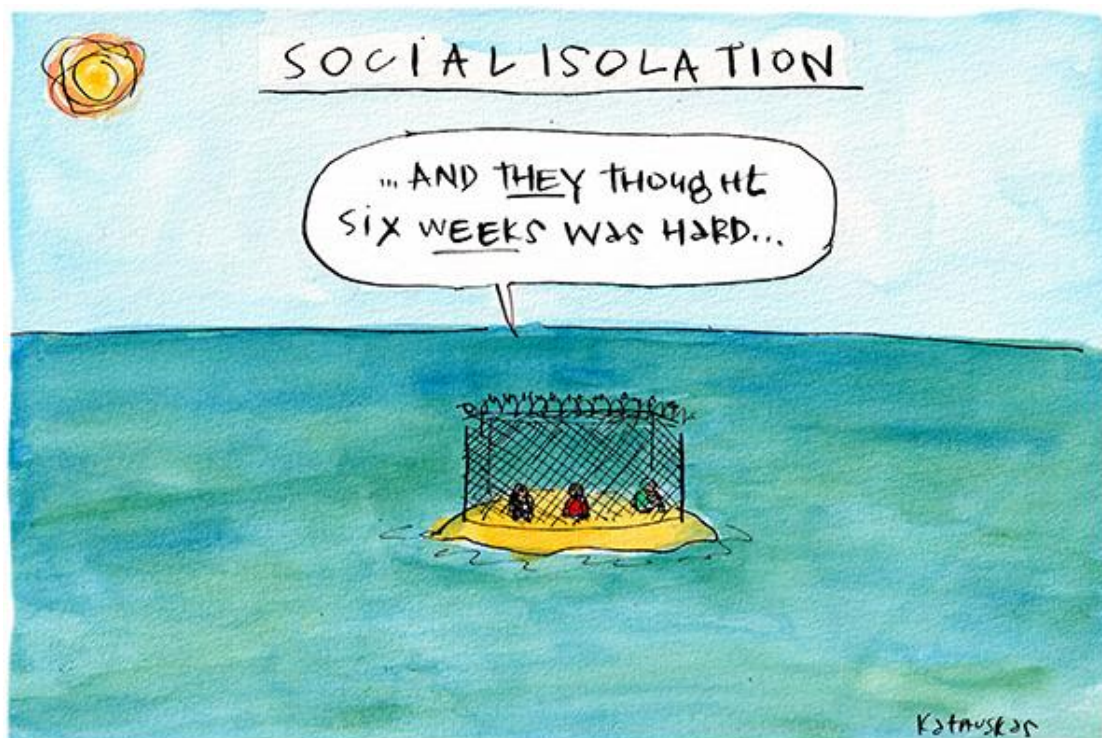


# Reflecting on this Refugee Week

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This year Refugee Week has been swallowed by the disruption caused by COVID-19, and by the fracturing of society in the United States. In a world where people naturally turn inwards, those who seek protection from persecution receive little public attention or sympathy. It becomes all the more important to reflect on the world of which refugees are part and why their lives matter to us.



A starting point of reflection is to compare the present situation of refugees now with that of thirty years ago. At that time public conversation about refugees normally paid at least lip service to the UNHCR Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Underlying the Convention was the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which demanded respect for the human dignity of each human being, so forbidding the treatment of them as means to an end. In the case of refugees this implied that to respect the rights of refugees was the responsibility of all nations.

In practice it was discharged by neighbouring nations who received refugees, and by other nations which, generally through the UNHCR, supported them with shelter, food and safety, assessed their claims for refugee status, and so opened pathways to life outside their own nation.

Despite this cooperative and principled framework, however, it was not a golden age for refugees. Not all nations subscribed to the United Nations Convention on Refugees, nor to the Declaration of Human Rights. Those that did often found ways of evading the framework. In Australia an early fateful decision was to detain indefinitely people who came by boat to claim protection. Initially a stratagem to prevent access to the protection of law, the certainty of detention was soon seen as a means to deter others from seeking protection. The corrupting force of this practice and its rationale has worked its way through Australian public life since.

Although imperfectly observed, the framework governing the treatment of refugees was an agreed starting point of conversation, and governments felt the need to argue for restrictions on their human rights by appealing to clauses in the convention. Advocates for justice for people who sought protection had strong support from a minority of the population.

Refugee Week this year is celebrated in a very different world. People continue to seek protection from persecution and from wars, but the nations involved in fighting or supplying weapons take no responsibility for the refugees they create. The UNHCR is inadequately funded to support the people who need protection. Mostly impoverished neighbouring nations often turn them back or encourage them to seek protection elsewhere. When they make their way across seas or overland to European nations they are denied entrance. In the course of this rejection their human rights to food, shelter, safety, education for their children and respect are often routinely violated. They enjoy little public support.

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The weakened international commitment to refugees reflects a corresponding diminishment of respect for universal human rights and for the institutions which transcend purely national interests. President Trump is the public face of this change, withdrawing from international agreements designed to promote peace and cooperation, imposing trade embargoes with no thought for the effect on the human beings whom they will affect, and subordinating even human life to business. Elsewhere, too respect for the rule of law is weakened by populist appeal to fear and the consequent legislative entrenchment of systems of control and secrecy.

For society the treatment of refugees is the canary in the mine. In Australia the creation of the Manus Island system and the sophisticated regime of dehumanisation that it spawned have presaged the creeping growth of control, secrecy and militarisation in other areas of public life. Public conversation about movement between nations and our relationships with other nations, too, are now conducted purely in terms of our short-term national interest, usually defined in purely economic terms, not by the respect that helps people less fortunate build a better future.

When seen against this background it is understandable that refugees have little place in the minds and hearts of Australians. Those seeking protection are shut out. They are not seen, not heard.

Where to from here? Perhaps the principal challenge to us in our concern for refugees is to hold together companionship with people who seek protection and attention to the larger movements in Australian society and the world over which refugees have no control, but which nevertheless shape their lives. The risk of fragmentation that the coronavirus threatens and its embodiment in the unfair and divided society in the United States are a warning of dystopia. But they also represent an opportunity to envision a hospitable society in which the dignity of all human beings is respected.

The lives of refugees depend on the resolution of that larger choice between dystopia and hospitality. Once again refugees will be canaries in the mine of society. Both for that reason and also out of respect for their humanity, they call for the small kindnesses of support, advocacy, visits and support for the legal and other agencies that have stuck by them and given them hope. They also call for critical attention to the world which we by participation or by silence will shape.



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Main image: Illustration by Fiona Katauskas