

# Australia: Murdoch media attacks 1976 Lebanese refugee intake

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On January 1 each year, Australia's parliamentary cabinet papers from 30 years earlier are partially released. Invariably, the media coverage is tailored to fit the contemporary political agenda, rather than to probe and clarify the historical record.

This year was no exception. 1976 was a turbulent time, and a serious review of the documents of the inner workings of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's conservative coalition government could have shed light on a range of key issues.

Fraser had seized office in November 1975 through a fundamental attack on democratic rights—the dismissal of the elected Whitlam Labor government by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in the “Canberra coup”—and faced deep-going hostility and resistance throughout the working class. In July, despite the best efforts of the trade union leaders to prevent an eruption, there was a one-day general strike against Fraser's dismantling of the universal Medibank health insurance scheme.

The government tried to impose severe spending cuts amid an ongoing global economic crisis—reflected in double-digit inflation, rising unemployment, stagnant investment and a large budget deficit. By the end of the year, after trying to inflict an outright wage freeze on workers, it had been compelled to devalue the Australian dollar by 17.5 percent in a bid to boost exports.

In order to prepare for further class confrontations, Fraser began a series of measures to significantly strengthen the security and intelligence agencies, establishing a new peak Office of National Assessments within his own department and creating an elite SAS force for domestic use, under the guise of “counter-terrorism”.

In foreign policy, his cabinet continued the policy of the Whitlam government (and the Ford administration in the United States) of supporting the Indonesian invasion and military occupation of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, while publicly trying to distance itself from the ongoing bloodshed by calling on the Suharto regime to allow a formal act of self-determination.

Far from subjecting these actions to close scrutiny, the Murdoch media trawled through the 50,000 pages of 944 cabinet submissions and 2,098 decisions to concentrate on just two documents—both of which dealt with Lebanese

immigration.

On January 1, 2007 the front page of the *Australian* accused Fraser of “contributing to contemporary racial tensions” by allowing Lebanese Muslim refugees into the country during the first phase of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. Under the banner headline, “Fraser was warned on Lebanese migrants,” the article claimed: “Immigration authorities warned the Fraser government in 1976 it was accepting too many Lebanese Muslim refugees without ‘the required qualities’ for successful integration.”

The aim was to further two campaigns currently being waged by the Murdoch media: to vilify Muslim and Arab Australians and to attack Malcolm Fraser. A traditional conservative, Fraser has become concerned in recent years at the destabilising potential of some of the Howard government's policies. He has, for example, condemned its treatment of refugees, its flouting of legal and democratic norms in the “war on terror” and its proposed new English-language “Australian values” citizenship test.

The Lebanese civil war was launched by various Maronite Christian militias, including the fascistic Phalangists, backed by Israel and the US, against the Lebanese left, representing the impoverished Muslim majority, in alliance with the Palestinians. From the outset, the right-wing militias carried out massacres of hundreds of civilians, forcing tens of thousands of Lebanese Muslim and Palestinian families to flee.

Demonstrating its general hostility to the working class, the *Australian* insinuated that the refugees, and by implication their descendants, were backward, dirty and morally repugnant. To bolster its argument, it seized upon racist comments by Fraser's immigration and ethnic affairs minister at the time, Michael MacKellar, to the effect that many of the refugees were “unskilled, illiterate and had questionable character and standards of personal hygiene”. The newspaper then denounced Fraser for not “heeding the warning”.

In reality, according to the cabinet papers themselves, Fraser and his ministers largely inherited the Lebanese refugee program from the ousted Whitlam government and quickly shut it down—after only about 4,000 people were granted visas—as soon as it became apparent that the majority of applicants were poor Muslims.

Initially, Fraser and MacKellar had expanded the program after they were approached by Maronite Australians to allow Lebanese Christians with close relatives in Australia to immigrate. However, once Muslim refugees began to arrive, the cabinet decided to reimpose its normal migration criteria, which were weighted heavily in favour of better-off, English speaking, educated and immediately employable people.

A cabinet minute of September 23, 1976, makes clear that the government was allowing only a limited exception from “economic viability criteria” for parents, brothers and sisters of Lebanese Australian residents, until the end of the year, “subject to normal health and character requirements,” which also systematically discriminated against poorer and politically unwanted refugees. Moreover, the government restricted their visas to three months, refused to pay any travel costs, and required their Australian sponsors to have lived in Australia for at least one year.

Just two months later, on November 30, the cabinet decided to shut down the Lebanese refugee program altogether, leaving open only the general migration scheme. Only spouses, dependent children and aged parents of Australian residents were entitled to immigrate—provided they passed the health and character tests. MacKellar recommended the clampdown, in an “urgent” cabinet submission, on the basis of openly anti-working class and anti-Muslim comments.

The submission alleged that “a high percentage is illiterate”, “personal hygiene is poor”, and the “balance between Muslim and Christian applicants has risen to 90% Muslim”. It noted that “the majority are semi-skilled or unskilled workers who will be settling in Sydney or Melbourne”. It also referred to high unemployment rates in Australia, housing shortages and lack of room in local schools—pointing to the fact that the Fraser government had no intention of providing basic services or decent jobs.

The contemporary thrust of the *Australian’s* attack was spelt out when the newspaper alleged that it was Fraser’s decisions in 1976 that had sown the seeds for the racist riots—three decades later—at Sydney’s Cronulla beach in December 2005. The newspaper said the documents “raised the question” of whether Fraser’s “relaxation” of immigration standards had contributed to the tensions that “exploded a year ago into race-based riots in Cronulla”.

In fact, the Cronulla riots were not sparked by Lebanese immigrants and youth, but by a drunken mob, draped in Australian flags, intent on attacking anyone of Middle Eastern appearance. The mass media, notably radio shock-jocks with close connections to the Howard government, directly fomented the assault. Murdoch’s Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, ran inflammatory headlines every day during the previous week, urging its readers to “reclaim” the beach from supposed gangs of Muslim youth.

Moreover, the underlying atmosphere was created by the Howard government and the entire political establishment,

which has consciously whipped up anti-Muslim prejudice. Significantly, the *Australian’s* January 1 article again defended Howard’s comments last February, two months after the Cronulla riot, in which he accused some Australian Muslims of being “utterly antagonistic to our kind of society”.

Predictably, a day later, on January 2, *Daily Telegraph* columnist Piers Ackerman, one of Murdoch’s most notorious right-wing hacks, joined the fray. Ackerman claimed that the response of the Lebanese immigrants to Fraser’s “open hand” policy was “hate and contempt”.

The main aim of this filthy campaign is to channel mounting social and political tensions into deeply reactionary directions. In the three decades since 1976 social inequality has massively escalated throughout Australia. The latest *Australian Financial Review* statistics on corporate executive salaries show that CEOs at the top 50 Australian-based companies are now paid an average of \$4 million a year—70 times the average full-time earnings of \$55,000, compared with 20 times the average 20 years ago.

Middle Eastern immigrants and many other Australian Muslims are among the most disadvantaged and oppressed layers of the working class. Long deprived of decent welfare and other essential services, they have been particularly vulnerable to the devastating impact of two decades of pro-market economic restructuring and the resultant destruction of permanent jobs, public education, health and housing. The majority of Muslim youth have no hope for a decent future.

At the same time, the campaign is aimed at providing a justification for the Howard government’s embrace of militarism and war—in Afghanistan, Iraq and in the Asia-Pacific region—and its assault on democratic rights and growing resort to police-state measures at home.

In so far as Fraser has opposed aspects of this program, the Murdoch media has branded him a “darling of the Left”. It is ironic that Fraser, once lionised by right-wing commentators as an “arch-conservative,” now stands to the left, not only of Howard—the treasurer under Fraser—but also of the official Labor Party opposition.

In press interviews marking the release of the 1976 documents, Fraser remarked that he was not the only one who had changed. In fact, he remains the conservative liberal he always was. It is the rest of the political establishment that has moved—so far to the right that the leader of the 1975 coup that ousted the Labor government now finds himself demonised as an ultra-left.



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