



**AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter**  
Global Thought Leader  
Real Insights & Authority



## MAKING SENSE OF REFUGEE NUMBERS

There is controversy again over some people seeking to arrive in Australia.

People have been on the move since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden - and so this is a continuing issue with a very long history!

It is necessary to make a distinction: “migration” (whereby Australia currently accepts about 170,000 people per year) and “refugees” (whereby Australia accepts about 13,500 people per year).

“Migration” is based on each country’s own requirements. In Australia’s case, the two main categories of migrants are those arriving to do particular jobs where there are shortages of labour (such as teachers or medical doctors) or are family reunions (such as an Australian who goes overseas, falls in love and wants to bring their new partner back here to live).

“Refugees” are accepted on the basis of their own need. They have a well-founded fear of persecution based on such matters as race or religion or political opinion.

There is currently a total global refugee population about 22 million (the figure varies as political disputes and conflicts start and end). Australia has resettled 700,000 refugees since 1945.

Some of the confusion in Australia over “refugees” is that people have lumped in the comparatively small number of refugees with the much larger number of “migrants” and so they have a wrong idea of just how many people are arriving as “refugees”.

In 2008 a total of 4,750 people sought asylum in Australia (the vast majority arriving by air). By contrast 36,900 sought asylum in Canada and 30,500 in the UK.

Australia is not a major player on the global asylum issue. If Australia were to take in as many refugees as, say, Sweden or the Netherlands, then the figure would need to rise from 13,500 to about 40,000 per year.

A person – legally or illegally – enters the United States every 18 seconds! There are at least 10 million “undocumented workers in the US”. Indeed even President Barack Obama has an aunt from Kenya still seeking to stay in the US after having overstayed her visa years ago.

For Australian politicians who are so concerned about “illegals” in Australia, the real problem comes from British backpackers who arrive here on a working holiday, fall in love with the country and so don’t want to go back to the UK!

But, of course, these people are white and so the politicians most likely to complain about “illegals” are also the people most likely to overlook that the biggest problem is with people who are white.

### ✓ **Why the Controversy in Australia?**

Australia has an unrealistic fear of invasion. Politicians have been able to exploit this fear for their own purposes – as John Howard did in the 2001 federal election campaign and the handful of asylum seekers seeking to enter Australia. (By the way, most of the people were eventually allowed to stay – after the election, when they had served their purpose: they had got the Howard Government re-elected)

In fact, as the global figures for Australian seekers show, Australia is actually a very difficult country to enter illegally. Australia is geographically isolated and physically very difficult to travel to.

In our increasingly individualistic and fragmented society, one thing binds the community together: fear. Hence John Howard’s successful exploitation of the fear of invasion in 2001. Some conservative politicians are trying it on again at the moment.

Keith Suter