

Four Decades of Resettlement: The Vietnamese in Australia - a brief historical review

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Abstract

Unlike most other NESB or CALD communities, the Vietnamese came to Australia in large numbers within a rather short period of time when the host multicultural society was still in its infancy. Their presence as an Asian visible minority was really a test to the strength of Australia's political leadership and tolerance of the population at large.

Initially without any intra structure of support, Vietnamese Australians learned to adapt themselves to the new social and cultural environment to become a vibrant community with tangible and intangible contributions to Australia.

In future growth however, Vietnamese Australians appear to face a challenge as today's new settlers from Vietnam bear little commonality in life experience and outlook with the essentially Vietnamese refugee community of the past few decades.



Saigon Welcome Arch 2015, Footscray (Melbourne) Victoria - Its design conveys traditional Vietnamese culture and symbols, while presenting a contemporary and modern aesthetic appeal (Source: Maribyrnong News).

Part 1

Australia's political and social setting in the 1970s and 1980's and the Vietnamese boat people

The Commonwealth of Australia came into existence in 1901 as an independent federation consisting of six states which had been British colonies at various stages of white European

settlement since 1788, which was marked by the arrival of the *First Fleet* transporting convicts to this southern land from the United Kingdom.

Australia has had a long and at times unflattering record of racist policies and practices. Apart from the abysmal treatment of indigenous inhabitants before and after independence, *The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901*, Australia's first Act of Parliament, provided the legal basis for what became known as the White Australia Policy which was followed by governments of all political persuasions until the late 1950's.

The first important step which eventually led to the end of White Australia as a government policy took place in 1958 when *the Migration Act* was amended to abolish the infamous Dictation Test, a mechanism used to exclude non-European applicants to migrate to Australia by requiring them to write down a short text of any European language chosen and dictated by an Australian officer.

In 1966, *the Migration Act 1958* was further amended by the Holt Coalition Government to allow limited immigration of non-Europeans (i.e. the Chinese) to Australia. And finally in 1972, White Australia was abolished as a government policy by the Whitlam Labor Government.

The Whitlam Labor Government

Adored by many Australians as a man of vision and as the Leader of the Federal Opposition from 1967, the Hon Edward Gough Whitlam, AC, QC (1916-2014) led the Australian Labor Party (The ALP) into power on 2nd December 1972. In Opposition, he was against the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. In government, he refused to accept Vietnamese refugees in any large number after the Fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975.

Gough Whitlam was a reformist Prime Minister and although he was in power for only 3 years, he left a lasting legacy of social and cultural changes as Australia moved forwards in a more inclusive and culturally diverse manner. It is therefore all the more disappointing that he did not see the Vietnamese exodus as a humanitarian issue.

Indeed, as a Labor politician, Whitlam was influenced in my view by two long-term considerations - one was domestic and the other, geopolitical. I served as a diplomat at the Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in Canberra before and during his Prime Ministership, from March 1970 to October 1974.

Domestically, Whitlam saw in the Vietnamese refugees potentially anti-communist Liberal voters in the same way as settlers from the three Baltic countries after the Second World War. Hence he reportedly said he did not want "Asian Balts" in Australia.

In his Memoir, the Minister for Labour and Immigration, Mr. Clyde Cameron recorded the discussion on 21st April 1975 between the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Don Willesee (1916-2003) and Mr. Whitlam in the latter's office, with him as an eye witness:

"Finally, Whitlam stuck out his jaw and thundered: "I'm not having hundreds of fucking Vietnamese Balts coming into this country with their religious and political hatreds against us!" Poor Don looked pleadingly towards me for help but I replied: "No Don, I'm sorry mate, but I agree with Gough on this matter".

Clyde Cameron [1]

On the second point, not only did he oppose the Vietnam War, Mr Whitlam also considered North Vietnam as potentially the major political and military force in Indo-China. Of course, he was fully aware - or should have been fully aware - that North Vietnam received massive and continuous support from the Communist Block to conduct its war against the South [2].

The Whitlam government was amongst the first group of western democracies to recognise the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) on 26th February 1973, just one month after the signing of the so-called Agreement Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam (Paris, 27th January 1973).

This was *realpolitik* at work and consistent with Whitlam's vision for Asia. He led an ALP delegation to visit Beijing in July 1971 when he indicated to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that an Australian Government under his leadership would shift its recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (Beijing). This shift of *de jure* recognition eventuated on 21st December 1972 on the basis of 'One China Policy' and therefore at the same time, Australia severed its diplomatic relation with Taipei [3].

Vietnam was different [4]. Australia recognised the State of Vietnam on 8th February 1950 and in 1952, the Australian diplomatic mission opened its door in Saigon, the capital of undivided Vietnam. This *de jure* recognition continued after Vietnam was divided in 1954 until ANZAC Day 25th April 1975 when the Australian Embassy, under Whitlam's instruction, left the capital of the Republic of Vietnam without taking many Vietnamese evacuees deemed to be at risk after the communist taking over [5].

There was an exception though. At the request of the Cardinal of Sydney, Sir James D Freeman, Whitlam agreed for a group of Sisters of Mary Queen in Saigon to come to Australia "for study". The Embassy's second in charge, Mr Alan Deacon conveyed Whitlam's decision to me and sought an authorisation by the RVN government. I contacted President Tran van Huong's office in my capacity as Acting Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a relevant permission was given for 34 nuns to leave for Australia.

Before the Fall of Saigon, Mr. Whitlam reportedly said:

"We believe that political, economic and social changes in Asia will occur and are indeed desirable. We believe Australia should not intervene militarily even when the contest for power and control over the change leads to violence".

Gough Whitlam [6]

And in *The Age* (Melbourne, 14th April, 1975) he was again quoted as saying Australia's security and long-term interests were not affected by the political colour of the rulers of Saigon and never had been [7].



Tuong Quang Luu and the Hon Gough Whitlam, Sydney 1989

At a different time and in a different circumstance after I was posted from Canberra to Sydney in 1987 as the NSW State Director for the Commonwealth Department of Immigration Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, I met the Hon Gough Whitlam again when we were both guests of the Australian Chinese Community Association (The ACCA). Sitting next to him on that occasion in Sydney's Chinatown, I introduced myself as a former Vietnamese refugee, recalling my first face-to-face meeting with him at the height of his power in July 1973 during the ALP Biennial Conference at Surfers Paradise, Qld. Of course, the former 21st Prime Minister of Australia did not remember but the conversation was nice.

However, when I attempted to mention his policy stand vis-à-vis Vietnam in April 1975 particularly in relation to the subsequent Vietnamese exodus, Mr Whitlam became totally disengaged. I sensed that he did not feel comfortable to be reminded of that part of his otherwise very significant legacy.

But Mr Whitlam was not alone at the time in rejecting and demonising the Vietnamese 'boat people' while in power. Some members of his ministry were far worse – such as the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Jim Cairns, Ministers Clyde Cameron and Tom Uren, Senators John Wheeldon and Tony Mulvihill etc...

Senator Don Willesee stood out, though, as a lone ministerial voice arguing for a more sympathetic approach to the South Vietnamese [8] as did some ALP backbenchers such as Dr Richard E Klugman, Federal MP for Prospect (NSW) whom I personally knew and admired. Dick Klugman (1924-2011) was born in Vienna of Jewish-Italian heritage, fled to Australia at the age of 14 with his family to escape Nazi persecution.

The Fraser Coalition Government

The Whitlam Dismissal of 11th Nov 1975 brought the Leader of the Opposition, the Hon Malcolm Fraser, MP (1930-2015) to power and an opportunity to change policy regarding the Indochinese exodus. The Liberal-Country Party Coalition had advocated a more generous acceptance of Vietnamese evacuees at risk before the Fall of Saigon and thereafter, refugees fleeing communist Vietnam. Before 1972, Mr. Malcolm Fraser, MP, as Minister for the Army (1966-68) and Minister for Defence (1968-69) was one of the architects for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Fraser's main focus during this time of caretaker government was to organise a parliamentary election to gain his own legitimacy, which he did with a landslide victory on 13th Dec 1975. After this defeat, Whitlam was again elected Leader of the ALP in Opposition to fight another federal election which Fraser would call a year earlier than required in December 1977.

Even in caretaker position, Fraser reversed Whitlam's policy on the Vietnamese refugees. Personally, I was then granted permanent resident status when my 6 month temporary permit expired in November. The new government also lifted the entry condition imposed on some former South Vietnamese officials - including the former RVN Foreign Minister and first Vietnamese Ambassador to Australia, Mr. Charles Tran Van Lam (1913-2001) and the last RVN Ambassador to this country, Mr. Doan Ba Cang – that they were not to be involved in politics.

Fraser's first year in government, however, was drawn much more towards the issue of Lebanese victims of a civil war in Lebanon.

Fraser Cabinet Papers of 1976, released under 30-year Archival Rule on 1st January 2007, showed that the Australian government agreed in September of that year to relax entry

requirements of good health, good character and work qualifications to accept 4 000 Lebanese immigrants the majority of whom were Muslims.

In subsequent years, Fraser, his first Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs from 1975 to 1979, the Hon Michael MacKellar, AM (1938-2015) and his Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Andrew Peacock, AC, CGL shaped the Australian response to the Vietnamese refugee crisis - known as the Boat People, in South East Asia and Hong Kong and to a lesser extent, the Lao and Cambodian land refugees mainly in Thailand.

1977 was particularly testing for the Fraser government, as it had to manage a rather hostile voting public in an election year and the renewed relentless attack by the ALP Opposition led by former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on the perceived threat of Australia being 'invaded' by the Vietnamese boat people.

This simple yet very powerful message was used then and indeed has been re-used many times since, in similar words or by coded phrases, by politicians such as Ms Pauline Hanson as the independent MP for Oxley (Qld) in 1996 and as a senator for Queensland and leader of the One Nation Party twenty years later.

Since the Fall of Saigon, the first ever Vietnamese boat reaching northern Australia near Darwin, unannounced and hardly reported, was the *Kien Giang* on 26 April 1976 with 6 persons onboard. They were allowed to stay and resettled in Adelaide [9]. During the financial year 1976-77 however, 7 more boats arrived directly carrying 204 Vietnamese asylum seekers. By the time of the December 1977 election, 868 Vietnamese already sailed straight to northern Australia without going through any offshore checking [10].

The ALP Opposition pushed hard to make these 'unauthorised arrivals' as an election issue with some success, when it became widely reported in the media.

The Opposition Shadow Minister for Immigration, Senator Tony Mulvihill "demanded that Vietnamese refugee boats should be turned back by the Navy". Quite significantly, the ACTU President and future Prime Minister, Mr Bob Hawke, was featured prominently on the front page of *The Australian* of 29th Nov 1977: "*Hawke - Return Bogus Refugees*" [11].

The Fraser government indeed felt vulnerable politically as the Morgan Gallup poll in Dec 1977 found that 80% of respondents wanted to 'stop the boats' or to limit acceptance of Vietnamese refugees.

Cabinet papers of 1977 record Fraser government's policy on Vietnamese refugees in details with an action plan for resettlement of Indochinese refugees which was seen as generous and well ahead of public opinion at the time. Thirty years after, the former 22nd Prime Minister was reflecting on his government stance when these Papers were officially released:

"I strongly felt that we had been fighting alongside a lot of these people, that 'the Americans in particular had given them assurances and we had an obligation to them, rather than just leaving them behind, which had been the original decision of the Whitlam government".

Malcolm Fraser [12]

Mr Fraser then added in his interview with *The Australian*: "But when we made the contrary decision, Gough [Whitlam] did not oppose it" [13].

From bitter opponents as a result of the event of 11th Nov 1975, Fraser and Whitlam became quite close in their later years in retirement. But his defence of Whitlam on the Vietnamese refugee issue as Leader of the Opposition - is hard to verify. Whitlam and his shadow Cabinet were vehemently opposed to Fraser and remained as critical as ever to Fraser policy

on this issue during the Dec 1977 election which the ALP lost and Whitlam was then replaced as Leader by Mr. Bill Hayden.

In subsequent years, the Fraser government found itself navigating between domestic realities risking national unity and Australia's international interest. In 1978, Cabinet considered options to deal with direct and unauthorised boat arrivals by setting up detention centres in Australia and/or turn back the boats or restrictions in social benefit payment. But in the end, the government took a humanitarian approach and rejected all those harsh options. Minister for Foreign affairs Andrew Peacock, in particular, was sensitive to countries of first asylum in South East Asia, when the option of 'turn back the boat' was again discussed in 1979. He and his department believed Australia was at risk of being labelled with "a pariah status" should Canberra take such a hard line [14].

1979 was also important for Minister Michael MacKellar as the First International Conference on the Indochinese Refugees was convened on 21st and 22nd July in Geneva.

This was a global effort through the United Nations to find a viable solution to the crisis in South East Asia. Sixty five nations took part in addition to Vietnam, the source country. The Conference outcome included a commitment by third countries of resettlement to accept more refugees, an undertaking by first countries to respect the principle of asylum and importantly an endorsement of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) which had been signed by the UNHCR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in May 1979.

The drawn out negotiations for an ODP program between Australia and the SRV were conducted by the Hon Ian Macphee who replaced Mr. Michael MacKellar as Fraser's second Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (1979-1982). On this particular issue, I had an opportunity, in my capacity as the first national President of the Vietnamese Community in Australia (the VCA) to present community input to the Minister, as I had done on previous occasions to MacKellar in terms of Australia's annual intake.

Ian Macphee was a politician of high humanitarian principles. After politics, he remains keenly interested in social policy affecting the voiceless such as indigenous Australians and refugees/asylum seekers. Among the first things he did as the newly appointed Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs was to join hands with the ALP Opposition to make Australia a better nation.

Through the arrangement of Dr Tien Nguyen, OAM, a former president of the VCA/NSW and VCA National, the Hon Ian Macphee, AO, and his wife Julie, were the guests of honour at the 2012 Biennial Conference of the VCA in Sydney. Also as the keynote speaker on this occasion, the former Minister had this to say:

"I was asked to identify the highlight of my time as Immigration Minister. My immediate answer was: "the settlement of Vietnamese in Australia." And, in my last public words as Immigration Minister, I recall saying to Vietnamese refugees in a processing centre outside Adelaide: "you have enriched my life."

Then he continued:

"In 1979, Labor's shadow minister for immigration, the late Mick Young and I agreed that humane treatment would assist refugees to blend into our community. Mick had me confer with a caucus committee and with the Opposition Leader, Bill Hayden. We gained a crucial consensus on processing refugees in UNHCR camps offshore and in Australia".

Ian Macphee [15]

So finally, the bipartisan approach to the Vietnamese refugee issue eventuated, but with the Hon Bill Hayden and the Hon Mick Young. Bill Hayden did not lead the ALP to victory in the March 1983 election, because he was replaced by Mr. Bob Hawke as Leader. In spite of what he had argued in 1977, Prime Minister Bob Hawke, AC, GCL (1983-1991) with Bill Hayden as first Foreign Minister and Mick Young as third Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, did not fundamentally change Fraser policy.

The Hawke Labor Government

The Hon Mick Young (1936-1996), a former shearer, was considered as one of the best political brains who moved from the ranks of trade unions to become a national secretary of the ALP. In this capacity, he brilliantly conducted the *"It's Time"* campaign leading to Gough Whitlam's victory in December 1972.

I first met Mr. Mick Young in late 1972 when he invited foreign diplomats to his electoral briefing at the Canberra Rex Hotel on the policies of a future ALP government. I met him again quite a few times after his election to the House of Representatives as Federal Member for Port Adelaide, SA in 1974. He once served as Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs when the ALP was in the Opposition.

After March 1983, Mick Young was promoted to the Hawke Ministry. Among his ministerial portfolios, he took charge again of the Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, when I was the Department's State Director for NSW.

Prime Minister Bob Hawke reshuffled his government 4 times before he was replaced by Mr. Paul Keating in 1991. Through these ministerial changes, five ministers came and went: Mr. Stuart West, MP, Mr. Chris Hurford, MP, Mr. Mick Young, MP, Mr. Clyde Holding, MP and Senator Robert Ray within the immigration portfolio.

Some major developments in social policy during this period included the creation of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in 1987 with Dr. Peter Shergold, AC, as the founding Director and the launch of the Hawke Government's National Agenda for a Multicultural Society in 1989. Otherwise, the Hawke government policy in relation to Vietnamese refugees was broadly similar to that of Fraser.

Naturally, each minister brought to their portfolio their own focus and formulated their annual intake program in accordance with government priorities on a broader political and economic outlook. The Vietnamese component of the intake varied from year to year, but overall the numbers remained broadly constant, as a result of Australia's undertaking to resettle refugees and the gradual increase of family reunion under the ODP. It should be noted that for 6 years between 1982 to 1988, not a single Vietnamese boat attempted sailing directly to Australia [16].

The most significant change took place in June 1989 not only in Australia but also internationally, when seventy seven nations agreed at the Second International Conference in Geneva to adopt the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), which aimed primarily to deter and stop the Indochinese exodus. Vietnamese boat people ceased to be granted prima facie refugee status on arrival, after the CPA cut-off dates which were June 1988 in Hong Kong and March 1989 in Malaysia, Thailand, The Philippines and Indonesia. They were then subject to individual screening to determine their claim, and those rejected would be involuntarily repatriated.

In 1983, the Hawke Government had already endorsed the 3 steps towards a durable solution to the outflows of refugees – with the first being 'voluntary' repatriation, the second, local integration in countries of first asylum and the third, resettlement in other countries such as

the USA, Canada and Australia [17]. This was not a new policy. In fact, it was - and remains until today - a long standing approach preferred by the UNHCR but the difficulties lied in its application. If the root causes of the exodus remained in place in communist Vietnam, how could a Vietnamese refugee agree to return voluntarily? The second step would require permission or acceptance by Vietnam's neighbours and none was forthcoming. Under the CPA, most Vietnamese asylum seekers were sent back to Vietnam against their will.

The CPA ended on 6 March 1996 when all UNHCR-sponsored camps for the Indochinese were officially closed. Four days earlier, the Hon John Howard became Australia's new Prime Minister, bringing to an end the 13 years of Hawke-Keating era. This was not just a change of party or a coalition of parties in power: Post-1996 Australian governments of both political persuasions have taken extremely harsh policies towards asylum seekers who attempted to enter Australia by boats.

Apart from sporadic attempts over the last two decades, the Vietnamese did not figure prominently among the 21st century waves of boat people seeking asylum in Australia.

In fact, the Vietnamese component of the annual intake started to decline significantly under the Keating government (1991-1996). With the CPA, Vietnam ceased to be one of the major source countries. Keating's two Ministers for Immigration, the Hon Gerry Hand, MP and Senator the Hon Nick Bolkus, continued to keep close contact with the Vietnamese community in terms of post-arrival programs.

By 1991, the Vietnamese already became the 6th largest NESB community of Australia, thanks to the Fraser and Hawke governments [18].

In a parliamentary democracy like Australia, politicians of all levels of government are keen to know their constituents. But parliamentarians with a flair for long term planning like Mick Young on the Labor side and the Hon Philip Ruddock of the Liberal Party went beyond their personal interest and indeed beyond their electorate.

Mick Young as a backbencher made every effort out of his busy time to set up contacts with the Vietnamese community through voluntary workers like the late Mr Chu Van Hop and myself. Chu Van Hop was the founder of the first Vietnamese language newspaper, *The Bell of Saigon*, in Sydney in 1979. He would become NSW Premier Barrie J Unsworth's adviser on ethnic affairs in 1987. Fully aware of Whitlam government's stance on the Vietnamese refugees, Mick Young tried to reach out to the Vietnamese with two clear messages: One was that the ALP, a social democratic party, was not pro-communist and had no link whatsoever with the communists ; and two, the ALP worked for all Australians, particularly Australians of working class including migrants and refugees.

As it happened, the Vietnamese followed the same footsteps of many previous waves of settlers. They tended to live in less well-off suburbs surrounding migrant hostels, their first point of contact in Australia. If the Vietnamese were indeed "*Asian Balts*", this social and economic distribution turned many of them around to become Labor voters.

Mick Young as Minister lost none of his keen interest in culturally diverse communities. When he was in Sydney, I often held community consultations for him as his time permitted. He wanted to listen to multicultural communities at the grass root level. And so did his successors, including Senator the Hon Robert Ray, a very influential and one of the best strategists of the Hawke-Keating governments.

Senator Robert Ray has a great mind and an excellent memory. Before Sydney, I had an opportunity to brief him in the Senate Chamber in Canberra when a relevant government bill was debated.

I remember one occasion in Sydney in March 1989 when Minister Robert Ray was invited as the Guest of Honour to attend a Commemorative Ceremony for the Two Trung Sisters held by the Vietnamese Women's Association in NSW at the Cabramatta Community Hall. Rather than going directly to the location, he came first to the Immigration State headquarter in the City. From there, he left his driver in his Commonwealth car to follow my car when I drove him as my passenger to the ceremony. During this one hour long trip, he listened to my oral briefing on the Vietnamese and other communities. On arrival, he delivered a very pertinent speech to the delight of the audience and the organizing committee headed by Ms. Dang Kim Ngoc and assisted by Ms. Ngoc Han (B. T. Nguyen, OAM). He extolled the important role of the two Vietnamese heroines in history and noted the significant role played by Vietnamese women during the resettlement process of their families in Australia.

On the other side of politics but with a long-standing interest in CALD communities, the Hon Philip Ruddock, MP, had also been very active in this multicultural field, before he finally became Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in 1996.

Ruddock was the Federal Member for Parramatta (NSW) from 1973 to 1993 where he did have NESB voters, but since 1993 until his retirement from Parliament before the 2nd July 2016 election as the Father of The House, he represented his constituents of Berowra (NSW), a true blue safe Liberal seat. As a backbencher during the Fraser government, he was involved in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees through Minister Ian Macphree-initiated Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (the CRSS).

Philip Ruddock had a very successful career as a Federal Member of Parliament and as a Minister, even though at times he became somewhat controversial. He enjoyed a close association with Asian and Arabic speaking Australians, particularly the Vietnamese, the Chinese and the Lebanese. He developed a good friendship with quite a few religious leaders in the Buddhist and Islamic Faiths.

Shortly after his retirement from politics, the Hon Philip Ruddock received a rare inter-community tribute on 29 July 2016 at Sydney's Le Montage – where many Vietnamese Australians attended – to honour his contributions to multicultural Australia.

Honour the trees that give shelter

I was saddened by the untimely passing of the Hon Mick Young in 1996. The Vietnamese Australian community can never say thanks adequately to Australia and the Australian people for their helping hand in time of desperate need for survival. They also feel indebted to Australian political and civic leaders almost to a fault. There has been a certain counterview as noted by The Australian's Greg Sheridan [19] relating to the most prominent figure of them all: the Rt. Hon Malcolm Fraser, AC, CH, GCL.

Be that as it may however, politics is a tough game and politicians at times have to talk tough as a matter of politics to pursue a good policy. It cannot be denied that the Fraser and Hawke ministries at times expressed strong views against the Vietnamese boat people largely for domestic purposes, but when the outcome of their respective policies is taken into account, they were far more humanitarian in policy and practice than the preceding government in 1975 and all of the succeeding ones since 1996.



A gift presentation: (from Left) Mr Hien Le, the Rt. Hon Malcolm Fraser, Mr Thanh Nguyen and Mr Than Nguyen – Sydney, 2011

Even within the Whitlam government, the Foreign Minister, Senator the Hon Don Willesee was on record sympathetic to the plight of the South Vietnamese and similarly but not necessarily well-known on record because he was not in the relevant policy area, the Hon Kim E Beazley, AC (1917-2007) was indeed also supportive of the South Vietnamese. As Minister for Education, Kim Beazley *Senior* quietly set up a lesser known but very effective scholarship scheme for children of Vietnamese and Cambodians living in financial hardship at the time in Australia as a result of the Fall of Phnom Penh in mid-April 1975 and the Fall of Saigon two weeks later.

Shortly after my return to Canberra in late May 1975 as a refugee on a temporary entry permit, I was invited to Kim E Beazley's parliamentary office for morning tea. On my arrival, the federal Minister for Education extended his hand to me, saying: "*Welcome home, Quang*". He really touched my heart deeply. I had known Kim E Beazley during my diplomatic service and he treated me in the same friendly way before and after the Fall of Saigon.

In 2005, when the Vietnamese Australian community celebrated their 30th Anniversary of settlement in Australia, the Hon Kim C Beazley, AC - also known as Kim Beazley *Junior* - former Deputy Prime Minister and in his capacity then as Leader of the ALP in Opposition, asked all members of his Shadow Cabinet to be upstanding to applaud the success of their fellow Australians of Vietnamese heritage. That celebration in the Great Hall of the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra was held by the VCA and sponsored by the Hon Peter McGauran, MP Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs representing the Howard Coalition government. This was also an opportunity for the Vietnamese Australian community to show their gratitude to one of their benefactors, the Hon Michael MacKellar, as their guest of honour and keynote speaker for the event.

For the Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser, the Vietnamese Australian community was the living evidence of his humanitarian legacy. In retirement, Fraser changed his view of the world but not his stance on the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Once a strong supporter of the US /Australian alliance, he became hostile to aspects of the American defence and foreign

policies and began to advocate a new approach to communist China. On domestic policy, he was very critical of Australia's so-called Pacific Solution and its subsequent variations since the *Tampa Incident* in August 2001.

Fraser was generous with his time for the Vietnamese Australians, specially the leadership of the VCA / Victoria. Vivienne Nguyen told me that her team often sought Fraser's views as a mentor and at the same time during their frequent dialogues, they tried to persuade the octogenarian former prime minister that, in their view, China and not the USA, was the real long term threat to Australia's security.

In 2005, Fraser was honoured by the VCA/Vic to mark the 30th anniversary of the Vietnamese settlement. He was quite amused when his host, Hung Chau, recalled an assessment interview at a refugee camp in South East Asia. In response to a question testing his knowledge of Australia, Hung Chau just said: "Fraser is the Prime Minister". He was accepted right away and in fact, this was the only thing he knew of Australia at the time!

The next time I met Fraser was at the Vietnamese Tet (Lunar New Year) Festival on 5th February 2011 in Sydney when he was honoured by the VCA/NSW. He delivered his keynote speech passionately calling for a more human approach to asylum seekers and encouraged Vietnamese Australians as beneficiaries of his policy to support his campaign. He appeared very pleased to receive a gift from his host, Mr Thanh Nguyen, OAM – a painting of a Vietnamese refugee boat. Sitting next to him, I thought he felt once again vindicated when many other speakers from the other side of politics paid tributes to his legacy and praised the success story of Vietnamese Australians. He did not show any concern at all knowing that those ALP politicians in Western and South Western Sydney now holding safe seats thanks to the "*Asian Balts*" that Prime Minister Gough Whitlam referred to in April 1975.

The last time I met Fraser was on 17th August 2012 at Melbourne Town Hall when we shared the floor as guest speakers to mark the 50th Anniversary of ANZAC involvement in the Vietnam War, hosted by Bon Nguyen, President of the VCA/Victoria. Even though he had changed his view, politically with hindsight on the US policy of that time, the former Minister for the Army and Defence expressed his unqualified admiration for the courage and high professional standard of Australian and New Zealand members of the ANZAC in South Vietnam from 1962 to 1972.

And of course, the Vietnamese Australian community around Australia mourned the passing on 20 March 2015 of former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser whom many consider as "Father" of the Vietnamese community in Australia. Former President of VCA / Victoria and VCA National, Phong Nguyen, reflecting on what he termed as Fraser's act of tremendous political courage, said on this sad occasion: "If not for his leadership, tenacity and standing up for us, we would not be here" [20].

When Malcolm Fraser became Prime Minister in November 1975, there were less than 2 000 Vietnamese in Australia but at the end of his term in March 1983, more than 55 000 already settled in this beautiful country [21].



City of Bankstown, Sydney NSW - 2016

Next

Part 2 - the Vietnamese community: Development, Contribution and Challenge

** This article is an updated version of the author's one hour long presentation on the same subject at the Whitlam Library on Saturday 8th Oct 2016, as part of the NSW City of Fairfield's Heritage Program of the year.*

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- [2] Denis Warner 1977
- [3] Whitlam's Labor delegation to China 1971
- [4] Tuong Quang Luu, Ky Niem 40 Nam Bang Giao Canberra-Hanoi: Nhìn lại những nét chính trong quan hệ Việt Nam-Australia từ 1950, Tạp san Dong Nai & Cuu Long So 7 nam 2013
- [5] Parliament of Australia 1976, "Australia and the Refugee Problem" – According to this Report of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Prime Minister Whitlam announced on 22.04.1975 the categories of Vietnamese eligible to temporary entry to Australia. As of 25th April, among 3 667 Vietnamese nominated by their relatives in Australia, 342 were approved but only 78 were evacuated by the Australian Embassy.
- Denis Warner 1977: Whitlam took control of all aspects of the Vietnam issue on 2nd April 1975.

[6] Quoted by Colabatch 2014

[7] Quoted by Colabatch 2014

[8] Peter Edwards 2016

[9] Ky Yeu Cong Dong Nguoi Viet tai Nam Uc / Vietnamese community in South Australia, 2000

[10] Janet Phillips and Harriet Spinks, *Boat Arrivals in Australia since 1976*

[11] Quoted by Colabatch 2010

[12] Mike Steketee, *Howard in war refugee snub: Fraser*, The Australian, 01.01.2008

[13] See [12]

[14] Mike Steketee, *Risk of 'pariah status' over Vietnam*, The Australian 01.01.2010

[15] The Hon Ian Macphee, AO, *Opening Remarks*, Sydney, 09 June 2012

[16] See [10]

[17] See [10]

[18] Australia, Census 1991 (121 813 Vietnamese recorded)

[19] Greg Sheridan, 26.03.2015

[20] The Age 22.03.2015 & AFP / APP 27.03.2015

[21] Australia, Census 1976 (2 427 Vietnamese recorded) - Census 1981 (41 096 Vietnamese recorded) & Census 1986 (83 028 Vietnamese recorded)