

‘Boat people’ and borders: changing political debate on asylum seekers

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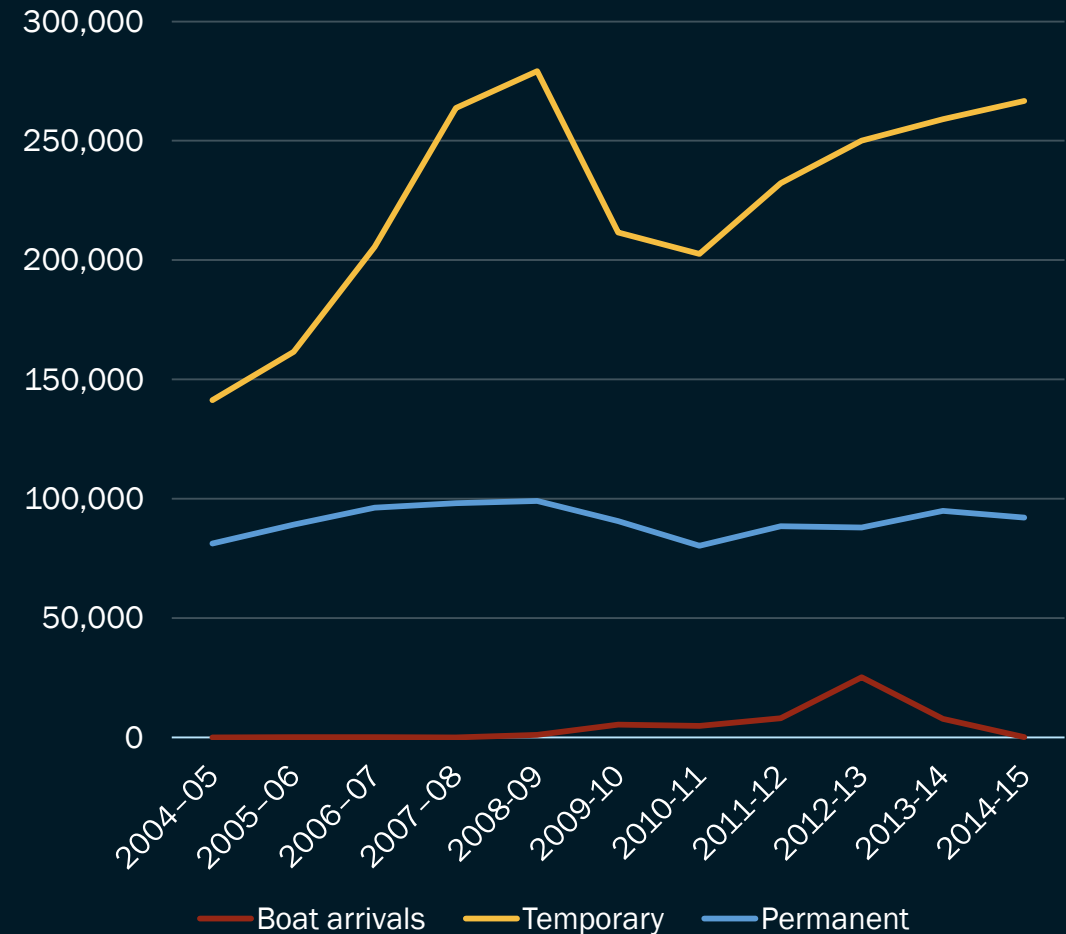


‘The first were five young men who arrived in Darwin from Vietnam in a small wooden boat in April 1976. They had been two months at sea, travelled 3,500 kilometres, and had found their way to us with the aid of a page torn from a school atlas’

(Betts 2001:34)

Disproportionate emphasis on boat arrivals

- 69,605 boat arrivals since 1976
- From 2004-05 to 2014-15:
 - 80,000+ resettled refugees
 - 1m permanent migrants
 - 2.5m temporary migrants
- Budget emphasis 2016-17:
 - \$3.05bn contract for ‘garrison support and welfare services’ at offshore processing centres in Nauru and Manus Is.
 - \$264m for settlement services (for refugees and other migrants)



Sources: Phillips 2017; ABS 2017; Australian Government 2017a, 2017b; ANAO 2017

Overview

- Why look at political language about ‘boat people’?
- The research and methods
- Three ‘waves’ of boat arrivals: 1977-79, 1999-2001, 2011-13
- How are ‘boat people’ discussed in parliament? What are the features of the debate in each ‘wave’?
- Discussion and conclusions

**Why look at political language about
'boat people'?**

'Spectacle' of border security

- Governments use physical displays of border enforcement to calm public fears about unplanned immigration, reassert territory (De Genova 2013)



Language is a tool for doing 'border work'

- Language and branding used as strategies to project border security
(Mazzadro and Neilson 2013)
- Changes in official language can signify policy priorities:
 - E.g. changing official term from 'irregular' to 'illegal maritime arrivals'
 - E.g. Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs → Immigration and Citizenship → Immigration and Border Protection



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Latest news

- Dandenong office closure**
- IMAs 1 October deadline**
- Visa simplification**
Policy consultation paper

The office will close its business operations on Thursday 31 August 2017. Illegal maritime arrivals must apply before 1 October or leave. The policy consultation paper is now available.

Words as ‘tokens’ in political ‘power games’

- Language, rhetoric, metaphors used against political adversaries to secure public opinion and support for ideas (Bächtiger et al. 2008)
- Examples:
 - “Stop the boats” (Liberal Party election slogan)
 - “No way: you will not make Australia home” (advertising campaign)



20. Delivering stronger borders and a more secure nation

Putting the national interest first

The Coalition will put the national interest first, deliver stronger borders, provide a world-class defence force and protect the nation's interests overseas.

We will take immediate action to protect both the integrity of our borders and Australia's immigration programme. We will not allow illegal

- We will boost rigorous offshore processing for illegal arrivals so that bad behaviour has consequences.
- We will establish presumption against refugee status for people who arrive on boats without identity papers.
- Where asylum seekers deliberately discard their identity documentation, we will deny them the when determining their refugee

ish and increase mandatory sentences for people smugglers.
11,000 of the 13,750 refugee for offshore applicants.

POLICY PRIORITY

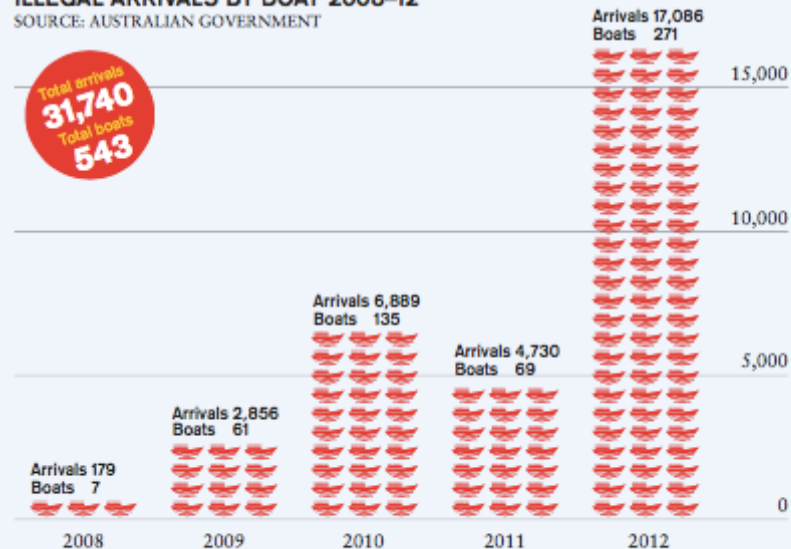
We will deliver stronger borders – where the boats are stopped – with tough and proven measures.

“We will not allow illegal boat arrivals to either determine Australia’s immigration programme, or undermine the Australian people’s confidence in the programme”

are stopped – with tough and proven measures.

- If elected Prime Minister, the first overseas trip that Tony Abbott makes as Prime Minister will be to Indonesia to renew cooperation against people smugglers.
- We will re-introduce the use of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) to deny the people smugglers a product to sell.
- We will immediately give new orders to the Navy to tackle illegal boat arrivals and ‘turn back’ the boats where safe to do so.
- We will give priority in processing to offshore special humanitarian visa applicants, over illegal boat arrivals.
- We will ensure, offshore special humanitarian visa applicants receive priority in obtaining permanent residency in Australia over illegal boat arrivals.

ILLEGAL ARRIVALS BY BOAT 2008–12
SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT



“Stopping the boats matters. It would signify that the

“The Australian government is in every respect sovereign over Australia’s borders”



Australian Government



NO WAY

YOU WILL NOT MAKE AUSTRALIA HOME

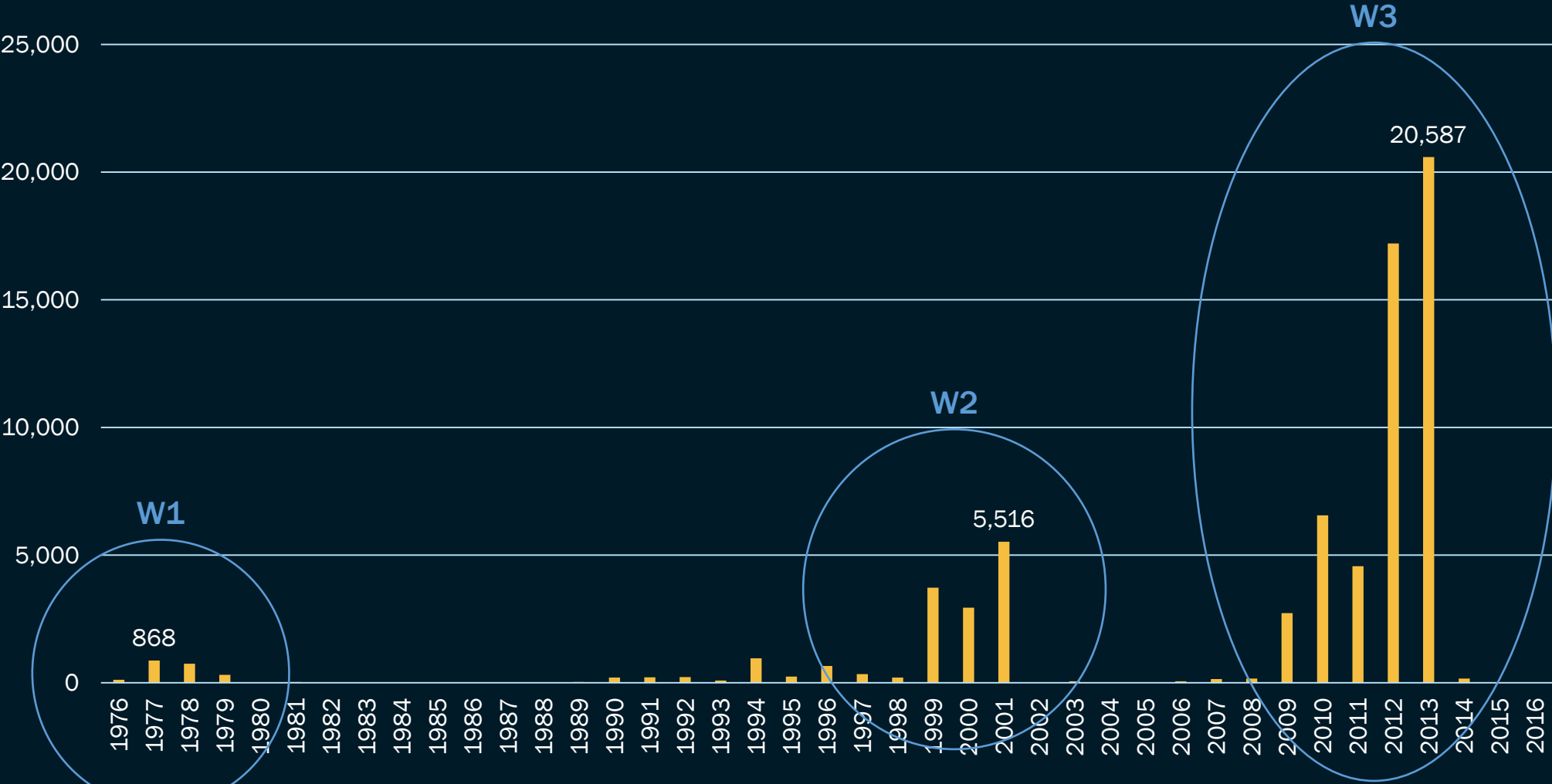
The research

'Boat people' and discursive bordering: Australian parliamentary discourses on asylum seekers, 1977-2013

Research methods

- Analysis of transcripts from parliament (Hansard)
- Three periods x three years: 1977-79, 1999-2001 and 2011-13
- Searched term “boat people” and extracted paragraphs
- Consolidated words
- Examined frequencies and looked for patterns
- Research questions (Bacchi 2009):
 - What similarities and differences exist across the three periods? What new terms are introduced, and which terms disappear?
 - How is ‘problem’ of ‘boat people’ represented? How are ‘boat people’ subjectively constructed?
 - What are the potential effects in terms of policy options created (or prevented)?

Three 'waves' of boat arrivals, 1977-2013



Source: Phillips 2017

Increasing debate and a larger vocabulary

Period	Approx. sitting rate to calendar days		References to 'boat people'	Unique words in same para as 'boat people'	Total word count
	Senate	House of Reps			
Wave 1: 1977-1979	0.18	0.21	61	869	2,103
Wave 2: 1999-2001	0.20	0.20	85 (+39%)	1,156 (+33%)	2,641 (+26%)
Wave 3: 2011-2013	0.15	0.17	158 (+86%)	1,978 (+71%)	6,677 (+153%)

Frequency rankings show focus of debates

Ranking	W1 terms (1977-79)	W2 terms (1999-2001)	W3 terms (2011-13)
1	refuge	illegal	countries
2	countries	countries	refuge
3	arrival	arrival	policies
4	situation	immigrants	labor
5	problem	refugee	arrivals
6	immigrant	committee	boatloads
7	vietnamese	political	participants
8	vietnam	communities	protect
9	status	concern	illegal
10	question	figure	process

Emerging and disappearing terms

- Becoming synonymous with crime: 'Illegal' more frequent in W2 and W3 (not mentioned in W1)
- Australia's territory: 'Offshore' and 'border' used more frequently in W3 (absent: 'settle', 'welcome', 'live')
- Political and partisan: 'Labor' and 'Coalition' much more frequent in W3 (do not feature in W1 or much in W2)
- Government management of the boats issue: 'Solution', 'tax', 'deal', 'pay', 'budget' emerge in W3
- 'Immigrant' disappears in W3: hardening of definitions and categories for boat arrivals

W1 (1977-79): Establishing facts, practical responses

- Relatively uncomplicated and procedural terms
- Practical matters: numbers, how 'boat people' will be accommodated
- 'Refuge' (including 'refugee/s') is dominant term
- No specific emphasis on borders
- No dispute of validity of asylum claims
- Some dissension which prefaces future debate: 'flood', welfare magnet, national security risks, crime, 'offshore processing base'

W2 (1999-2001): Criminalisation of 'boat people'

- More legalistic and politically partisan
- Protecting Australia's borders against criminal activity becomes key theme: e.g. debates on Border Protection Legislation Bill
- Other (now common) phrases appear : 'playing by the rules', 'sneaking through the system', 'jumping the queue', 'exploiting loopholes'
- Criticism of public figures encouraging 'welcoming' dispositions
- 'Boat people' a product of commercial people-smuggling
- Narrows policy options open to Government: deterrence and punishment

W3 (2011-13): 'Boat people' a tool of electoral politics

- Build political capital by looking 'tough' on asylum seekers (or damage an opposition's political capital by making them look weak)
- 'Labor' is in top 5, 'Coalition' in top 25 words used
- 'Boat people' used to directly confront and attack political adversaries in parliament
- Direct, sustained involvement of PM and Opposition Leader
- Accusations of mismanagement of the issue- leads to introduction of words like 'solution' and 'deal', reflecting a need to look in control
- Coalition election messages of 'stopping boats' and prosecuting 'operation sovereign borders' is a further shift

Discussion

- ‘Boat people’ a signifier of increased arrivals, growing political issues, and changing government language
- From turn of century, parliamentarians criminalise ‘boat people’ and they become something to be stopped at the border
- Future governments are judged by measures of making borders more ‘secure’ for our ‘protection’
- Forced migration is complex, with consequences are not easily managed
- Language can ‘produce, disseminate and defend’ (Bacchi 2009) classifications and solutions, but narrow framing leads to poverty of effective options which can backfire (e.g. Manus payout)

Conclusion: room for alternatives?

- Terms absent: ethics, care, reception, welcome, partnerships, region, collaboration, transparency, data, information, conflict, war, poverty
- Discussing ‘asylum by boat’ (Higgins 2017) in other terms creates space for alternatives:
 - Stronger regional collaboration based on protecting people at risk, efficiently processing asylum claims, transparently sharing migration data
 - Technical and financial support to agencies who are ‘first responders’ in countries of origin (redirecting resources currently allocated to offshore operations)
 - Receiving boats with well-trained public officials, medical professionals and culturally-competent social workers; rather than outsourcing duty of care
 - Ensuring onshore asylum seekers have same rights and entitlements regardless of mode of arrival

Thank you. Questions?

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