

Integrate new arrivals or let in crime, terror: minister

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ABSTRACT

By way of example, Mr Morrison said second-generation Afghan asylum seekers were among those arrested in September during Operation Appleby, a massive counter terrorism raid that disrupted an alleged plot to abduct and behead a random member of the public.

FULL TEXT

EXCLUSIVE Failure to integrate the 50,000 asylum-seekers who arrived by boat over the past decade presents an intergenerational challenge that, if not met, will increase the risk of crime, poverty and even terrorism. Social Services Minister Scott Morrison has warned that Australia risks creating an underclass of migrants unless urgent action is taken to equip these new arrivals with the skills necessary to participate in mainstream Australian life.

These migrants, many of them Muslim, would be vulnerable to the predations of criminals and extremists without help, Mr Morrison said.

The former immigration minister told The Weekend Australian many of those who arrived during the Labor years were poorly educated, had no English, hailed from very different cultural backgrounds and had limited economic opportunities.

More than 50,000 asylum-seekers arrived during the last wave of boats. The single largest cohort – about 13,000 – hailed from Iran, followed by about 12,700 Hazara Afghans and 9800 Sri Lankans.

Iranians and Hazaras are Shia Muslims, whereas groups such as al-Qa'ida or Islamic State are extreme offshoots of Sunni Islam.

But Mr Morrison said "religion isn't the issue", with economic and social factors among the key drivers of radicalisation. "The majority of these illegal arrivals were Muslims," he said of the recent wave of boat arrivals. "Afghan refugees were a particularly dominant component of this group and are also characterised by their youth, poor language skills and limited vocational capacity." These characteristics, Mr Morrison said, called for "more active engagement policies", lest they spawn a generation of new Australians marginalised from mainstream life. Such an outcome would have "profound consequences", particularly given so many of these new arrivals were young.

"At best, these consequences are long-term unemployment and welfare dependence and at worst gangs, violent crime and even terrorism," Mr Morrison said.

This week the founding president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, Haset Sali, called for a tightening of Australia's immigration policies, arguing there was a widening gap between Muslims who had adopted Australian values and those who had not. "I really do believe that we need to be more careful about who we let into this country and who we grant refugee status to, because I think it's just getting beyond a joke quite frankly," Mr Sali told the ABC.

"There are people who unfortunately don't appreciate the great freedom that we have in this nation and the

opportunities that are available if people live by the law and do the right thing." Mr Morrison said Australia boasted the "most successful" immigration record in the world, but it was not without its blemishes.

Those blemishes had occurred when governments stopped focusing on economic and skilled migration, opting instead for migrants with "very low levels of skills, very low levels of English (and) very low capacities to engage and integrate into the population".

Such episodes had yielded "significant social consequences", Mr Morrison said. "What Labor has exposed the country to through their border failures is a repeat of those previous exceptions to what our immigration rule has been in this country." The remarks were a veiled reference to the immigration policies of the mid-1970s, when the Fraser government relaxed entry requirements for Lebanese migrants fleeing the civil war. "The challenge for us now is not just to process the backlog of 30,000 claims and deal with the immediate legacy of that, but to actually now try to avoid a negative social legacy from their border failures. That now falls to us and it falls over a generation," Mr Morrison said.

The minister, who made his reputation as a political hardliner prosecuting the Coalition's controversial set of border-security policies, took aim at right-wing commentators who dismissed Islamic extremism as an intrinsic evil, divorced from any social and economic factors. "You can't put them all in the same category because if you do that you get the policy responses wrong," he said.

"There are two different issues you've got to address here: hard core religious, Islamic extremism. That's one part of the problem, and a serious part of the problem. And then there is an economic and social set of challenges which also have to be addressed. If you fail at either they will end up in the same place." By way of example, Mr Morrison said second-generation Afghan asylum seekers were among those arrested in September during Operation Appleby, a massive counter terrorism raid that disrupted an alleged plot to abduct and behead a random member of the public. "Their religion isn't the issue," he said. "Their exposure and vulnerability to be taken down a radicalised path is the issue and that's often fuelled by very different social and economic issues. To think that it's all about religion that takes people down this path I think is to misunderstand the depth of the problem."

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Credit: PAUL MALEY NATIONAL SECURITY CORRESPONDENT

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