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Nansen Medal to the Silent Indifference of the
Syrian Refugee Crisis 2011-2015

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October 2015

CARFMS/ACERMF Working Paper No: 2015/5





FROM THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEE CRISIS AND UNHCR'S
NANSEN MEDAL TO THE SILENT INDIFFERENCE OF THE
SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS 2011-2015:

A JOURNALIST'S REFLECTIONS ON SHIFTS IN REFUGEE
POLICY IN CANADA OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES

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Editor's Note

The following text is an edited version of the Special Plenary Session address, "Advancing Protection and the Rights of Refugees in a Global Era of the Criminalization of Migration," delivered on May 14, 2015, at the 8th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS) at Ryerson University, Toronto.

Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I'm a little bashful about being here. I am definitely a novice when it comes to studying migration and refugee issues. My fellow panelists are really the experts.

Still, that's never stopped me from spouting off in the past.

A couple of years ago, when I was churning out daily news analysis on world affairs for the *National Post* one of my friends sent me an e-mail drawing my attention to an article on Afghanistan in the *Weekly Standard* by the humorist P.J. O'Rourke.

O'Rourke opened his story with a painful, but undeniable, truth saying:

"If you spend 72 hours in a place you've never been, talking to people whose language you don't speak, about social, political and economic complexities you don't understand and you come back as the world's biggest know-it-all, --- you're a reporter."

I stand before you today, as a reporter, who spent 30 years as a foreign correspondent, proving O'Rourke's point.

Thanks to the Atkinson Foundation and its Journalism Fellowship program I had the luxury to end my reporting career by spending a year looking at refugee policy in Canada and publishing the results in the Toronto Star in a series entitled: *The Politics of Compassion*.

When I submitted my proposal to the Atkinson selection committee in January of 2013 I had a vague idea of studying the refugee experience in Canada in the context of the country's new asylum determination procedures and a massive increase in international migration.

The topic seemed ripe for reporting. I'd spent 30 years covering wars and disasters and I was still slightly bewildered that refugee policy remains one of the most controversial topics of Canadian political life. The war in Syria was also just ramping up and the xenophobic rhetoric of Europe's far-right political parties was creeping into immigration discussions worldwide.

In Canada, passage of the *Balanced Refugee Reform Act* in 2010 and the *Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act* in June 2012, had just created a new asylum system.

I felt it was important to look at how the new system was operating. I proposed to look at the ideas, the interests, the institutions and the rhetoric that surrounds Canada's refugee system.

But I quickly realized that my ambitions far outstripped my knowledge. Within a matter of months I was struggling to get a handle on my topic so I could produce a coherent series of stories for the Toronto Star.

That's when I rediscovered the Vietnamese boat people.

Three months into my Atkinson project, I was invited to participate in a three day conference at York University on the Indochinese Refugee Movement of 1979-1980 and I had a chance to revisit the fascinating story of Canada's successful resettling of 60,000 destitute and desperate people from Southeast Asia in just 18 months.

I was amazed by the stunning acts of generosity performed by tens of thousands of individual Canadians, families, churches and neighbourhood groups who rallied to rescue 60,000 total strangers. In a matter of just two months, Canadians convinced the government to take in ten times the number of Indochinese refugees it had originally planned to help. Then they surpassed that new target and sponsored more than 50,000 refugees in just four months. Tiny church congregations of 100 people lined up to sponsor as many as six families; employers promised jobs, small grocery stores volunteered free fruit and vegetables for families for a year and supermarkets contributed groceries.

In 1979, Canadians surprised the world and themselves by opening their doors and their hearts to refugees. And we did it, almost without thinking, just because it seemed the right thing to do.

Canada's outpouring of kindness in 1979 was a defining moment for the country, one recognized internationally in 1986 when the people of Canada became the first and only nation to ever be awarded the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees' Nansen Award in recognition of our "essential and constant contribution to the cause of refugees."

Yet, 20 years after the miracle of the boat people, in the summer of 1999, when 599 desperate Chinese migrants put to sea in four decrepit, overcrowded, boats and arrived off the coast of British Columbia, their reception was quite different. They too dominated the news for 18 months, but, unlike the Indochinese refugees of 1979, they were imprisoned and paraded before television cameras in handcuffs and leg shackles. Their arrival was greeted with political hysteria, demands for a tighter refugee determination process and complaints about illegal migrants and queue-jumpers who relied on criminals to gain entry to Canada.

At one point, the *Victoria Times Colonist* newspaper ran a front page story headlined: "Go Home" about a poll that showed 97% of the newspaper's readers felt the Chinese "boat people" should be sent back to China immediately. Editorials in the *National Post* claimed, if the Chinese migrants were allowed to stay in Canada, the country's sovereignty would be at risk

In 20 years, Canada, Canadians and the Canadian media had moved far beyond the spectacular generosity of the initial "boat people" crisis.

What changed and why?

The answer might be found in Canada and the world's reaction to a second, intense wave of Indochinese refugees that swept over Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After the initial mass exodus from Southeast Asia ended in 1980, refugees continued to slip out of Vietnam and surrounding countries but at a much slower rate. Then starting in late 1986 tens of thousands of Vietnamese asylum seekers began sailing to Hong Kong.

To its everlasting credit, Hong Kong never turned back a boat. But this second exodus from Vietnam was marked by a dramatic shift in the type of asylum-seeker arriving in Hong Kong. The later waves came mainly from northern Vietnam and were economic migrants seeking a better life, rather the political refugees from the south who were fleeing persecution.

Nearly 90 per cent of the Vietnamese who arrived in Hong Kong in the late 1980s and early 1990s were declared "illegal migrants" who were ineligible for resettlement and they were condemned to spend years living in despair and deprivation in overcrowded detention centres.

At their overpopulated worst, Hong Kong's refugee camps earned a reputation for squalid hopelessness and sporadic violence. For many who lived there, they were teeming cesspools of brutality. Refugees slept and lived in cage-like compounds, furnished with three-tier bunks. Robbery and physical and sexual abuse were rampant. There was constant tension and threats of riots and hunger strikes.

From 1975 to 1988, Indochinese refugees in Asia were almost automatically resettled. But after 1988 they had to undergo a screening process, based on the 1951 United Nations Refugee convention, which is the basis of Canada's own refugee determination procedure. The new boat people could only qualify as refugees if they proved they fled because of political or religious persecution. If they left simply because they didn't like communism or because they wanted to improve their standard of living, they were categorized as illegal immigrants and kept indefinitely in detention camps until they could be convinced to go back home.

The drama and pathos of the refugees in Hong Kong's camps from 1989 to 1995 wasn't all that different from the exodus of 1975 to 1979. But the outcomes were incredibly different. That difference probably depends on a drastic shift in public attitudes towards asylum seekers and a growing acceptance of the verdict of the Vietnam War. A decade after the initial Indochinese exodus, it seemed the world had no room or patience for refugees. Compassion was overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

In a new era of 24-hour, all-news television, the public got its fill of tragedy. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan turned central Asia into a running sore; the Middle East was wracked by wars in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel and Kuwait; the Soviet Union, itself collapsed; Africa was tormented by AIDS, famines in Ethiopia and Somalia and genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia collapsed into eight years of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The people who were stranded in Asia's refugee camps in the 1990s were really just the last victims of the Vietnam War and they were simply shunted aside by history, as the world moved on.

I think today, we are a little more selfish and self-centred as a society than we were in 1979. Our immigration policies are more demanding, more selective and more self-serving than they were in the past. Canada's old refugee determination system also invited criticism for being slow, costly, and inefficient and a boon to human traffickers. With a backlog of 45,000 unresolved asylum claims and waiting periods of up to three years for hearings, critics claimed the old system actually encouraged people to play the system in the

hopes of getting into Canada. As a result, arguments raged over how to differentiate between persecuted refugees and opportunistic economic migrants and in the process, border control became a focus of “law and order” politics with the stress on security over human rights.

The result is it is now harder for refugees and asylum seekers to come to Canada. Add to that the shadow of fear that still lingers from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and you can see that Canadians now react differently to refugee crises.

The resentment, uncertainty and fear engendered by terrorism have translated into a new focus on security issues, with demands to patrol borders, intercept migrants and to seek safeguards from foreign threats.

Demands for reform have also been accompanied by a marked shift in our rhetoric. Refugees are now depicted as economic freeloaders and refugee resettlement is portrayed as an optional work of charity instead of a moral obligation or a vital national interest.

This dramatic shift in national attitudes and policies comes starkly into focus when you look at Canada's response to the current refugee crisis in Syria.

The more time I spent looking at Canada's response to the Indochinese refugee crisis of 1979, the more I wondered why Canada wasn't able or willing to try to do something similar for Syrian refugees who have been suffering for four years now.

Innocent Syrians have been imprisoned, bombed, gassed, shot, raped and tortured by their own government. Their biggest cities have been turned into rubble. Islamist radicals, who now control nearly one-third of the country, crucify, behead, stone and tax non-Muslims throughout Syria's northeast.

Syrians now make up the largest refugee group in the world -- almost 12 million people (half the country's population) have been left homeless and 4 million people now live in exile with no hope of being able to return safely.

Yet, as Syria's civil war enters its fifth year next month, Canada -- as of the middle of March this year - has only just met its 2013 commitment to resettle 1,300 Syrian refugees.

Almost five years into a conflict, that has seen Sweden -- a country with only a quarter of Canada's population -- give permanent resident status to nearly 40,000 Syrians, Canada can boast of providing shelter to just 1,306 people.

While struggling to justify and meet its limited commitment to Syrian refugees, our government has pledged to resettle 10,000 Syrians over the next three years. But there has been no obvious move to adjust our resettlement programs to meet the demands of such a commitment.

The government decided that 60% of that commitment will be resettled by private groups. But it did nothing to consult with those groups ahead of time. So there is some legitimate doubt as to the true strength of our commitment or whether we will ever meet it.

The Syrian crisis underlines a harsh new reality -- There is a growing gap between Canada's rhetoric and how it actually treats refugees.

As a nation, we are less tolerant and caring and more hostile to refugees than we were just 35 years ago.

A year after the reforms of 2012, Canada sheltered and resettled its lowest number of refugees in two decades.

In 1990, this country brought in 15,485 government-assisted refugees. In 2013, the figure was 5,781 -- and that was 1,583 fewer than in 2011, when Syria's war began.

At the same time, reforms to Canada's asylum system have slashed the number of potential refugees seeking shelter in Canada.

In 2008 there were 35,000 asylum claims in Canada. In 2013 there were only 10,000.

Perhaps most damning is the fact that Canada's dramatic refugee declines come when the rest of the world is struggling to cope with its worst international refugee crisis since World War II.

According to the UNHCR the number of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people worldwide has reached an unprecedented 51.2 million. Yet while asylum applications in the world's top 44 industrial

countries increased by 28 per cent in 2013 and surged by 25 per cent in the United States, they were cut in half in Canada.

Those plummeting statistics are directly related to the immigration reforms that have reduced refugee rights in Canada.

Government spokesmen readily claim their refugee reforms stand to save the government \$1.6 billion over the next five years by reducing what they regard as “bogus” refugee claims.

One can't help but wonder if the real motivation for the reforms was a search for cost-savings and a push for a balanced budget rather than a quest for a fast, fair and efficient refugee determination system.

Combined with "law and order politics" the result has been the demonization of immigrants and refugees and an emphasis on "fraud" and "abuse". We have bolstered security, restricted migration and expanded surveillance, all while trying to deter, deflect and block potential asylum claimants from even coming to Canada to make refugee claims.

In 1979, we still wallowed in the warm afterglow of Canada's centennial and were still experimenting with what we thought it means to be Canadian. We took pride in our growing multiculturalism and unconsciously expressed our values in an overwhelmingly act of kindness.

Today, we are less sure of ourselves, our country and our future. As a result, we are less tolerant and caring. We frame issues around concepts of "us and them" and seem to fear foreigners. Our churches, religious leaders and community groups don't have the same sort of influence they had back in 1979, when they spearheaded the refugee resettlement movement. Canada is increasingly more secular and our people more isolated, insular and self-indulgent.

In our modern media environment, it is difficult to hold anyone's focus for long. "Going viral" is what counts. Syria's pain has to compete for attention with "Ice Bucket Challenges" or your aunt's latest *Facebook* update.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can rediscover our past and rebuild our future, if we simply care about the tragedies of others long enough to do something meaningful to help them.

Syria's present pain may well be Canada's opportunity to reassert itself; to decide what we really want to represent as a nation and to act on that belief in ways that can make the world a better place -- just as we did 36 years ago.