The untold success story of Tamil refugees and migrants in Australia

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Introduction
Good afternoon everyone and thanks to Mr Stanhope for that introduction, and to Professor Minns and Sama for your insights. Today I’d like to share with you some of my perspectives as a young Australian-born Tamil. In particular, how I think our current policies have led the Tamil community to lose confidence in government; how those policies contribute to the break down in social cohesion; and how those policies mask the many benefits of welcoming refugees.

My parents had the privileged opportunity to migrate to this country – my father in the late 80s and my mother in the early 90s. They were joined by my uncles, aunties and grandparents too so I’ve been blessed to have grown up with my entire extended family here in Australia and the influence of a large Tamil community. My parents and many others came here during the early stages of the conflict in Sri Lanka, knowing that it was the only way their children could have a more prosperous life. They were leaving a country where they suffered discrimination as a minority and where they knew violence would escalate. Australia welcomed and accepted them with open arms.

But while they had the money and the means to migrate, the more desperate and vulnerable people who fled during the final stages of the war and in the years afterwards were either locked away or turned away by our government.

What I’ve come to realise in recent years as I’ve seen successive governments deal with the boat people issue is that if my family didn’t have the chance to migrate when they did, I might have been born in Sri Lanka and my life would have been radically different. If we survived those final years, my family may have been compelled by the opportunity to get on a boat and come to Australia or at least send me as their eldest son so that I could escape the violence, avoid military conscription, save myself and build a life free from discrimination and persecution.

I mention this because I am acutely aware that the alternative reality I have just described could have been how my life panned out. I am reminded of it each time I meet a young Tamil asylum seeker around my age who did get on a boat, went through a detention centre and now lives here in the community.

Implications for government confidence
Today I want to shed light on how the government’s dismissive attitude to fellow Tamil people, has a negative effect on the Tamil community who have been living here for many years – even a few generations.

Let’s start by taking a look at the government’s track record in relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka:

- Australia refused to vote for an independent UN inquiry into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sri Lanka;
• the current Prime Minister visited Sri Lanka to attend CHOGM 2013 and was one of the only Western leaders to praise the Sri Lankan government’s human rights record; contrast the Canadian Prime Minister who boycott the event altogether;
• Australia actively cooperated with the Sri Lankan government to “stop the boats” even though Australian officials were aware of public rumours that senior members of the Sri Lankan government were aware of or complicit in the people smuggling trade;
• last year Australia returned a boat load of Tamil asylum seekers to Sri Lankan authorities without assessing their claims properly and knowing they could face torture upon return;
• Australian ministers have publicly described Tamil asylum seekers as “illegals”, “economic migrants” and “queue jumpers”; and
• there have been multiple suicides and acts of self-harm by Tamil youth in detention centres

From the Tamil community’s perspective, these decisions suggest our government is more concerned about its standing in the polls, its standing with the electorate as having a hard line against boat people – and not concerned with the actual issues asylum seekers are facing and the reasons they are pushed to get on a boat in the first place.

The Tamil community have not been able to make any difference in how refugees are treated, despite the fact that representatives have met and lobbied ministers, MPs and department officials. For example, in 2009, at the height of the war when thousands of Tamils were being killed, the Tamil community was out in large numbers protesting in front of Parliament House, including hunger strikes in front of The Lodge and right around the country. The government showed no sympathy and took no action. Soon after May 2009, their language seemed to suggest, “the war has ended, there’s no need to flee” and eventually even went as far as categorising all Sri Lankan asylum seekers as economic migrants. Of course we knew that on the ground in Sri Lanka this was not the case as authoritarianism grew, land was taken arbitrarily and abductions were left investigated.

For the Tamil community, this resulted in a huge loss of confidence in government and the major political parties. In fact, the Australian Greens have been the only supportive advocates for Tamil refugees in this country.

Think of it from the point of view of the Tamil migrants, like my parents and others in this room, who came here many years ago. They’ve been through a war, they’ve suffered discrimination as a minority, they’ve come to Australia thinking it was a more egalitarian society with a higher moral standard and respect for human rights – and while these expectations may have been upheld initially, the policies of both major parties over the last few years has completely undermined that confidence and they are now going through the same lack of representation which they went through in Sri Lanka.

This is a form of political disenfranchisement and I challenge you to ask yourself: “would this have occurred if we had a larger Tamil population like in the UK or Canada?” or “would the government be this dismissive of our concerns if Sri Lanka had valuable oil reserves like countries in the Middle East?”
Implications for social cohesion
The second major issue is that the language that is used when we discuss refugees is divisive and demonising. It has created a barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and is really playing to the worst fears and insecurities of people even though there is really no threat. This has implications for us as a pluralist, multicultural society. In my eyes, this kind of language from the highest levels of government contributes to the breakdown in social cohesion that we have started to see across many communities.

One example is use of the term ‘economic migrants’ in relation to Tamils arriving by boat. We know some of them might not be genuine refugees if you apply the technical definition – but at the very core, their cause for fleeing is that they cannot survive. Their land and livelihood has been taken, there are no opportunities for prosperity, they live under military occupation and are recuperating from a traumatic war.

Changing the conversation
I want to really challenge this point about economic migrants by highlighting the significant and diverse contribution that Tamil diaspora have made in Australia, because that is often lost in this debate.

The Australian Tamil Congress estimates the global Tamil diaspora have amassed and injected at least as much wealth in their new countries as the GDP of Sri Lanka because their incomes are much higher.

Right around Australia, there is an impressive story to tell about the career success of Tamil people. We have academics and business leaders, surgeons, physicians, dentists, lawyers, accountants, engineers, senior public servants and political advisors – people for whom English is a second language, who are thriving in a new country after beginning a new life from scratch, and are earning some of the highest incomes in Australia.

This has been verified in economic studies such as Andrew Roy’s 1951 model on “refugee sorting” which described how people from the lower end of a country’s socio-economic scale, usually minorities whose opportunities are oppressed by prejudice, move to a new country and outperform natives because their skills are valued by the host country. Importantly, the refugee or migration experience makes them more determined, flexible, adaptive, innovative, entrepreneurial, willing to take risks, work hard to improve themselves and take initiative. We this in the myriad of small businesses or high skills jobs Tamil Australians hold today. They are a net positive benefit to our economy. Very often this sense of drive and hard work is passed on to their children who are influenced by the example of their parents.

There’s also a major social and cultural contribution. Young Tamils have now run for parliament in a number of jurisdictions; they have created their own charities; they are engaging in social entrepreneurship; they are doing amazing work in the cultural and western performing arts space. Members of our community have been honoured with the Medal of the Order of Australia, the Public Service Medal and numerous other community awards.

Imagine the breadth of talent, creativity and skills that we might be missing out on every time we turn refugees away.
Conclusion

We’re at a stage where there is no real debate anymore. Our political leaders are just engaging in meaningless talk that is not achieving anything because neither of the major parties seem to care about addressing the negative impacts of their policies.

Leaders should exist to challenge myths and attitudes and show us a better direction. The people running our country, on this issue at least, are acting more like followers: reacting to the polls, the negative media coverage and feeding the fears and insecurities of the community. So there is a real lack of leadership and sadly, I don’t know how we can break that cycle.

What’s clear is that the longer these policies continue, the greater impact they are going to have on us as a society – making people feel a lack of confidence in government, causing social division and masking the fact that we could be a more enriched society if we were welcoming of refugees and asylum seekers.