

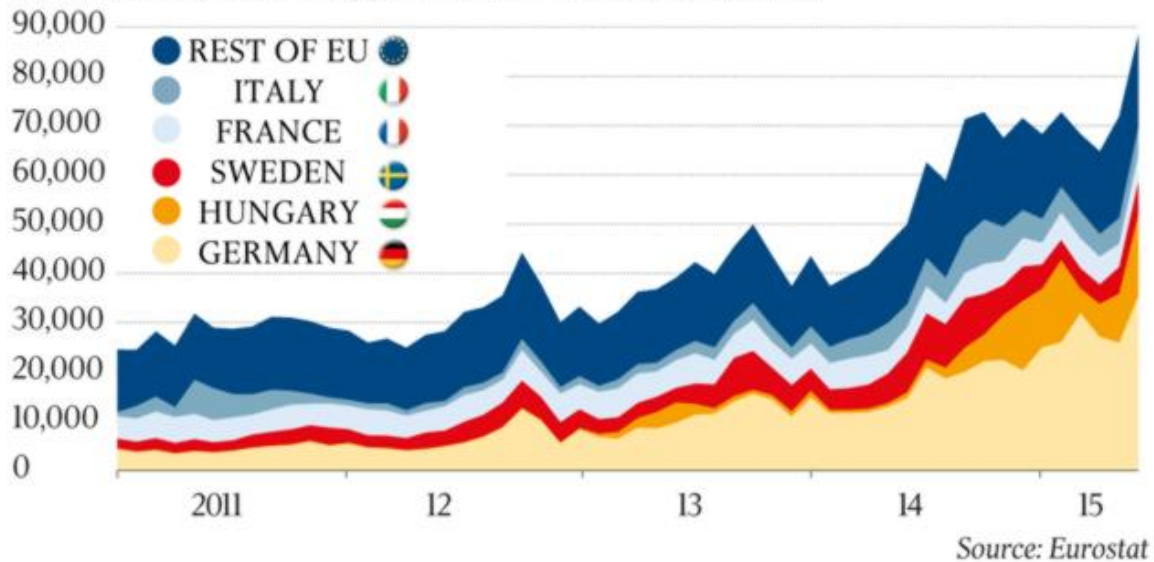
THE AUSTRALIAN

EU should revisit Australia's asylum-seeker policy

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 07, 2015 12:00AM

Seeking refuge

Total monthly asylum applications in the EU, by country



Seeking refuge. Source: TheAustralian

All the grief in the world about the death by drowning of Aylan and Galip Kurdi, aged 3 and 5, as they tried to cross from Turkey to Greece, cannot absolve Europe of its responsibility for the 2600 lives lost, this year alone, to the Mediterranean's treacherous seas.

Nor can German Chancellor Angela Merkel's calls for the European Union to vastly increase its refugee intake eliminate the risks that simply accommodating the flood of asylum-seekers would create, including that of further fraying Europe's social fabric. Rather, if it is to overcome the crisis that has engulfed it, the EU should take a fresh look at Australia's policies, while abandoning the approach it has adopted to date.

That approach is at heart of the problem: ridden with inconsistencies, it has merely made the crisis worse.

Those inconsistencies, which mirror the errors Labor made, are readily explained.

On the one hand, Europe's political leaders profess their unshakable commitment to the UN's Refugee Convention. Asylum-seekers, once they arrive in the EU, are therefore generally allowed to remain, all the more so given the European courts' reluctance to permit the deportation of those whose claims are rejected. (The British courts, for example, set such high standards that deportations are only approved to four of Africa's 54 countries.)

Together with limitations on detention, that ensures the returns on getting to Europe are high,

especially compared to the catastrophic situation in the greater Middle East.

At the same time, however, those leaders, responding to public opinion, have made it ever harder for refugees to actually reach the EU and so claim asylum. Not only do barbed-wire fences close off the land crossings, but Frontex (the European border security agency) has shut down asylum-seekers' access to the lower-risk means of moving by sea — such as the tourist ferries that, for one-tenth the price the people smugglers charge, could have transported little Aylan and Galip safely across the Aegean.

Predictably, instead of eliminating the migrant flows, the effect has been to shift them to increasingly dangerous routes and modes of travel. And as if that was not bad enough, once deteriorating conditions in the refugee camps swelled the flows into a torrent, the fear that entry would become even more difficult precipitated a rush to get in before the doors slammed shut.

Faced with the chaos those forces have caused, Merkel's goal is to restore order.

Her hope is that by expanding resettlement programs, while developing better mechanisms for allocating places, the EU could curb the stampede. The obvious precedents are the Orderly Departure Program created to manage the exodus of Vietnamese boat people in 1979, and the lottery scheme the US deployed to stem the flotillas leaving Cuba in the “balsero” crisis of 1994.

But whether those programs worked is questionable; rather, the evidence suggests they just fanned the flames. And even if they worked then, the pressures the EU faces are much greater than those the earlier crises unleashed.

There are, after all, some 10 million refugees within reasonable distance of Europe, and millions more who, given the chance, would flee Africa's violence and civil wars; to believe Europe could readily absorb even a small fraction of that population at an acceptable social cost is an illusion.

Indeed, even putting aside the fact that 22.5 per cent of the Eurozone's young people are out of work, Germany's own record highlights the dangers that dramatically lifting the refugee intake would involve.

For sure, 12 million ethnic Germans, expelled from Eastern Europe at the end of World War II, were rapidly integrated into West Germany at a far more difficult time, as were 2.6 million ethnic Germans after the Soviet Union's collapse; but Germany's experience with migration from the Middle East and Africa is entirely another story.

Those migrants' unemployment rates are two to three times the native population's, while their labour force participation rates are 20 percentage points lower.

Even among the second generation, educational outcomes are so poor as to guarantee disadvantage: the chances of a German native obtaining some level of post-secondary education are about three times those of a youth from a Turkish immigrant family, while the proportion of young Turks leaving school without a qualification is more than twice that of young Germans.

Accompanying these poorer prospects is widespread alienation: only 40 per cent of German Muslims identify strongly with Germany, significantly below even the 52 per cent recorded in France. The mistrust is reciprocal: in a 2005 survey, 85 per cent of Germans said they feared a growing sense of Islamic identity among the country's migrants would lead to violence; and in 2010, when Thilo Sarrazin, a prominent social democrat, published a book shrilly denouncing Islam's growing reach, polls showed a majority of the country's population agreed.

The result of mutual distrust is that intermarriage rates for Germans of Turkish origin are less than a third those for the mainly Christian Caribbean blacks in the UK.

Of course, none of that may stop Europe's elites, who are a law to themselves; but they would be far better off changing course. As even the philosopher Peter Singer now admits, the UN Refugee Convention, which gives those who make it to a signatory country priority over those who cannot, is past its use-by date; it should be replaced by agreements that genuinely share the burden of improving living conditions for the world's 19.5 million refugees.

And leaping over the borders must no longer be a way of jumping the queue.

That is the Abbott government's achievement; it is why the bodies of dead children no longer float to our shores. Far from denigrating that achievement, as the New York Times foolishly did, emulating it would be Europe's best means of ensuring Aylan and Galip did not die in vain.