Environmental Refugees: An accountability perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine the increasing concern of the impact climate change on vulnerable nations, the creation of environmental refugees and the notion of government accountability towards addressing issues associated with supporting environmental refugees.

Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on the Second Reading, in the Australian Federal Parliament, of the proposed Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007 and the associated replies by the various political actors within the senate. The main method used to review this material is discourse analysis.

Findings: The key finding from this initial review is that while all actors within the senate agree the Australian government does have a responsibility to contributing to addressing the issues around environmental refugees their views on the level of accountability varies. This indicates any mechanism developed to contribute to the discharge of this accountability will be shaped by differing views and foci of the participating actors.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the limited literature on environmental refugees and the associated level of government accountability.

Keywords

Accountability, environmental refugee, climate change

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"*The time for words is over. The time for action is now. If the human race has not advanced to the point where we can put aside immediate self-gratification for the larger global good and our own futures, then I fear for what the world of the next ten years and thereafter will become*" (Falcam 2002)

Introduction and Background

President Leo Falcam of the Federated States of Micronesia (1999-2003) included the above statement in his 2002 address at the World Summit for Sustainable Development. His address was based on the concern of Micronesia, "a grouping consisting of 607 small islands in the Western Pacific ... lying just above the equator" (Government of the Federated States of Micronesia 2010) northeast of Australia, about the potential impact of climate change on its very survival. The increasing sea levels resulting from climate change, has contributed to the creation of a new type of refugee, the environmental refugee. These environmental refugees have emerged due to the damaging effects of sea level rises on low lying land areas, such as the many islands in the Pacific, including Micronesia, and the societies that occupy them.

The current change in the world climate has come as the result of human processes, particularly over the past two centuries, including urbanisation and resulting pollution (IPCC 2007). This change in climate has presented the world community a number of significant threats and created a degree of uncertainty about the future especially those communities living on the coast fringes. The following section will discuss in more detail the issue of climate change.

Climate Change

Climate change refers to the warming of the Earth's atmosphere caused by a change in the normal equilibrium between the solar radiation entering the atmosphere and the outgoing heat (Preston and Jones 2006). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognise the effects of climate change to include an increase in global temperature, both in the air and the ocean; a change in rainfall patterns, resulting in cyclones and droughts and melting of snow and ice, causing an increase in sea levels. The IPCC's 4th Assessment Report (2007) predicted a temperature increase in global temperatures of between 1.8 and 4˚C. As a result of this temperature change, it is predicted the global sea level will rise between 0.18 and 0.59 meters by 2009, with the possibility of even higher records (Tisdell 2008). These

consequences of climate change are a result of anthropogenic events as the rate of climate change has exceeded that of any natural change in occurring in the atmosphere (IPCC 2007). There is however, opposing views to the climate change science. There are a number of scientists, academics and members of government who debate the accuracy of the generally accepted and published climate change assumptions. They argue that in the past global temperatures have fluctuated between warming and cooling (Plimer 2009; Taylor 2009). They also argue that current change hasn't been compared to historical figures, concluding that the analysis of short-term climate change data is not convincing. Hulme (2009) argues that it is impossible to collect all the required scientific evidence on climate change and therefore unable to draw conclusions. For the purpose of this paper the climate change predictions and the associated sea level rises are accepted. The following section will discuss the impact of these sea level rises on peoples living in low lying coastal areas specifically those who are or at risk of being displaced, due to their land being consumed by the ocean.

Environmental Refugees

The IPCC (2001) outlines the rising global temperatures and resulting sea level changes will have a diverse range of impacts on many countries. It has been estimated by 2050 around 150 million people (Myers 1993; Stern 2007) will become "permanently displaced ... due to rising sea levels, more frequent floods, and more intense droughts" (Stern 2007). These people who become permanently displaced may be classified as environmental refugees.

The UNHCR (1951) Convention defines the term refugee as people who:

> *"owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."*

The above definition however does not include individuals who flee their home due to environmental change. Environmental refugees have, in the past, and in more recent studies, been recognised under various classifications. For example in a number Australian Government publications and debates, environmental refugees have been referred to as climate refugees whereas in other publically available publications the terms such as 'ecologically displaced people' or 'environmental immigrants' are used to describe people displaced due to climate change. There has been a few attempts at defining environmental refugees such as Myers (1993), who defined environmental refugees as:

> *"people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their erstwhile homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, and other environmental problems. In their desperation, they feel they have no alternative but to seek sanctuary elsewhere" (p. 752).*

And more recently Locke (2009) who defined environmental refugees as people who:

> *"for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently" (p. 172).*

Both Myers (1993) and Locke's (2009) definitions include the direct effects of climate change and the consequence of forced migration, however as the threat of climate change can adversely influence the economy and as an indirect result force people to migrate the definition should acknowledge the indirect impacts. To recognise the indirect effects of climate change the authors define environmental refugees as:

> *People directly or indirectly affected by environmental pressures as a result of climate change. As a consequence of these pressures they are no longer able to live in their homeland and therefore find themselves displaced.*

An example of environmental refugees under this expanded definition are the people who have been and will in the near future be displaced (internal and externally) on the Pacific island nation of Kiribati due to rising sea levels. The island nation of Kiribati, which is located on the equator within the Pacific Ocean, consists of 33 atolls and has an area of only 811 square kilometres. A study currently being undertaken by Dixon (2010) found a significant increase in migration patterns among Kiribati citizens in the last half century and while these movements have been recorded as the result of economic pressures, the economic pressures experienced by the people of Kiribati are a direct result of rising sea levels. The above expanded definition is necessary so that environmental pressures of displacement don't go unnoticed, or confused with economic or political pressures, when the consequences of climate change are felt (Dixon 2010). There is a real risk that in incorrectly defining refugees as other than environmental refugees when the root cause of their displacement is climate change will less the reported impact of climate change and in turn negate the required response of government.

The following section outlines the response to the increasing development of environmental

Environmental Refugees – Who's responsible?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is an international Non Government Organisation with the responsibility "mandated by the United Nations to lead and co-ordinate international action for the world-wide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems" (UNHCR 2010). In 2008 the United Nations (UN) Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, outlined a number of questions the UNHCR needs to address in relation to environmental refugees. These questions include how the agency will cope with the increasing numbers of refugees; whether developed countries, those who contributed the most to climate change, should be responsible for providing funding support for these refugees; and most importantly, where will all these environmental refugees go? The debate over environmental refugees, the role and responsibilities of the UNHCR and the international community is not clear.

In 2007 the Australian Greens Party (Greens) Senator Kerry Nettle proposed the introduction "for an Act to recognise refugees of climate change induced environmental disasters and for related purposes" (2007). In the second reading of the proposed Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007 [hereafter the *Amendment Bill 2007*] Senator Nettle outlined:

> *"Climate change will displace people around the world by making their immediate environment unhabitable. Although our Pacific Island neighbours have made virtually no contribution to the greenhouse pollution now causing climate change, they will be among the first victims" (p.13)*

In the second reading of the Amendment Bill 2007 Senator Nettle argued that the UNHCR's Convention on the Status of Refugees "provided a framework for the treatment, assessment and re-settlement of refugees ... [however] ... climate refugees are not refugees as defined under the existing convention" (2007). Nettle goes on to suggest that the Amendment Bill 2007 would allow Australia to provide both leadership and guidance to the UNHCR in the development of a "multilateral framework to deal with climate refugees" (2007). Following Nettle's speech senators from the other political parties put forward their views on climate change, environmental refugees, Australia's response to both and finally their support, or opposition to the Amendment Bill 2007. All agreed that climate change and environmental refugees are issues Australia bears some responsibility to contribute to the efforts of resolving, however none of them supported the Amendment Bill 2007. The Opposition party at the time, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), recognised it is Australia's responsibility to

assist climate refugees "Labor recognise that our Pacific island neighbours face increasing environmental challenges arising from climate change" however they did not believe it was solely the responsibility of Australia rather "there needs to be an international effort to deal with people displaced by the effects of climate change ... [T]he bill before the Senate today prescribes a unilateral response... [O]n this basis, Labor cannot support the bill in its current form". The government at the time, the Liberal/National party coalition, also recognised Australia did have some responsibility however they believe the science of climate change was currently inconclusive "could I just point out that sea level rise is a long-term challenge for our region which scientific evidence tells us does not present an immediate danger of displacing entire Pacific island populations". This view was further supported by the statement "in the *event* of environmental conditions in certain Pacific states reaching disaster proportions, Australia would play a major part in any international response" In other words this Senator did not believe that climate change, if it really does exist, would result in sea level rises which in-turn impact on communities living on low lying coastal areas. However if [in the event] then they would play a major [leading?] international role is responding [after the event]. This interpretation will be covered in more detail in future research which analyses the interpretative meanings of the Second Reading of the Amendment Bill 2007.

The introduction of the Amendment Bill 2007 and the replies of the different senators on the proposed Amendment Bill 2007 highlights the Australian Parliament believed Australia has a responsibility for contributing to supporting environmental refugees. The speeches also indicated and all are accountable to the Australian public, who they represent, to demonstrate how they have addressed this responsibility. The following section will discuss the notion of accountability, in relation to environmental refugees, with particular focus on the Australian Federal government.

Accountability

Accountability is a murky' term that, despite its extensive use, does not have a precise definition (Sinclair 1995; Cooper and Owen 2007) and as such there are a number of different definitions to be found in the literature. However the majority of definitions have a similar view. For example Funnel and Cooper (1998) explain that "to be accountable means there is an obligation to answer for one's actions and decisions" (p. 30) which is consistent with Mulgan, who suggests that accountability implies a relationship of authority based on the idea

that those who are accountable are in some sense subordinate to those to whom they must give account (2000).

There are a number of forms of accountability emerging throughout the accounting literature. These forms have been argued to be the extension of meaning by creative academics rather than an actual change in everyday usage (Mulgan 2000). Despite the limited use in practice there is still a push by academics to abandon the "traditional methods of comprehending social reality… in favour of these [new forms] which put greater emphasis on subjects actively creating meaning" (Sinclair 1995, p. 223). Theoretical studies recognize many types of accountabilities however Sinclair (1995) describe five major forms of accountability. These forms include political, managerial, public, professional and personal.

Professional and personal accountability goes beyond the external focus to provide an internal judgement. Each form represents the sense of "individual responsibility and concern for the public interest expected from public servants" (Mulgan 2000, p. 556). More specifically to each term, professional accountability highlights the duty owed from a member of a profession or knowledgeable position (Sinclair 1995). This level of accountability incorporates such aspects as commitment, integrity and legitimisation. Personal accountability concentrates on human values such as accepting responsibility, respect and human dignity (Sinclair 1995). Managerial accountability focuses on the idea that all accountability involves control from hierarchical figures (Mulgan 2000). In this sense accountability becomes external (Day and Klein 1987). Similar to internal accountability, external accountability also faces problems in the attempt to please multiple levels of public and presents conflicting issues.

> *"In the context of a democratic state, the key accountability relationships in this core sense are those between the citizens and the holders of public office and, within the ranks of office holders, between elected politicians and bureaucrats"* (Mulgan 2000 p. 556).

As this paper concentrates primarily on data from the Australian Government greater emphasis will be given to the remaining forms of accountability: public and political. Together both forms cover issues of who holds power, how legislation can control actions and how society can seek answers from government. The analysis of these new forms of accountability has significantly contributed to the understanding of public sectors (Day & Klein 1987).

The Australian Government has a number of key stakeholders to who they are accountable to various degrees. These stakeholders include international agencies and organizations, multiple channels of government (Australia, state/ territory and local), advisory (non-government), services, clients, client representation, external providers, institutions, peak industry groups, industry, internal stakeholders and the general community (Australian Government n.d.).

Discourse analysis:

Discourse analysis is usually considered to be the analysis of 'texts,' including written, spoken and viewed (Fairclough 2005), and focuses on knowledge about the language beyond the word, cause, phrase or sentence (Paltridge 2006). Discourse alone is not meaningful; it is only through examining the nature of their production, dissemination and consumption that meaning is established (Phillips and Malhotra 2008). There are several approaches to discourse analysis. Originally methods were of a structural nature, which have now diverged into functional forms (Van Dijk 1989). Van Dijk within his work identifies a number of forms of discourse analysis including critical, political and media discourse analysis.

Results

The Senate Hansard of the Second Reading of the Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007 which took place on June 2007 and 9th August 2007 was analysed using discourse analysis. The analysis of this discourse has been formulated into 'layers' based on specific constructed themes, refer to Table 1 below. Through this parliamentary debate these layers will be identified and discussed throughout this paper as follows: 'what is being said'; 'what this discourse means' or 'what isn't being said'. This paper will cover the first layer, what is being said, while the more interpretive layer, what isn't being said, will be covered in a revised version of this paper or future paper.

Table 1: The two layers of discourse analysis.

Themes
Layer One: What is being said
1.1 Support
1.2 Prioritising: Cost-benefit analysis

1.3 Climate Change 1.4 Environmental Refugees 1.5 Global Relationships 1.6 Current/ Planned action
Layer Two: What isn't being said 2.1 Legitimacy 2.2 Defer and Distract 2.3 Accountability 2.4 Responsibility

What is being said?

This layer of the Hansard data focuses on the explicit meaning of the discourse delivered. This meaning is directly extracted from the speeches and senator's discourse and through this examination, it is possible to identify the initial purpose and aim of the discourse. Themes that have been used to highlight this explicit meaning are: support of the Amendment Bill 2007; prioritising; economic versus social; predictions, consequences and costs of both climate change and environmental refugees; global relationships; and current and proposed action for addressing the issues.

Support

For a private senator's bill to get considered it must get approved by both the House of Representatives and the Senate. It then goes through a number of other processes before it can be passed into legislation (Parliament of Australia 2010). The Amendment Bill 2007, proposed by the Australian Green's member, Senator Kerry Nettle, was not supported by the other political parties in the Senate and accordingly was never enacted into legislation.

In the introduction of the Amendment Bill 2007, Nettle presented the option of extending the Migration Bill 1958 to include climate refugees by creating a new visa that is complimentary to the existing refugee visas so the existing framework could be applied. The Greens hope that Amendment Bill 2007 will:

"Assist in providing some guidance and leadership towards a multilateral framework"(2007, p. 97).

The Greens forecast predict that Australia would be able to accept 'several hundred' refugees per year.

While both the Australian Labour Party (ALP) and Australian Democrats senators were not in support of the Amendment Bill 2007, they did acknowledge that the issue of environmental refugees needs to be addressed. One of the concerns with the Amendment Bill 2007 was the use of the term 'refugee' which would place an unwelcomed stigma upon the environmental refugees. Another concern was that while Australia should participate, there should be an international effort to address these issues and Australia should wait until this international effort was developed and implement. This view was contrary to the Greens suggestion for Australia to lead and provide guidance to the UNHCR in addressing the issue of environmental refugees. The other major concern raised was that the Amendment Bill 2007 "would be wide open to abuse and that it really has little to do with climate change, immigration and visas" (2007), rather it was a political stunt to further the Greens political agenda. These views offered by the other political parties represented in the senate confirmed their inability to support the Amendment Bill 2007. The next theme to be discussed is that of priorities.

Prioritising

The speeches delivered by the senators highlighted the differing priorities each had in relation to the issues of climate change and environmental refugees. In the introduction to the Amendment Bill 2007 Senator Nettle put forward the view that there is no difficult decision to make the issue on environmental refugees must be addressed. The other parties through their replies to the introduction indicated quite explicitly they had other priorities. For example one senator outlined that if the global community takes action to address the issue, benefits will not only be environmental but economic and diplomatic as well. However another priority put forward was that the Amendment Bill 2007 would not only not address the issues it was designed to address but it would also damage the Australian economy. These differing priorities are not surprising yet the emphasis placed on these priorities did not seem to adequately support the decision to not support the Amendment Bill 2007. The next identified theme to be discussed is climate change.

Climate Change

There are a number of issues surrounding climate change explicitly discussed throughout the Second reading of the Amendment Bill 2007. These relate to the climate change science, predictions, consequences and costs. All parties present during this discussion acknowledge that climate change is happening however the causes, timing and predictions vary greatly. One party presented the view that the scientific evidence is not conclusive and therefore it would be pre-emptive to introduce any specific measures to address the 'potential impact' of climate change. This perspective was followed up with the view that sea-level rise is a long-term challenge and does not cause immediate threat. The other positions put forward were consistent with the acknowledgment that climate change will result in increasing sea-levels. Other effects of climate change discussed was flooding, monsoons, consistently changing weather patterns, erosions, droughts, changing temperatures, increase disease, higher salt water concentrations and bleaching. The discussion around the theme of climate change also covered the potential costs associated to these effects including fresh water and food shortages, health threats, security and political unrest and a major consequence could be death.

Environmental Refugees

Discussions, predictions and costs surrounding environmental refugees vary greatly amongst the senators. Those parties recognising the effects of climate change, as outlined above, have more to contribute on this theme. One group focused on the financial aspects of the issues and the estimated cost the government incurs for each refugee. Other groups outlined that the environmental refugees should not be considered in dollar values [costs] rather the refugees are one group of the migrants who to come to Australia and engage in the Australian culture and all of the responsibilities that come with being a citizen. The Greens contributed to this debate by offering predictions from both the Stern Report and Myers research from 1990s. Complimentary to this debate the ALP have produced evidence on the issue through the publication of 'Our Drowning Neighbours" which specifically addressed the impacts on environmental refugees (Albanese and Sercombe 2006). Consequences mentioned by both the Greens and ALP suggest that why this may be a minor problem it has the potential, and most likely will expand to a major global concern. This leads to the next theme in this layer, global relationships, to be discussed.

Global Relationships

There are a number of global relationships appearing throughout this discourse. An initial connection is shown through the affiliation between Australia and international governments and agencies. Senator Nettle outlines Australia's close connection with New Zealand. However, although both countries are similar, Australia has not followed in New Zealand's footsteps regarding the environmental refugee issue. New Zealand has already begun accepting one hundred and fifty environmental refugees per year from both Kiribati and Tuvalu. Based on Australia's size and economy, it too should be able to accept several hundred refugees per year. In addition Australia also holds a very strong relationship with both the USA and the United Nations, and its fifty one international members. It was discussed that Australia should use these relationships to focus on international efforts to assist in the environmental refugee process. Advancements should be considered in the UNHCR and refugee definition as well as the Status of Refugee (1951) convention. Another participant in the discussion outlined their belief that it is Australia's responsibility to use the strong bond with the USA to convince them to reduce their emissions. The final relationship evident in this discussion on the Amendment Bill 2007 is between Australia and its Pacific Island neighbours. The Tuvaluan and Kiribati governments have both approached the Australian government for assistance and advice, however the links between Australia and these Pacific neighbours are not as strong as they should be rather Australia's focus is on other not so near neighbours. The next theme identified in the Hansard extract was current and planned action.

Current and Planned action

Evidence of current and planned action to assist in the environmental refugee issue is dependent on the party in power and each party's individual ideas. As the introduction of the Second Reading of the Amendment Bill 2007 occurred close to the 2007 federal election Much of the disclosed 'actions' were of a broad and general nature and it is apparent, while the Greens had introduced the Amendment Bill 2007, they had little influence or power to make changes. Senator Nettle put forward a number of courses of action to ensure Australia develops and implements policy to deal with the consequences of climate change. Recognising the effects and where the country stands is a major step to addressing the issue. Following this, Australia must mitigate global warming and adapt immediately while assisting those affected by climate change. However, Senator Nettle outlines the number of

times the Department of Immigration and Citizenship has been approached in relation to determine if any activities are being undertaken to address the issue of environmental refugees. Unfortunately the responses indicate that nothing has as yet been implemented.

A number of the responding senators indicated a number of *planned* actions. For example the SeaFrame project designed to help the Pacific Islanders in securing data on sea-level change. In addition to this project one of the non government senators announced if they were in power Australia's technical and scientific knowledge on climate change would be shared with those who would benefit from the knowledge. It was also outlined the government funding which would be provided to through ensuring climate change is a key consideration of AusAid as well as plans to assist by providing islanders direct funding support in the vicinity $150 million (AusAid 2010). However the discussion was based primarily on what some may do rather than any firm commitments to action. The following section briefly outlines the second layer of this discourse analysis which will be covered in more detail in future research.

What is not said?

This section of analysis will extract meaning from both the Hansard data and the explicit representations outlined above. Interpretations will be applied to Second Reading of the Amendment Bill 2007, and to show levels of socially constructed discourse within parliament. Keys themes that have been identified and will be discussed are: legitimacy; aims to deferring and distracting arguments; accountability; and responsibility. A similar study was undertaken by Every and Augoustinos (2007) when they applied discourse analysis to Hansard Documents in relation to refugees and the term 'racist'. Themes chosen by the authors were categorical generalisations, unequal treatment and nation and cultural difference. General conclusions obtained from the research in regards to government parties and political discourse hold similar to results obtained through the interpretation of the Migration Amendment Bill. Comparisons will be shown and discussed throughout the following section.

Conclusion and Future Research

This initial paper is based on the [unsuccessful] introduction of a private members bill in the Australian Federal Parliament to recognise and support a new group of refugees created by impact of the recent climate change and the associated rising sea levels on the communities

and peoples living in low lying coastal regions such as the islands in the Pacific. The creation of this new group of refugees, environmental refugees, presents a number of difficult issues for governments and international non-government organisations to address, particularly how these institutions should to respond to the increasing number of environmental refugees and who should provide funding and support for these environmental refugees.

This paper reviews the Hansard of the Seconding Reading of the Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007 to identify the issues of concern and interest of the Australian Senators who took part in the Second Reading. Discourse analysis was used to identify specific themes in the Second Reading. These themes were then classified under two categories, 'what was said' and 'what wasn't said' so as to break the analysis into consistent groups. The next step was to analyse the text associated with the identified themes under the classification 'what was said'. The key area of interest of the authors was to identify any indications of the identification, acceptance and level of Australia's Federal Parliament's accountability in relation the environmental refugees and climate change. The main finding from this initial review was that the key participants in the Australian Federal Parliament believe Australia does have a responsibility to assisting the environmental refugees. However the extent and to who Parliament is accountable and the methods required to address the issues of climate change and environmental refugees are topics for much debate. This disagreement led to the Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007 not being enacted in legislation.

Future research will continue with the discourse analysis of the Second reading of the Amendment Bill 2007 with particular focus on the interpretative perspective of the themes classified under the category 'what wasn't said'. This analysis will contribute to the possible identification of the most appropriate processes and mechanisms to used in the Australian Federal Parliament to discharge its accepted level of accountability to environmental refugees.

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