view, mainstream therapeutic practice had always relied upon a tutelary relationship between therapist and client, according to which the job of the therapist was to diagnose the clients’ problems, teach them to recognise them and instruct them in the reform of their personalities so as to remove the problems by degrees. Rogers was instinctively uncomfortable with this approach. As he saw it, moral personhood was a learned accomplishment rather than an innate faculty - and yet, for a person to properly develop the capacity for moral autonomy, he or she had, necessarily, to learn it for him or herself rather than be taught it. The thorny question was how to foster the capacity for moral autonomy without infringing that same autonomy in the process.

A former farm boy from the American Midwest, the young Rogers had thrown over

his agricultural studies, first for the seminary and then for teachers' college. Under the combined influence of liberal philosophical pragmatism and radical Protestant theology, he came to emphasise the open-ended character of personal development, the experiential as opposed to the intellectual aspects of the client-therapist relationship, and the absolute necessity for the therapist to cleave to the client through the cultivation of an attitude of "unconditional positive regard". In this respect it was not so much the personality of the client that was at stake in the relationship as the personality of the therapist. Indeed, for Rogers's more zealous followers, unconstrained by his prosaic educational protocols and worldly concerns, therapy could become as much an exercise in self-exploration and self-development as in the personal welfare of the client. In the process, the therapist could become a new kind of spiritual hero.

Rogers's famous essay on "therapeutic personality change" outlined a series of "necessary and sufficient conditions" for such change. Rogers meant these terms precisely: nothing else but these conditions would contribute towards the success of a therapeutic relationship - not even an understanding of the client's problems or the capacity to explain the problems to the client, would make any difference. The final of these conditions was by far the most influential. According to Rogers, for therapy to be successful the therapist must "experience an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavour to communicate this experience to the client ... to sense the client's private world as if it were his or her own, but without losing the "as if" quality - this is empathy and this seems essential to therapy".

It's probably worth stressing two phrases out of this gnomic formulation. First, the therapist does not communicate to the client his or her understanding of the client's "internal frame of reference" - rather, what he or she requires to communicate is the empathic experience of having understood that frame of reference, since it is the experience, rather than the knowledge derived from it, which possesses the healing power. Second, the therapist requires to "sense the client's private world" as if it were his or her own, without ever letting go of the "as if" quality of this experience. In this way, Rogers separated his professionalised practice of empathy from the earlier psychoanalytic diagnosis of it, according to which the sufferer of empathy tended either to project his or her feelings on to others, or else to lose his or her personality entirely into that of the other. The therapist gives up most of the distance between him or herself and his or her client, but not all of it. Professional distance and personal autonomy harmonise.

If the initial clinical reaction to Rogers's argument was politely sceptical, the broader professional response was almost overwhelming. By the mid-1970s, client-centred approaches had become assimilated into the liberal educational curriculum, and across the full gamut of the new "people-centred" professions based on social work and counselling. Case workers, therapists of various persuasions, nurses, alternative-medicine

practitioners, even some members of the nation's police forces and prison staff, have all been weaned for two decades or more now on client-centred therapy and on the empathic imperative. (A friend and neighbour of mine, who was trained as a teacher, recalls undertaking a compulsory unit on empathy in the classroom as early as 1972.) It's become part of the intellectual common sense of the caring professions and of the various less-specialised literatures spawned by them. Today, any handbook of helping or caring worth its salt muses upon the difficulty of truly "entering into the world" of the client, while at the same time stressing the indispensability of the empathetic "way of being" for carers.

In the light of this potted history, then, it's perhaps not so surprising that the sympathetic view in our asylum-seekers debate has been dominated (at least in public) by such a familiar gallery of faces, and has been presented, argumentatively, in such a distinctive manner. There is, after all, a kind of loose social coalition of the empathetic. There are those (the direct heirs of the "intellectual aristocrats", as it were) whose professional and academic culture has a deep and long-established preoccupation with individual conscience and moral responsibility. There are those in the "caring professions" whose sense of conscience and responsibility is mediated by their training in person-centred approaches to the professional-client relationship. And there are the cultural workers whose conception of their own artistic identity is deeply infused by empathetic-psychological accounts of creative inspiration. (The novelist who "gets under the skin" of his or her characters, the actor who "lives" his or her role, the artist whose work "taps into" some aspect of the human condition, and so on.) Put together, these groups are far less tight-knit and cohesive than the original intellectual aristocrats. Yet - like all well-functioning cultural groups - they respond in a similar fashion to shared intellectual stimuli. The problem, as I suggested at the outset, is that they exhibit to a high degree the natural human presumption of members of cultural groups that their shared intellectual and emotional responses are somehow natural responses - and even that they are part of our nature as human beings.

Listen, for instance, to the tenor of these comments by former Labor frontbencher (and trained psychologist) Carmen Lawrence in her online weblog, as filed in *The Sydney Morning Herald's* online archive. In an article based upon an address to the Sydney branch of the Australian Psychological Society in June 2003, but modified for popular consumption, Lawrence invited Australians to "exercise their empathic imagination" towards the occupants of the detention centres, despite the efforts of the Government to prevent them from doing so.

Contemplate for a moment the care you lavish on your children; your thoughtfulness in protecting them from exposure to violence and suffering; your careful planning of their ... access to opportunities to learn, to explore the world from a secure, loving base. How can your children safely explore the world from behind barbed wire? ... We don't need elaborate research to conclude that asylum seekers are going to be damaged by these experiences. It's obvious to anyone prepared to examine their own responses, to think about what would happen to their families if they were put under the sort of stress experienced daily in the detention centres.

It's a simple and immediate message, which probably reverberates among anyone possessed of what is nowadays pejoratively termed a "hand-wringing" approach to social issues. And yet, for all that, there is a quite specific moral language at work here. There is the conviction in the capacity of empathy to transgress the ordinary boundaries of self; the authorial search for a language that serves to connect lived experiences across the counsellor-client boundary; the seeming irrelevance of empirical data or clinical knowledge in the face of immediate intuitive experience. (Asked in February 2005 whether a deputation of parliamentarians would be allowed to see the true face of the Baxter detention centre, Lawrence replied "Probably not", but insisted that "just having a look at the physical environment and imagining how I would feel and how others might feel placed in that environment" might suffice.) To anyone trained in a post-Rogers professional world, these cries from the heart are bound to have struck a chord. Whether they struck chords elsewhere is more doubtful. Indeed, it's not entirely clear how much of a chord Lawrence expected to be struck, given that in the more technical version of the same paper she described public opinion in the asylum seekers' crisis as a product of pathological tendencies in the public psyche.

Or take the SBS-funded telemovie *So Close to Home*, released late in 2003 as part of a wave of artistic interventions into the refugee debate. *So Close to Home* was clearly intended as a political allegory - even though, as ABC radio's Julie Rigg put it, "it plays as a mystery". In a promotional interview for the Australian Film Commission, director Jessica Hobbs summarised the plot:

We meet Maggie ... on a train. Her solitude is broken by Azra, a young Albanian refugee, who comes into her train carriage and who, on their arrival in Sydney, trails after Maggie. Maggie is unsure of what the girl wants but decides, on the spur of the moment, to take the girl home with her. Maggie's relationship with her emotionally manipulative and needy mother, Ramona, means Azra has to fight to get Maggie to take her to where she insists she wants to go, the Opera House. Ultimately, it is Azra who takes Maggie on a humbling journey of self-discovery and revelation.

On the face of it this is a broadly human moral fable: Hobbs's intention was probably to give a sense of universal humanity to the idea of the refugee-outsider. And yet again it's a moral tale with a quite particular currency. Maggie is lonely and unfulfilled. Her mother (let's take a stab and see her as an incarnation of Australian values from "the 1950s") demands her single-minded emotional commitment and denies her the discovery of other parts of herself. But the mysterious foreign refugee, arriving apparently out of nowhere, at once evokes her compassion and opens her up to self-discovery. The entire story "works" best if you presume - as quite a few of its viewers no doubt did - that empathy and self-discovery, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, all form a kind of seamless emotional fabric.

More specifically, the fable works best if the viewer understands the refugee character as a kind of (in Freud's terms) "uncanny" figure who serves to disrupt, by his or her very presence, the taken-for-granted assumptions of Australians' mundane lives. (A very similar role, it's worth mentioning, was played by the Afghan refugee Randa, the hero Hal's beloved, in John Doyle's ABC TV series *Marking Time*.) Perhaps this artistic preoccupation with the "uncanny" outsider explains why David Marr, at the 2003 Sydney Writers' Festival, thought it made sense to call upon writers, directors and artists to rouse the conscience of the nation in the pro-asylum-seeker cause. And yet, the emotional language of the "uncanny", like that of its close sibling, the empathetic, requires a very specific kind of response. It's possible for the enthusiast of the arts to grossly overestimate the number of Australians who feel their sense of personal identity and awareness to be enlarged by a spiritual engagement with "the other", however defined. Indeed, most Australians, confronted with this kind of scenario, are probably liable to respond in a fashion similar to Freud's response to the idea of the uncanny (the *unheimlich*): it simply doesn't "work" for them.

Indeed, Freud might have found a wry interest in various "uncanny" aspects of our current political turmoils. For over the past few years our great cultural discontents seem to have found their own "Sandman" - in the deceptively humdrum person of our present prime minister. As the stuff-shirted Victorian public man was to the Edwardian aesthete; as "the 1950s" were to the flower children; so, it seems, John Howard has become to us. Refugee advocates, rankled by what they feel to be the moral insensibility of their country folk, have cottoned onto the PM's supposed "dog-whistle" politics as the real culprit. (Howard whistles, it seems, and the nation jumps yapping into his lap.) Howard seems almost to have become the human confluence of our many streams of anxiety. To passionate opponents of the war in Iraq he has become almost the personification of the American Alliance. Republicans see in him a kind of Menziesesque Second Coming, all ermine and Earl Grey, slouching towards Westminster to be born.

And to the arts community he is a throwback to our supposed national heritage of cultural philistinism.

One symbolic moment, though, clearly stands out above all the others. When the Prime Minister refused steadfastly to apologise for the historic mistreatment of the country's indigenes - justifying this refusal with implausible allusions to unspecified legal consequences - he created for himself a permanent reputation among his critics as a man without heart or compassion. This reputation followed him through the asylum-seekers' crisis (even though there it was Phillip Ruddock who obligingly played the role of the emotionless bureaucrat), and through the war in Iraq. Indeed, John Howard's public personality and the ideal of emotional self-containment have become almost synonymous. His momentary lapse of decorum during his victory speech after the October 2004 election became a matter of journalistic tittle-tattle. And when in early 2005 the PM refused, again, to apologise for the mistaken detention of Cornelia Rau, the media coverage resembled a fusion of the "Sorry" campaign and the asylum-seekers' crisis, all rolled into one.

And yet, abhorred and despised though he may be by many who count themselves as astute followers of politics, the Prime Minister has become, to a quite unexpected extent, one of the dominating political figures of his generation. Emotionless or otherwise, his grasp of the public mood - of its generosity and of the limits upon it; the public's desire for stability and reassurance, and the limits of that desire - is far stronger than most of his critics can bring themselves to acknowledge. As, it should be added, is his capacity for recognising political errors. After all, the self-styled "most conservative prime minister ever" of 1996 has become, by 2005, the very model of the modern political pragmatist.

One source for the prevailing intellectual contempt for the Prime Minister may be the sheer prosaicness of his mode of appeal. It was the complicated - and ultimately counterproductive - strategy of asylum-seeker supporters to want to persuade Australians to their point of view by arousing shame in them. Carmen Lawrence, in the same weblog article cited above, spoke feelingly of how we, "as a nation", had rejected the world's "most traumatised people" and "added to their suffering". These were people who had come to our shores "to beg our compassion and help"; yet we had "yet to justify their faith in us or to earn the description as a fair and humane people". To many people, of course, such sentiments amounted to a personal affront. They saw themselves as being in full possession of a natural allotment of human compassion but as being unwilling to have it "tricked" out of them in a controversial cause by people who seemed to assume for themselves a special empathetic vocation.

These were the sentiments to which Howard appealed so effectively - albeit inelegantly - in the aftermath of the tsunamis of Boxing Day 2004. Rather than call upon Australians to respond to the plight of the homeless and dispossessed of South Asia,

Howard took the opportunity to laud the “essential decency” of the country and its citizens. And rather than congratulating Australians for their compassion towards hordes of suffering individuals, Howard chose to invoke the humdrum language of neighbourliness. “On this occasion we have not been moved by the bonds of empire and kinship, but by something deeper and truer and better ... these are our neighbours.”

For in truth the immediate and unconditional extension of a bond of empathy to a previously unknown other, seen as in need of our help and succour, is not in ordinary circumstances an easy human reaction. It may seize us when we are thrust together with strangers as part of a vast calamity - like war or tsunami. In ordinary circumstances, though, most people most often extend their sympathy and helping hand most readily to those they know, or recognise, or treat as “neighbours”. The view that all people, as people, are our neighbours, or that people who seem otherwise foreign or alien to us ought in reality to excite as much (or even more) sympathy than those who are close to us, is a trained reaction. Historically, it has most commonly been produced by a strong religious commitment (to “all God’s children”, as it would once have been put) or by an intense adherence to a set of formal philosophical principles - the kind of transcendental attachment, in short, that most people simply do not possess. When Trollope’s Mr Crawley bemoans the limited spiritual capacities of humans to extend their sympathies to “those we have not seen in the flesh”, and the failure of most people to properly “nurture their heart[s]”, he speaks out of this tradition - albeit in somewhat antiquated terms.

And yet Mr Crawley’s complaint serves to oversimplify the situation. In fact, it’s too neat to oppose, on the one hand, a mundane moral universe shaped out of the familiar material of neighbours, kith and kin; and, on the other, a ghostly transcendental community of humans identified with purely on the grounds of their humanity. In practice, most people - even those of the loftiest moral fibre - tend to move from the first in the direction of the second. After all, refugee advocates themselves tried to argue for seeing the detainees as would-be fellow Australians, rather than simply as suffering people. And the parallel sympathy extended by many refugee supporters to David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib - individuals who seem to have almost become refugees themselves, in the confusion of emotions of the past few years - was derived not merely from their peculiar situation as internees without charge, but on account of their Australianness. The same may be true of the mentally disturbed immigration centre detainee Cornelia Rau, whose case reignited the passions of asylum-seeker advocates in February 2005. Rau’s ordeal undoubtedly aroused the greatest sympathy among those critics who, like Carmen Lawrence, strove to imagine themselves in her place. Yet as asylum-seeker advocate David Marr put it, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Rau became a *cause celebre* beyond the ranks of the committed in large measure because she “turns out to be one of us”.

Indeed, on the whole, people naturally tend to imagine the existence of wider communities as potential recipients of sympathy and understanding by a process of extension from the communities they do know, rather than simply by juxtaposition with them. This was the nub of Howard's appeal on January 16. We don't usually think of the people of Aceh as our neighbours. But in reaching out to them, a natural way of extending the bond of sympathy is to imagine a growing set of communities around us, like the ripples spreading from a pebble thrown in a pond - or, come to that, like a benign counterpart of the tsunamis themselves, as if seen from a fortuitously placed weather satellite out in space. This kind of movement of the sympathies appears to those who experience it to be natural and untutored. It doesn't appear to demand, on the one hand, an enlarged spiritual capacity - which Mr Crawley, in any case, believed beyond the limits of our human frailty. Nor does it require a special moral equipment derived (or at least believed to be derived) from a particular form of education or professional training, or the inheritance of a rare and treasured way of understanding the world.

Machiavelli once quipped that, in politics, one judges by the result. He might have added that, in politics, one is judged by the effect. Speaking from one's own heart - no matter how natural it may seem to those whose hearts call to them in this fashion - is rarely an effective means of communicating the needs of a political situation. Prime Minister Howard's political testament - compounded of his characteristic blend of wily pragmatism and almost willful mean-spiritedness - will be a decidedly chequered one. Yet on the question of the nation's heart, his critics should swallow their pride and take notes. ■

Notes on Sources

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