

Australian TV mini-series provides glimpse into refugee experience

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The recent three-part television series, “Go back to where you came from,” provided a rare opportunity for audiences to gain an insight into the experiences of asylum seekers. Aired last month on the Australian public broadcaster SBS, the program cut through the continual vilification of refugees by the Gillard government and the political and media establishment as a whole.

The mini-series, created by Peter Newman and directed by Ivan Mahoney, invited six participants to retrace, in reverse, two typical journeys made by refugees from their home countries to Australia.

Many members of the public evidently welcomed the program as a refreshing change from the daily barrage of anti-immigrant sentiment churned out by the Labor government, the Liberal Party opposition and the mass media. On June 21 the first episode gained a metro audience of 500,000 viewers, growing to 600,000 by the final instalment—a record for the SBS television network for 2011.

During the first episode, the show was the number one trend on Twitter globally, and remained in number one position in Australia throughout the evening, while online viewings set another record for SBS. As a result of positive feedback, and anecdotal evidence of a broad discussion of the show, SBS commissioned a forum show during the following week, in which the participants answered questions and spoke of how the experience had affected them.

Through the eyes of the six participants, viewers obtained a moving account of the lives of refugees granted asylum in Australia, and others still languishing overseas. Split into two groups, the six first visited two households of settled asylum seekers in Australia—one of a family of African origin (the mother from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the father from

Burundi) and the second of several men originally from different villages in Iraq.

Next, the participants travelled from Australia on a leaking boat, before being intercepted and rescued by a customs vessel. They then visited refugees in Malaysia, and witnessed a terrifying police raid on a construction site where suspected illegal immigrants had been living. Finally, the two groups were flown to Jordan, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq, where they confronted the squalid living conditions of refugees, and also met family members of some of the refugees introduced in the first episode.

According to the producers, the six participants were selected on the basis of their strong views on the refugee issue, rather than accurately reflecting the positions of the general public. As the show progressed it became clear that five of the six were hostile toward asylum seekers, and, to varying degrees, some expressed racist positions.

The program did not probe the source of these initial attitudes. To the extent that the participants gave reasons, their explanations could be traced almost word for word to the government-media propaganda: that asylum seekers who arrive by boat “jumped the queue” in front of “genuine refugees;” that many only seek an “easier lifestyle;” that “boat-people” destroy their personal documents because they do not actually require asylum; and that refugees have illegally “self-selected” Australia by choosing not to reside in “safe havens” along their journey.

Audiences were able to compare these falsities with the reality of the lives of refugees. The juxtaposition reached painful proportions at several points—for example, when an Iraqi refugee was forced, upon questioning by a participant, to justify his decision to seek asylum in Australia rather than remain in

oppressive and insecure conditions in Indonesia.

Segments were also interspersed with information, providing the participants with access to little-known facts, such as that seeking asylum is not “illegal”—it is a right recognised by Australian and international law; that Australia accepts about 13,750 refugees per year—less than 0.1 percent of the world’s total; and that asylum seekers fleeing oppressive governments or sudden violence often cannot obtain or bring identity documents.

Most participants substantially changed their views as a result of the program, and online feedback indicated broad public support for their more understanding responses. Yet during the forum, in which participants and their family members explained how their views had been affected, there was no reference to the bipartisan political support for the assault on the basic legal and democratic rights of asylum seekers.

In episode one, the participants visited Sydney’s Villawood detention centre, which forms part of the Labor government’s punitive mandatory detention network. Some weeks after the episode was filmed, Villawood was the scene of violent protests by detainees, caused by increased asylum claim rejection rates and lengthening periods of detention, with some inmates incarcerated for up to 18 months. Upon leaving the facility—which remains closed to the media—the distraught participants attempted to describe the depressing and inhuman conditions. One participant correctly warned that desperate protests were inevitable.

Equally relevant was the second episode, which focussed on the situation facing refugees in Malaysia, where Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government is currently in negotiations with its Malaysian counterparts for a people trading agreement that will see 800 asylum seekers who arrive in Australia deported to Malaysia. While Gillard has promised that asylum seekers sent from Australia would be free to “mingle” in the community, the mini-series shed light on what that means. Unauthorised immigrants cannot legally work or access basic public services. Many work illegally in exchange for food and shelter for themselves and their families, while others live in construction camps in fear of frequent police raids. The episode showed the harrowing situation of two families residing in a single small bedroom, with no one able to

leave the house for fear of arrest.

The show did not, however, challenge the framework of border protection and restrictive immigration. Rather it added to the impression that only “genuine” refugees, whom it argued make up the bulk of boat arrivals, should be allowed to seek asylum.

The series did not examine the way in which successive governments have vilified refugees, to divert attention from the declining living standards created by their own policies. Nor did the program probe the legacy of the racist “White Australia” policy on which the Labor Party was founded and that continues to underpin the policies of all the major parties.

Yet, as the mini-series demonstrated, even those with apparently firm hostility to refugees can begin to shift their stance once they are given an opportunity to understand the plight of asylum seekers.

By contrast, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen sought to reinforce the Labor government’s intensive efforts to deter or prevent refugees from reaching Australia. He claimed that the mini-series “highlighted the dangers of coming to Australia by boat.”

The government remains determined to divert attention from the increasing assault on the living conditions of the working class since the global financial crash of 2008. Like other governments around the world that are slashing social spending to meet the demands of financial markets, Labor is also increasingly shutting out asylum seekers and whipping up anti-refugee prejudices.

The SBS series and the reaction it has provoked have helped dispel the myth that these efforts are driven by entrenched racism and xenophobia among working people. It did not, however, defend what is a basic democratic right of all working people—that is, the right to live, work and study in Australia or any country with full citizenship rights.



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