

Arasa, *Destiny Will Out*, Minerva Press, London, 1997 ISBN 1 86106 462 4
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■ **Selected excerpts introduced by Katharine Betts**

Arasa is the name used by Raja Ratnam for this book of autobiographical reflection; it is derived from the name his family gave him at birth. *Raja Ratnam* is the concession he has made for authorities in Malaya and Australia who required people to have a given name and a family name.

Arasa is not a man who is easy to typify in terms of the common labels of race and ethnicity: Indian ancestry but stemming from a Tamil family in Sri Lanka, born in Malaya, and a determined immigrant to Australia back in the days when the white Australia policy was designed to make such a move next to impossible. (He survived the Japanese occupation in Malaya as a boy, acquired some schooling, and then came to Sydney as a student in 1948.)

Arasa's story provides a fascinating account of Australian life in the 1950s seen from a very different perspective from most of those who lived here during that period. Racial insensitivities exasperate him but, along with rudeness and unkindness he also finds friendship, acceptance, a philosophy of life and a successful career as a public servant. Readers of *People and Place* may be interested in the latter part of his career when, during the early 1980s, he worked in senior positions for the Department of Immigration. By 1981 he was chief ethnic affairs officer in the Victorian branch of the Department, from late 1981 to mid 1982 acting head, citizenship and language services branch, including the secretariat of NAATI (the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) and for a year—1982 to 1983—head of the section

of the Department responsible for refugee and humanitarian entry. He then moved to be head of the section responsible for migrant hostels from 1983 to early 1986. After that he had a rolling responsibility for all other settlement service policies. (The author supplied these details to *People and Place*. The book is, perhaps wisely, a little vague about particulars.)

The family reunion sub-program and structural multiculturalism have come in for their share of criticism and analysis since their expansion in the 1980s and Arasa has some pungent insider's comments on these topics and on the humanitarian intake. The following edited passages are taken from chapter 13, 'Integration—the ethnic scene'.

'... For a year, I was head of the policy section dealing with the humanitarian entry of Soviet Jews. When the Israeli government obtained agreement from Australia to help stop the substantial deflection to other countries of Soviet Jews approved for entry to Israel, however, a member of the Australian Jewish community became very angry. ... This man was so used to getting every thing he wanted from us that we, and not the government of Israel were blamed for the change of policy...

'What about those who joined Israel and subsequently claimed humanitarian entry to Australia? The same Jewish Australian applied to us to approve a number of such people. But how could they be deemed to be fleeing, in fear of discrimination, from Israel? ... I did not know then of the discrimination allegedly experienced by mixed couples; ... In any event [it was] not comparable (surely) to Baha'is in Iran, Chileans in neighbouring countries, supporters of Solidarity in Poland and Tamils in Sri Lanka. However, at that time, the Minister

and the head of his department could authorise immigrant entry to Australia for anyone, for any reason; it may be that the Jewish lobby was successful in obtaining such approval....

[He speaks favourably of the hard work and efforts to integrate of many Vietnamese immigrants and refugees but adds this.] ‘...[T]he community’s main objective was migration. The day after his arrival in a migrant hostel, a [Vietnamese] refugee sponsored relatives and friends from refugee camps in South-East Asia. Selection from these refugee camps seemed to be very liberal, driven by “international obligations”. This was the euphemism used by the bureaucracy to silence objectors, and it was based purely on Australia’s voluntary offer regarding the size of its refugee intake.... Once an annual target for the refugee intake was set, bureaucratic practice took over: the budget had to be spent, if need be, by increasing “productivity” in the processing in refugee camps....

‘The unusually generous approach to the Vietnamese refugees has led to some undesirable consequences. At an early stage some cynical fool of a bureaucrat came up with the idea of allowing the Vietnamese to change their “personal particulars”. This right applied only to the Vietnamese. It meant that they ... could change anything [on their files] except their sex....

‘So, Jo Hoi became, say, Charlie Chan. How so? “I had to conceal my name to get out of Vietnam.”

“Why did you not tell the selection officer your real name?”

“Because I did not know if I can trust him; we are not used to officials who are fair.”

“Ah, so?” It all sounds so reasonable. “So, she is not your wife?”

“No.”

“But you lived in the migrant hostel as husband and wife for three months.”

“Yes.”

“Who is she?”

“My sister.”

“Where is your wife?”

“In Malaysia, her name is XYZ.”

‘It is indeed remarkable how the tom-toms worked; there was information flowing out of Vietnam and out of the refugee camps into Australia, and vice versa, that should have made Telecom and Australia Post reconsider their effi-

ciencies. So another female is selected from the refugee camp for Australia. And entry into Australia expanded (through family reunion as well) as a consequence, as did the taxpayer burden. Some of the changes sought related to age, apparently depending on the differential in welfare and other benefits available. Other changes included: number of children, number of siblings, number of uncles and aunts—for obvious reasons. But why was this right available only for Vietnamese? Was there a guilt complex amongst the bureaucrats, compensating for the prejudices of their parents?

‘Or were they plain cynical in some case because the heart-on-the-sleeve welfare merchants wailed so much on behalf of their charges and if unsuccessful they went political. Why not—there was a buck for them in being so caring...

‘After a while, everyone who wanted anything, for themselves or for anyone else went political. Some played rough; one refugee lady went to four senators accusing the immigration Minister of killing her grandfather in Vietnam because the Vietnamese government would not let him out! Where other elderly migrants would not be eligible for the age pension without satisfying a qualifying period, aged relatives of refugees could apparently become our collective dependants on arrival. The name of the game was whinge, attack, whinge.

‘Australians had taught the “ethnics” how to control officials or “frighten the shit out of us” as one of them said. The ethnics have now adapted, and with a vengeance. I do believe, however, that this country needs more of such go-getters. The trouble is that the ethnic communities on the gravy train are now rather clever at playing the role of mendicant. ... Every ethnic community now wants more and more from the taxpayer, even if they have been in Australia for more than one generation....

‘The problem of non-return of illegal immigrants claiming to be refugees has reached insurmountable heights, mainly because of the charity of well-meaning Ministers. All kinds of silly things have happened, and the poor Australian taxpayer seems to be getting ripped off. If legal representatives take months and months (reportedly up to eighteen months) to present a case on behalf of some boat people,

the Minister gets blamed for the delay. If the Minister finds extra money to fund appeals against decisions which do not favour the applicants he receives no credit for being unduly charitable. The cost to the taxpayers is not recognised. But what the man in the street, who is also the taxpayer, is presented with are allegations of inequitable treatment.

'Strangely enough, it is all based on the claim that a person who is illegally in the country is entitled to full access to due process (which is reasonable); but he is also believed to be entitled to have all his legal and other expenses funded by the taxpayer. Such claims by the illegal immigrant may far exceed the recourse that ordinary Australians (his unwitting financiers) can afford. And, of course, for some reason, the illegal migrant has repeated access to the courts (at the taxpayers' expense)..... [Some] are eventually allowed to stay, apparently on some technical grounds. Then follows the welfare bill, followed by family reunion, followed by a bigger welfare bill. What stupid policies and practices we have. ...

'A major issue is why the country needs lawyers to present a case on behalf of the illegal immigrant. Is it because the whole truth is not to be let out? Why not a committee of enquiry to establish all the relevant facts to ensure that a claim for asylum is well based? The current practice appears to be a very expensive farce....

'It is interesting to note the supporters of an unquestioning expanded "refugee" or humanitarian intake. First, the peak trade union body with very highly paid chiefs: how does it benefit the trade unions to have more refugees? What business is it of theirs? Then, people appointed to advise the government on the settlement of refugees: what business is it of theirs to have increased numbers? Then there are the immigration lawyers: this makes sense—there is money in it, or one feels good if working for nothing. There are also the welfare service delivery people: this also makes sense because there is even a career structure coming out of all this. But who looks after the national interest or the long-suffering taxpayer? The politicians? When expediency is just, and the large retirement pension not that

far off, why stress oneself?...

'... I had a gut feeling that the main ingredient to success in selection was the strength of the sponsor and his community in Australia; while entry decisions were made at overseas immigration offices, rejections were reviewed in Australia on request and subject to political intervention. But that is reality.

'In time, the global non-discriminatory case-by-case humanitarian policy began to develop some clear patterns. It represented an additional door through which an array of people could be pulled when immigration entry was denied....

'The bureaucrats too made their contribution to changes of policy. Their motives were mixed—to grease the squeaky wheel ... to big-note themselves ... or to do favours... I do not believe that cost to the taxpayer, coherence in policy, or the consequential shifts in ethnic community balance or relations or tensions, were given adequate consideration....

'The unknowing taxpayer pays without any real appreciation of the changes which he is funding. And when a majority of taxpayers say that they do not want much more immigration they are ignored by their elected representatives. Why? Because policies on immigration and settlement services are now treated as the province of the ethnic communities, not all of whose members are immigrants. This reflects the bipartisan agreement politically on chasing the so-called ethnic vote.....'

Emeritus Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, Member, National Multicultural Advisory Council, Australia — brief review taken from the amazon.co.uk web site:

'I welcome the publication of Raja Ratnam's timely book. He is well qualified to comment on burning issues of ethnicity, tribalism and cultural hegemony, having had personal experience of settlement in Australia over a period of half a century. His voluntary involvement in a range of community organisations and his work experience as a senior public servant are a testimony to the success of Australia's multiculturalism, with its roots in the democratic ethos of the country's original settlers. The book is particularly timely, now that Australia is about to celebrate the centenary of its nationhood.'