

# THE WHITLAM GOVERNMENT & INDO- CHINESE REFUGEES

*The Sydney Institute Quarterly* publishes – for the historical record – a copy of the recent correspondence between former prime minister Gough Whitlam and Gerard Henderson – concerning the policy adopted by the Whitlam government to Indochinese refugees /asylum seekers in 1975. Mr Whitlam’s initial letter was in response to Gerard Henderson’s column published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 3 December 2002.

## **GOUGH WHITLAM TO GERARD HENDERSON, 30 DECEMBER 2002**

Dear Gerard,

The passage on asylum seekers in your *SMH* article on 3 December gives the readers of that newspaper a sample of the obituary which it will be disposed to publish. On the basis of Clyde Cameron’s hostile book published in 1980 you concluded that as Prime Minister I “denied refuge to Vietnamese who were entitled to seek refuge in Australia”.

You are not the first or only *SMH* commentator who fails to check contemporary editions of the paper or to check public and contemporary documents, such as *Hansard*, which are not on the internet. RAAF planes brought more than 200 Vietnamese war orphans to Sydney on Saturday 5 April 1975. On the front pages of the *SMH* and *Australian* of 7 April there are large photographs of me nursing a 7-month orphan at North Head quarantine station. Both papers report my wife’s and my visit at some length. On the following day I made a statement in the House of Representatives on Indo-China in general and the evacuation of the refugees from Da Nang in particular. On Thursday 10 April, I answered two questions from Connolly.

On Monday morning 21 April I answered questions from MacKellar and Sinclair. At 4 p.m. I had the meeting with Cameron and Don Willesse before the latter left to attend the ANZUS meeting in Wellington. On Wednesday morning I answered questions by Sinclair and Fraser. In the afternoon I arranged with the Australian National University for a five-year study



into the settlement experiences of the Vietnamese refugees admitted to Australia during 1975 to be carried out by a senior research fellow in sociology, Dr Jean Martin. (She was the wife of A.W. Martin, Menzies's biographer.) At 10 p.m. I left Sydney for the 1975 CHOGM meeting.

I arrived back in Canberra from CHOGM on 11 May. My engagement lists, available in the Whitlam Institute of the University of Western Sydney, show these meetings:

- Monday 19 May:** 1.30 pm Cameron and his secretary Wayne Gibbons
- Wednesday 21 May:** 8.30 pm Willesee
- Thursday 22 May:** 1pm Mr P Habib, U.S secretary for Pacific and S.E Asia department
- Thursday 29 May:** 5.30 pm Willesee and Renouf, Secretary of Foreign Affairs
- Thursday 5 June:** 4.30 pm Cameron, Hayden, Cairns  
5.30 Cameron, Hayden

On Friday 6 June I replaced Cameron with Jim McClelland as Minister for Labor and Immigration.

On 16 July I confirmed Dr Martin's study in writing. My engagement list shows that on Wednesday 23 July I lunched at the Lodge with Barnard, Renouf, Morrison (representing Barnard in the house) and Willesee. I attach my press statement of 23 July concerning Dr Martin's study and Fraser's answer of 26 April 1977 (*Hansard*, p.1263) and MacKellar's answer of 2 May 1978 (*Hansard* p.1680) concerning the termination and resumption of her study.

*Hansard* shows the views I expressed on Vietnamese refugees later in 1975:

- Thursday 31 August:** pp. 380, 381, my answers to Sinclair
- Thursday 2 September:** pp. 828-836, Debate on Matter of Public Importance, Vietnamese refugees in Australia p.896, answer to question on notice by minister representing McClelland
- Wednesday 3 September:** pp. 914, 915, my answer to Kevin Cairns ('already 1000 adult refugees from Vietnam')
- Thursday 2 October:** pp. 1717, answer to Peacock by minister representing McClelland ('since 1 April 1975, 1133 Vietnamese have arrived in Australia')

I attach pages pp. 1822 and 1823 from *Hansard* of 13 October 1976 to illustrate the actions my Government took to assist tertiary students from Vietnam and Cambodia.

Cameron's book is an elaborate effort to disparage my sustained and successful campaign to establish diplomatic relations between Australia and China. He downgrades everything that Freudenberg and I have written on that subject. His excursus on Vietnamese immigrants arises from my countermanding his agreement that the RAAF would evacuate children from an "orphan" school run by one Rosemary Taylor, if I correctly remember her name. She had bypassed the South Vietnam government and phoned Cameron directly from Saigon.

I realise that the *SMH* and *The Sydney Papers* would not be likely to publish this letter. I trust, however, that you will write to me acknowledging that you have received it.

Yours sincerely,

Gough Whitlam

## **GOUGH WHITLAM TO SYDNEY MORNING HERALD 2 JANUARY 2003**

(An almost identical letter was published in *The Age* on 1 January 2003)

In his survey of 2002, Gerard Henderson (*Herald*, December 31) states that "in 1975 Gough Whitlam opposed the entry of Vietnamese refugees to Australia, en bloc".

If he had checked the *Herald* files he would have noticed the April 7, 1975, front page story and picture of me nursing an orphan in a bloc of more than 200 evacuated by the RAAF.

If he had checked *Hansard* he would have noticed that in 1975:

- **On April 3**, I announced that students from Vietnam and Cambodia would be allowed to defer their return home.
- **On April 8**, I made a statement on Indochina in general and the evacuation of the refugees from Da Nang, in particular.
- **On April 23**, before leaving for CHOGM, I arranged with the ANU for a senior research fellow in sociology, Dr Jean Martin, to carry out a five year study into the settlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees.
- **On May 2**, I announced a special fund to provide living allowances for Vietnamese and Cambodian tertiary students.
- **On September 2**, I spoke in a debate on Vietnamese refugees.

- On September 3, I said there were 1000 adult refugees from Vietnam.
- On October 2, my minister for immigration said that 1133 Vietnamese had arrived since April 1.
- On November 11, my minister announced that government sponsored students from Vietnam and Cambodia were eligible for resident status whether or not they had completed their studies.

I also answered many questions in the parliament.

On refugees in general, my government in 1973 acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the 1961 Convention on the Status of Statelessness and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees and repealed the odious 1949 Wartime Refugees Removal Act.

E.G. Whitlam

Sydney

31 December 2002

## GERARD HENDERSON TO GOUGH WHITLAM, 9 JANUARY 2003

Dear Gough

I refer to your letter of 30 December 2002 (which I received on 31 December 2002) – and to your letter which was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 2 January 2003 and *The Age* on 1 January 2003.

### Background

The letter of 30 December 2002 was a response to my *Sydney Morning Herald/Age* column of 3 December 2002 where I wrote:

**These days Gough Whitlam constantly lectures-at-large about the rights of refugees. Yet no incumbent prime minister worked harder to keep genuine asylum seekers out of Australia when he had a chance to demonstrate fairness and empathy. Not even John Howard.**

**The Gough Fan Club has never disputed Clyde Cameron's account in *China, Communism and Coca-Cola* (1980) about how Whitlam told Cabinet in 1975 that he was "not having hundreds of f\_ \_ \_ \_ \_ Vietnamese Balts coming into this country". The Whitlam government's excessively harsh policy to potential asylum seekers is documented in Hal G. P. Colebatch's recent Ph.D. thesis at the University of Western Australia.**

**The fact is that Whitlam did not want anti-communist Vietnamese entering Australia. But it was the anti-communists who were**

**the genuine asylum seekers at the time - fleeing the communist regime which conquered South Vietnam in April 1975. In her book *The Long Journey* (MUP 1984), Nancy Viviani suggested that the Whitlam government's hostility to Vietnamese refugees was partly motivated by "a care for the attitudes" of the North Vietnamese communist leadership.**

**Writing in *Quarterly Essay* (Issue 6, 2002) Mungo MacCallum - one of the Gough Fan Club's leading barrackers - has described Whitlam's 1975 statement as "a few lines of rhetoric". This is completely disingenuous. The fact is that Whitlam's attitude, as reported by Cameron and others, denied refuge to Vietnamese who were entitled to seek asylum in Australia.**

The letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 2 January 2003 was in response to my column, published on 31 December 2002, where in a summary of hyperbole in 2002 – I wrote :

**Melbourne barrister Julian Burnside informs readers of the *Times Literary Supplement* that "since the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers" has been "based on a deeply anti-Asian prejudice". Conveniently overlooking the fact that in 1975 Gough Whitlam opposed the entry of Vietnamese refugees to Australia, en bloc.**

### Response

In neither your letter to me – nor your letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* – did you deny Clyde Cameron's report of the discussion on refugees which took place on 21 April 1975 between you, Clyde Cameron (Minister for Labor and Immigration) and Don Willesee (Minister for Foreign Affairs). I know that, at times, Clyde Cameron is less than a reliable witness. But this quote has been on the public record for over two decades – and, as far as I am aware, has never been challenged by you or your supporters. In your letter of 30 December 2002 you state that Mr Cameron's "excursus on Vietnamese immigrants" arose from you "countermanding his agreement that the RAAF would evacuate children from an 'orphan' school" run by a person who "had bypassed the South Vietnamese Government and phoned Cameron directly from Saigon". This overlooks that fact that, in his book, Clyde Cameron makes it explicitly clear that he agreed with what he regarded as your hard-line on Vietnamese refugees circa 1975. Indeed he wrote that he "could have hugged" you at the time for adopting a position on Vietnamese refugees which was the same as his.

In the early 1990s (at a private dinner in the Foreign Affairs and Trade Department in Canberra) I was approached by Peter Wilenski concerning published comments I had made about the Whitlam government's attitude to Vietnamese refugees. The late Dr Wilenski's position was that the Whitlam government was willing to admit Vietnamese into Australia in 1975 – but was looking for candidates from other than those who had – or were alleged to have had – an association with the anti-communist government in Saigon which was overthrown in 1975. I said to Dr Wilenski that his analysis was consistent with my critique. Namely, that the Whitlam government did not want to accept genuine refugees from Vietnam – i.e. those who wished to flee the new communist rulers of South Vietnam because they had a genuine fear of persecution. In short, the Whitlam government was hostile to genuine asylum seekers – or refugees – from Vietnam. Dr Wilenski did not refute this analysis.

In your letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* you made the following defences/rationalisations for your government's record on Indochinese refugees. Your claims are set out below – along with my responses:

• **On 7 April 1975** the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a photograph of you “nursing an orphan in a bloc of more than 200 evacuated by the RAAF”.

- Australia's decision to receive Vietnamese orphans in 1975 was a fine humanitarian gesture. But the recipients of this decision were infants – none of whom, by definition, were refugees/asylum seekers.

• **On 3 April 1975** you “announced that students from Vietnam and Cambodia would be allowed to defer their return home”.

- Once again, this was a proper decision. It's just that students studying in Australia at the time were not attempting to flee from persecution.

• **On 8 April 1975** you made a statement “on Indochina in general and the evacuation of the refugees from Da Nang in particular”.

- A reading of this speech indicates that you had nothing whatsoever to say about (potential) refugees from South Vietnam. The reference to Da Nang occupied less than one per cent of the entire speech.

• **On 23 April** you “arranged with the ANU for a senior research fellow in sociology, Dr Jean Martin, to carry out a five year study into the settlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees”.

- This was a proposed academic study into refugees - it was of no immediate benefit to asylum seekers. The first issue which the study was to “encompass” turned on “the refugees' reasons for leaving their country” In view of the fact that South Vietnam had

fallen to a totalitarian communist state – which had a brutal record of repression in North Vietnam – this was hardly an issue which warranted a five year study by an academic (who had no particular expertise in either contemporary political history or Indochina). I note that in your letter to me you point out that, in 1975, Dr Martin “the wife of A.W. Martin, Menzies' biographer”. I don't know what this is meant to imply - in view of the fact that Dr A.W. Martin was an ALP supporter circa 1975.

• **On 2 September 1975** you “spoke in a debate on Vietnamese refugees; on 3 September you said that “there were 1000 adult refugees from Vietnam” and on 2 October 1975 your Minister for Immigration (by then Jim McClelland had replaced Clyde Cameron) “said that 1133 Vietnamese had arrived since April 1”.

- The fact is that this debate took place in a climate where the Coalition (in opposition) under Malcolm Fraser's leadership was calling on Australia to be much more generous in its handling of applications for refuge from Vietnamese.

According to *Hansard*, you did *not* speak on the debate on Vietnamese refugees which took place in the House of Representatives on 2 September 1975. *Hansard* actually records John Howard interjecting that you were “not in the House” during the debate on that day. *Hansard* records that Bill Morrison and Joe Riordan spoke for the government during the *Matter of Public Importance* debate on 2 September 1975. Your answer to a *Question Without Notice* on 3 September 1975 was essentially directed at justifying your government's decision to prevent a number of Vietnamese, who had been allowed into Australia, from taking part in political debate in Australia.

• **On 11 November 1975** the Minister for Immigration “announced that government sponsored students from Vietnam and Cambodia were eligible for resident status whether or not they had completed their studies”.

- Once again, the individuals in question were living in Australia at the time. Not one was attempting to enter Australia from Vietnam or Cambodia.

In short, there is nothing in your recent correspondence to refute my comment that you worked hard to keep genuine asylum seekers from Indochina entering Australia in 1975. A few got into Australia. But your general policy was to oppose their entry en bloc – to the best of your ability.

A similar finding was reached by Nancy Viviani in *The Long Journey: Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia* (MUP, 1984) - where she wrote:

**On the evidence, it is clear that Australian refugee policy in 1975 was made by**

**Whitlam. It lacked strong support in Cabinet and in the Caucus, and the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Immigration had been largely excluded from the policy process. and in the later “international” effort, the intention of policy was to be as restrictive as possible. Not only were numbers restricted, but those with ties to the Saigon regime were avoided by not allowing students’ parents to join them. It seems fair to conclude that Whitlam’s chief motives were a straightforward concern to avoid a new influx of emotional anti-communists into Australian politics together with a care for the attitudes of Hanoi.**

As you will be aware, the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence – which reported on this issue in December 1976 – reached a not dissimilar conclusion. The committee was chaired by Senator J.P. Sim (who was a “moderate” Liberal) and included Labor MPs (Senator Gordon McIntosh, Senator Cyril Primmer and Senator Kerry Sibraa). The members of the committee agreed unanimously:

**In view of the Committee’s belief that the Australian Government had been informed of the gravity and magnitude of the situation in South Vietnam some three weeks before the evacuation of the Australian Embassy, we are unable to come to any conclusion other than one of deliberate delay in order to minimise the number of refugees with which Australia would have to concern itself. In addition, we believe that the guidelines of 22 April [1975] were so narrowly drawn that very few refugees would qualify for entry to Australia. In all, 5629 nominations were received but only 542 were approved – 355 for permanent residence and 187 for temporary residence. Of the 542 approved cases, less than 342 persons were informed of their approval in the four-day period prior to the Embassy’s evacuation. Other than orphans, 78 Vietnamese nationals were evacuated from Saigon by Australia...**

**As unpalatable as it may be, we are forced to conclude that the [Whitlam] Government acted reluctantly and, as expressed by one witness, in order to placate an increasingly suspicious Australian public.**

See Report of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence *Australia and the Refugee Problem*, Parliamentary Paper No. 329/1976, 1 December 1976.

An even more critical assessment was made by Hal G. P. Colebatch in his recently completed Ph. D. thesis at the University of Western Australia. I note that, in *The Long Journey*, Nancy Viviani wrote that, in 1975, you were reported to have said: “These Vietnamese sob stories don’t wring my withers”. The source for this quote is, apparently, contained in the background papers to the 1976 Senate report – I am currently attempting to locate this material. In any event, Dr Viviani (who was private secretary to Senator Willesee from 1974 to 1975) thought it appropriate to cite the quotation in her book.

On 1 January 2006, the record of the Whitlam government’s response to the Indochina refugee crisis of 1975 will be released. I expect that the evidence, when released, will support my claim that, as prime minister, you went out of your way to prevent Vietnamese refugees from entering Australia – and will refute your assertion that you were not opposed to the entry of Vietnamese refugees into Australia.

I look forward to a discussion on the facts on this matter on New Year’s Day 2006.

#### **Historical Precedents**

My interpretations of your actions in 1975 have been influenced by similar fact evidence – namely, your attitude to Indochinese refugees in 1977 (when you were Opposition leader) and, again, in 1979 (after you had left politics).

In November 1977, just before the Federal election of that year, the HMAS *Ardent* intercepted a boat containing some 180 Vietnamese refugees, heading for Darwin. Bob Hawke was ALP Federal president at the time. In words that sounded remarkably similar to John Howard’s over two decades later, the (then) ALP president opposed the arrival on Australian shores of “queue-jumping” boat people. Bob Hawke told a media conference in Hobart on 28 November 1977:

**Obviously there are people all around the world who have a strong case for entry into this country and successive governments have said we have an obligation, but we also have an obligation to people who are already here...Of course we should have compassion, but people who are coming in this way are not the only people in the world who have rights to our compassion. Any sovereign country has the right to determine how it will exercise its compassion and how it will increase its population.**

Bob Hawke was reported as calling on the Coalition government to make it clear that the asylum seekers had no right to land in Australia. Fortunately Prime

Minister Malcolm Fraser rejected his advice. He said that Australia needed to make sure that the Vietnamese boat people were refugees - but felt that the situation was under control. (See the broadsheet press of 29 November 1977 and after).

It is true that Bob Hawke was not alone in calling for a tough line on asylum seekers a quarter of a century ago. According to a contemporaneous report in *The National Times* (12 December 1977), Hawke's position was shared by senior Fraser government minister Peter Nixon. The Coalition Transport Minister was reported to have told a media conference in Darwin that refugees arriving illegally by boat in Australia would be turned around and sent back. Peter Nixon was quickly hauled into line and the Immigration Minister (Michael Mackellar) issued a statement declaring that "Australia will continue to accept Indo-Chinese refugees". The Fraser Government went to the December 1977 Federal election with this policy.

There is no evidence that, as Labor leader in 1977, you repudiated Bob Hawke's statement. Moreover, while acknowledging that "any genuine refugees should be accepted", you maintained that "the Government has a responsibility to ensure they are genuine refugees" and that "it should also see that they don't get ahead in the queue over people who have been sponsored and who are already coming here" (*The Age*, 29 November 1977). *The National Times* reported that, speaking in Darwin, you blamed Lee Kuan Yew for the boat people reaching Australia's shores. You were quoted as alleging that Singapore supplied the Indo-Chinese boat people with the "plans and petrol and the maps to get here" (*The National Times*, 12 December 1977).

The evidence indicates that in 1977 you were running a line about so-called "queue jumpers" being sent to Australia with the connivance of foreign governments - which happened to be similar to the stance adopted by John Howard and some of his senior ministers in 2001.

In September 1978 you addressed a seminar at the Australian National University. Your speech - titled "Vietnam - Refugees, Border War, Rehabilitation" - was published in Malcolm Salmon (ed) *The Vietnam-Kampuchea-China Conflicts: Motivations, Background, Significance* (March 1979). In this speech you actually queried where the term "refugees" should properly be applied to the situation in Vietnam viz:

**First, the refugees. I looked into this matter in Geneva with the International Committee of the Red Cross and with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I also discussed it in Bangkok, in Ho Chi**

**Minh City and Hanoi, and in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province, next to Vietnam, and also in Guangzhou. In the European context refugees used to mean at the beginning of the century those who were leaving the Tsarist Empire. Forty years ago they used to mean those who were leaving the German Empire, largely Jews. Thirty years ago they used to mean those who were leaving the new Russian Empire. Nowadays those whom we call refugees may not be so classified in the technical sense under the relevant international conventions. The Jews were free to leave Germany before the outbreak of the Second World War. The people who are leaving Vietnam now in general are free to leave Vietnam. It is arguable whether they are refugees.**

In the same speech you:

- alleged that "refugees", as "they call themselves" were paying people smugglers to leave Vietnam.
- described the proposal by the (Labor) Shadow Minister for Immigration that holding camps should be set up in Australia "until the United Nations or some other international body can find another home for them" as "futile" and
- declared that you doubted "all the stories that appear in the newspapers about the treatment of people in Cambodia".

In other words, you not only queried whether there were genuine Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s - you also disputed the claim that there were victims of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge communist regime in Cambodia who would be entitled to claim a genuine fear of persecution.

### **Conclusion**

In your letter of 30 December 2002 you predict that neither *The Sydney Morning Herald* nor *The Sydney Papers* "would be likely to publish" your response to my criticisms concerning your attitude to Indochinese refugees in the final year of your government. As you are aware, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* has now published your case. *The Sydney Papers* only publishes speeches delivered at The Sydney Institute. However, your letter will be published in *The Sydney Institute Quarterly*.

In the past I have defended you against what I regard as unfair criticism of your government's policy with respect to Indonesia - including East Timor. But I believe it appropriate to draw attention to your government's actual record on refugees - especially

in view of the harsh criticism you made of Kim Beazley's position in late 2001.

Best wishes. Let's keep in touch.

Yours sincerely  
Gerard Henderson

## **GERARD HENDERSON TO GOUGH WHITLAM, 30 JANUARY 2003**

Dear Gough

I refer to my letter of 9 January 2003 – in response to your letter of 30 December 2002.

As you will recall, I pointed out that, in her book *The Long Journey*, Nancy Viviani wrote that – sometime in 1975 – you were reported to have said about Vietnamese refugees: "These Vietnamese sob stories don't wring my withers." I indicated that I was attempting to locate the source for this quotation – which, as I recall, has never been denied.

I have now checked the source. It is contained in Volume 1 of the Official Hansard Report of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence – at Page 246. The quote appears in a written submission by the respected Australian journalist Denis Warner (which was incorporated in *Hansard*). The relevant section of Mr Warner's submission reads as follows:

# **THE POLITICS OF WAR**

Brinkmanship, appeasement, bigotry, defeat and victory – what goes into the politics of war?

Hear **DAVID DAY**  
*Academic and author*

**At The Sydney Institute  
Tuesday 1 April 2003**

**5.30 for 6pm**

**41 Phillip Street, Sydney  
RSVP: (02) 9252 3366**

I have been told repeatedly by officials that Mr Whitlam accepted personal responsibilities for the admission, or otherwise, of all Vietnamese refugees wanting to come to Australia. I was told by one official that Mr Whitlam was quite unsympathetic. "These Vietnamese sob stories don't wring my withers," he is reported to have said. Mr Whitlam is also on record that there would be no reprisals in Vietnam and is privately said to hold the view that it would be better if the refugees returned there.

I am also informed by officials whose word I have no reason to doubt that the strict guidelines laid down for the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees were largely drawn up by the government of North Vietnam. Hanoi indicated that it did not want Australia to accept refugees "who had been forcibly evacuated by the Americans". In this category are all those refugees who went to Guam and Wake Island. Some exceptions were made to this and for a very brief period Australian Immigration officials were active on Guam, although, as the submission by Mr Nguyen Ngoc Phach indicates quite clearly, very little attempt was made to communicate with the many who wanted to go to Australia and had close relatives here. On the other hand, at least a token effort was made to bring in Vietnamese refugees from Hong Kong, though they had no close relations here.

The context of the submission makes it clear that the "officials" to whom Denis Werner referred were members of the Australian Public Service.

Best wishes. I was disappointed that, due to a conflicting commitment, I was not able to witness your performance (with Margaret) at the State Library of New South Wales last week.

Yours sincerely  
Gerard Henderson

## **POSTSCRIPT, 30 JANUARY 2003**

Gough Whitlam did not respond to the letter of 9 January 2003. However, he did acknowledge the 30 January 2003 correspondence. Mr Whitlam phoned Gerard Henderson on 30 January 2003 – after receiving the letter by fax. The conversation went for some time. In passing, Gough Whitlam said he could not recall the statement attributed to him by Denis Warner – but did not dispute the comment attributed to him by Clyde Cameron.