

Religious prejudice, not racism, main driver of intolerance towards asylum seekers

March 10 2016, by Laura Soderlind



False beliefs about Islam do not necessarily translate for broad support for current hardline immigration policies, report shows

Negative attitudes among Australian voters towards asylum seekers are driven by religious bigotry more than by racism or economic anxieties,

according to a new University of Melbourne report released today.

But this does not translate to strong support for current hardline policies.

Although support for these policies is widespread, a broad spectrum of the community wants something more humane, while keeping control of Australia's borders. So support for current policies is conditional on there being nothing better.

The report, 'Islamisation' and other anxieties: Voter attitudes to [asylum seekers](#) was undertaken by Dr Denis Muller from the Centre for Advancing Journalism and is being launched today at the Melbourne Social Equity Institute.

Researchers spoke to focus groups in Melbourne, Ballarat, Sydney, Dubbo, Brisbane and Toowoomba about their attitudes towards asylum seekers. The groups were made up of voters from all ages, backgrounds and political leanings.

The report found that people opposing asylum seekers are largely driven by fears about the role of Islam in multicultural Australia and the 'watering down' of Christian institutions.

Dr Muller said some research participants were influenced by false beliefs, such as bans on singing Christmas carols and sending Christmas cards.

"There are assumptions that most, or all, asylum seekers are Muslims. People expressed fears that Muslims bring terrorism with them, and anxiety about the 'Islamisation' of Australia.

"These are the main drivers of prejudice against people seeking asylum," said Dr Muller.

Dr Muller said he found participants were largely ignorant of the treaties Australia has signed, pledging to welcome asylum seekers and not subject them to cruel or degrading treatment.

"Voters rely on politicians and the media for their information, but there is no narrative about our legal obligations as a nation."

"The use of terms like 'illegals' and 'queue jumpers' are widely accepted because people lack the knowledge with which to challenge them," Dr Muller added.

"While this research helps explain [negative attitudes](#) to asylum seekers, it also finds evidence that many Australians understand the desperation driving asylum seekers to flee danger and seek a safe, secure future for themselves and their children," Dr Muller said.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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