

Refugee Policies in an Election Campaign

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Trades Hall Melbourne, 8 September 2004.

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It is a pleasure to once again contribute to the International Bookshop's public lecture series.

My book *Refuge Australia* debunks the myth that Australia has a proud record of assisting refugees, a myth which is reiterated by the Australian government as much as by many refugee advocacy groups. It shows that from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, the Australian government was interested in refugees only if they were also hard-working healthy European immigrants.

During the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, refugees were admitted to Australia as long as they were believed to constitute a 'migration gain'. Very few exceptions aside, they were not resettled out of humanitarian considerations. In fact, those who most urgently required permanent resettlement, were often those whom Australia refused to take. In the 1950s and 1960s, they were usually referred to as the 'hard core'. The hard core comprised single mothers, people with disabilities, the frail and elderly, and people who were mentally or physically ill.

Successive governments, from Chifley - via Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon - to Whitlam, promoted the view that refugees should be offered resettlement places as long as their resettlement was in the national interest. It was in the national interest to resettle a twenty-five year old displaced person who was physically fit and eager to work under the direction of the Australian authorities. It was supposedly not in the national interest to resettle a fifty-year old displaced person who had spent several years in German concentration camps and was chronically ill as a result of her ordeal.

The Australian immigration authorities tried to screen out prospective immigrants who were likely to require medical care - irrespective of whether or not they were refugees. Some displaced persons, who in the late 1940s or early 1950s had been handpicked by Australian selection teams in Germany, Austria or Italy but had upon their arrival in Australia turned out to suffer from a debilitating physical or mental illness, were even deported back to Europe.

The Immigration Department also tried to keep out people who did not meet the criteria of the White Australia policy in terms of physical appearance or ancestry. And again, it did not matter whether those who were barred from entering Australia for permanent residence on account of their race were ordinary immigrants or refugees. Those who were under no circumstances allowed to enter Australia included, for example, Chinese refugees. But in order to maintain Australia's supposed racial purity, the immigration authorities often also prevented people who could be classed as Europeans from entering Australia. In the late 1930s, for example, these included many German and Austrian Jews. In 1938, Australia offered to take a contingent of refugees from Nazi Germany, but the 'offer' of taking 15,000 over three years was not so much a mark of Australia's generosity as a means of restricting the refugee intake to 5,000 per year. In 1947 and 1948, when Australia accepted the first batch of displaced persons sponsored by the International Refugee Organisation, it took only people from northeastern Europe (in fact, the first shipload included only Estonians, Lithuanians and Latvians); displaced persons from southeastern Europe were then not welcome. At the same time, the government stipulated that ships and planes carrying migrants to Australia must not have more than 25 per cent Jews among their passengers. In the late 1940s and in the 1950s, Sephardic Jews from India and Palestinians were also excluded on the basis of race and skin colour, regardless of whether or not they were refugees.

The most common response to what I just said has been something like this: 'Well, you are concerned with the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Australia was backward then. But surely things changed dramatically in 1972, when Gough Whitlam became prime minister. Not only did he abolish the White Australia policy as soon as he got into office. He also took seriously Australia's obligations as an international citizen. And of course, he has always been somebody who was much concerned about human rights.'

So let's talk about Saint Gough and refugees.

But in order to put the great man's approach to refugee issues into perspective, I need to start with a prime minister who is usually less well regarded, William McMahon.

The issue that fell into the periods of office of both McMahon and Whitlam, is that of the Asian refugees from Uganda. On 4 August 1972, Uganda's president, Idi Amin, gave a speech in which he announced that all non-citizens of South Asian ancestry would be required to leave the country. Shortly afterwards, he set a 90-day deadline. Between August and November 1972, some 50,000 Asians, including many of those who had taken out Ugandan citizenship after 1962, fled Uganda.

Initially Amin said that those affected by the expulsion order were South Asians who held passports from other countries. Most of them were British passport holders, a few thousand held Indian passports, and some held Pakistani, Kenyan or Tanzanian passports. Only several weeks after the initial announcement did it become clear that the decree also affected South Asians who were no longer entitled to British or Indian passports but whose Ugandan citizenship had been revoked by Amin. So in the end, a fairly large proportion of the expellees were stateless.

It was obvious that it was the responsibility of the British government to take all South Asians from Uganda who were entitled to British passports. The Heath government was taken by surprise by Amin's announcement and had very sketchy intelligence about the actual number of expellees Britain might have to accommodate. Census figures, which later turned out to be unreliable, suggested that there were 80,000 people of South Asian descent living in Uganda. The British high commission in Kampala estimated that at least 50,000 of them fell into the so-called UKPH category, that is, United Kingdom Passport Holders. (In the end, only about half that number were entitled to British passports.)

It was clear that while the Heath government never denied its obligation to accommodate the British passport holders from Uganda, it was most reluctant to do so. It was inundated by letters from Conservative backbenchers. To give you just one example: Keith Stainton, member for the safe Conservative seat of Sudbury and Woodbridge, wrote to the Prime Minister: 'Many of my constituents - people of great personal responsibility and integrity - have been in touch with me over the past few days expressing their dismay at the apparent ready acquiescence of the British Government to admit to the UK some 50,000 Ugandan Asians on so-called British passports.' South Asians already constituted the fourth largest ethnic group in England and Wales, after the Irish, West Indians and Jews. Successive British governments had tried to curb the migration of South Asians. In 1968, the Labour government had introduced the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which restricted the entry of British Asians to 1500 a year. In 1971, the Conservative government's Immigration Act restricted rights of abode in Britain to Commonwealth citizens with a patrilial connection, that is to people who had a parent or grandparent born in Britain.

Therefore the Heath government pursued a two-pronged strategy: it tried to off-load British passport holders from East Africa to other countries, and it refused to accommodate anybody not in possession of a British passport. The four obvious candidates to whom the Heath government turned for help were India, Pakistan, Canada and Australia. Neither India nor Pakistan were enthusiastic to accommodate substantial numbers of British passport holders. After all, they already had to look after expellees of Indian or Pakistani nationality. On 10 August, the British High Commissioner in Ottawa reported that the Canadians, 'although not anxious to get involved . . . would nevertheless be ready if necessary to look at the problem in a favourable frame of mind'. And Australia? On 11 August, the British High Commissioner in Canberra cabled the Foreign Office in London: 'Australian officials do not appear to have focused on question of future of Asian holders of UK passports in Uganda. Their reaction is likely to stay clear.'

Indeed, the Australian government ruled out tried to stay clear as much as that was possible. On 17 August, the Minister for Immigration, Jim Forbes, said in the Australian parliament: 'Applications by Asians in Uganda will continue to be considered on their individual merits in accordance with our non-European immigration policies. These policies reflect the firm and unshakeable determination of the Government to maintain a homogeneous society in Australia'. Five days later, Cabinet discussed the issue and decided that Australia would not depart from its established immigration policy and would therefore admit Asians from Uganda only if they were qualified to practice in professions in Australia into which they could be readily absorbed.

What did that mean? In 1966, the Holt government had made significant changes to the White Australia policy, making it possible for particularly well qualified and highly skilled non-Europeans to migrate to Australia. Between 1966 and 1972, annually about 3,000 people who were unambiguously non-European entered Australia for permanent residence. Asians from Uganda, many of whom were highly qualified professionals, were welcome to apply under the revised policy. But grocers and locksmiths were most unlikely to succeed with their applications.

Few of those desperate to leave Uganda were acceptable to the Australian authorities. The Immigration Department applied its non-European immigration policies scrupulously. On 27 September 1972, for example, the Department advised the immigration attaché interviewing applicants in Kampala: 'Applications by engineers in all branches of engineering with exception of civil, heating and ventilation, instrumentation and refrigeration may be rejected without reference unless special circumstances apart from conditions in Uganda exist.' The attaché noted: 'If policy was relaxed I consider we could select 1,000 good types with useful trade and semi-professional qualifications.' But the policy was not relaxed. Australia was only interested in highly qualified, highly skilled and readily employable Ugandan Asians.

Between August and November, Australian representatives discouraged about 2,000 enquirers from Uganda from putting in an application. About 400 applications were 'rejected locally' (that is, in Kampala or Nairobi), and another 37 by the Immigration Department in Canberra. Australia approved a total of only 190 applications covering 491 persons from Asians living in Uganda. At the same time, Canada accepted more than ten times as many, and provided regular charter flights to move successful applicants out of Uganda.

Medical doctors with degrees from British universities, and others who were considered a 'migration gain' by the Australian immigration authorities, had no trouble finding a new home. They often went 'visa-shopping', applying simultaneously to migrate to Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain. It was thus unsurprising that only a comparatively small number of those 491 persons approved for migration to Australia eventually settled here. By early November 1972, after the expiry of Amin's deadline, only 46 of the 491 had arrived in Australia.

With the end of the 90-day deadline fast approaching and the situation in Uganda becoming increasingly volatile, the UNHCR evacuated the remaining expellees to transit camps in Belgium, Italy, Malta, Austria and Spain. In November 1972, more than 4000 Asians, nearly all of them stateless, were still waiting for resettlement places.

All efforts by the Heath government (and by Australia's High Commissioner in London and former Minister for Immigration, Alexander Downer) to influence McMahon and his government failed. These efforts included a personal representation to the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs by a visiting British government minister. (This representation is in itself remarkable because it documents how divided the ruling Conservatives were on the issue. The minister concerned was most reluctant to raise the issue in Canberra. The official briefing her reported: 'she opened our conversation by telling me that she hoped she would not be asked to press the Australians on this. She made it very clear that, in her view, Australian immigration

policy is in the best interests of that country and that this is not the case with our policy.' The minister's name was Margaret Thatcher.)

But why were Australia's conservative politicians so reluctant to come to the aid of the British government? The British high commissioner had no doubts about what lay behind the Australian government's reluctance to extend a helping hand: 'Ministers are unwilling to forfeit votes in the forthcoming elections.'

Who would those unhappy about Australia's acceptance of a large number of Ugandan Asians have voted for? Some earlier incarnation of Pauline Hanson's One Nation perhaps? No, the McMahon government feared that disaffected xenophobes would vote for the Labor Party. Gough Whitlam's Labor Party?

In 1972, Australia's immigration policy no longer enjoyed bipartisan support. Forbes' and McMahon's ideas about maintaining the homogenous character of Australian society were not shared by Whitlam and the ALP leadership. But the ALP was deeply divided over the issue of non-European immigration. While reformers such as Don Dunstan wanted a multiracial and multicultural Australia, others, such as Fred Daly and Arthur Calwell, defended the White Australia policy. The ALP's platform, which had been passed at the 1971 Launceston conference, called for an immigration policy that avoided 'discrimination on any grounds of race or colour of skin or nationality.' But Arthur Calwell did not feel bound by that platform. In May 1972, he bemoaned the 'flood' of Mauritians, Ceylonese Burghers and Anglo-Indians arriving in Australia, saying that he did not want a 'chocolate-coloured Australia'. Justifying his statement, he explained in an interview that some of these migrants were living on the smell of an oily rag and breeding like flies. Calwell was categorically opposed to accepting any Asians from Uganda, and made it clear that he believed he had the majority of Australians behind him.

But at the end of 1972, Calwell retired. In December 1972, the ALP won the federal elections. Al Grassby, whose views on immigration resembled those of Dunstan rather than those of Daly and Calwell, became Minister for Immigration. The election of the first Whitlam government prompted one of the most significant policy shifts in Australian postwar politics. The immigration portfolio was not immune from the radical changes which Whitlam and his colleagues sought to make. In 1973, the White Australia policy was abolished. How then did Whitlam's election affect Australia's response to Asians from Uganda?

On 2 February 1973, Whitlam and Grassby, decided that Australia offer resettlement places for 50 families of stateless Ugandans in transit camps. These families would not even have made up for the shortfall between the number of Asians from Uganda approved for migration to Australia in 1972, and the number of expellees who had already arrived or were likely to do so. But it was an important step, the more so since Grassby instructed his department to relax its selection criteria.

Yet by 25 June 1973, of 4416 persons initially accommodated in the five transit centres, Australia had resettled only nine. By then, the United States had resettled 1308 expellees from the transit camps, Canada, which had already taken thousands the previous year, 438, and Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands another 896 between them.

While the Department of Immigration relaxed its selection criteria, it did not abandon them. Australia was still looking for expellees who would prove a migration gain, rather than admitting refugees on the basis of their individual needs. In late March, a UNHCR representative complained that of the 17 'best' families presented to the Australians by the High Commissioner's office from the transit camp in Spain, the Australians had considered only two beyond the preliminary interview stage. Of 12 families presented to Australia's selection team in Malta, only six were interviewed. The Immigration Department also rejected some applicants strongly recommended by its own interviewing officers, because Australia had not been their first preference or because their employment prospects were considered to be poor.

Evidence from recently released government files suggests three reasons why Australia's response to Uganda's Asians remained comparatively hard-hearted, even after the change of government. First, the Immigration Department had almost no experience in selecting migrants on the basis of their, rather than Australia's, need. As I said earlier, in postwar Australia, refugees had been admitted principally because they were considered a migration gain and not for compassionate reasons. The comments written by the Department of Immigration's interviewing officers on applications submitted by expellees in transit camps say much about the history of Australia's approach to refugee resettlement. About a family of five in the Maltese camp, the interviewing officer wrote:

Family westernised in dress, although wife in Sari . . . Although according to camp commandant, B/W [breadwinner] usually wears dress outfit with tight trousers etc. Generally unimpressive & surely wouldn't be able to 'integrate' in A/A [Australia]. Children who are quite good looking & speak English would be only ones to benefit at all.

The officer also noted:

Family are Muslim (Bohora) by religion. No knowledge of A/A, no connections. Family converse in Hindustani, Gudgurati?

In this instance an array of factors seemed to speak against the family, including the parents' dress and their preference to converse in a language other than English, but also their rejection by other countries and the breadwinner's prospects of getting a job. In the case of a widow and her five children, also in the camp in Malta, the decision was more clear-cut. One of her daughters 'has epilepsy which brings her under Section 16 of the Migration Act and she is not suitable for entry any category. Reject.'

What other factors explain why there was hardly any policy change after December 1972? The ideas that had underpinned the administration of the White Australia policy, were too ingrained to be easily abandoned. Selection officers considered an applicant unfavourably if his or her 'integration prospects' were deemed to be poor. About a couple in the Maltese transit camp, who were of mixed Asian and African descent and Muslims, the interviewing officer wrote:

both have African appearance, dark complexion, frizzy hair. . . . Would feel that overall have less chance of integration because of ethnic origin and religion and unlikelihood of acceptance of qualifications.

Also, the Department was not entirely sure how exactly to interpret Grassby's directive to relax the selection criteria. Immigration officers trying to discern the new government's position may have been frustrated by the lack of unambiguous instructions from Grassby, but they had little trouble divining Whitlam's position. Asked during a visit to London in April 1973 whether the abolition of the White Australia policy meant that Australia would accommodate more Asians from Uganda, Whitlam replied: 'If they have got qualifications such as entitle people to come to Australia then certainly they can come.' His statement was duly added to all the relevant policy files.

Whitlam's position hardly departed from that advocated by his predecessor. Six months earlier, an ABC journalist had asked William McMahon about Asians from Uganda: 'Is compassion grounds for migration?' 'I think our own interests must come first', McMahon replied, 'and consequently we should be able to choose those migrants that are going to make the greatest contribution to the development of this country.'

Admittedly, I am concerned with the past rather than the present. But a close look at past Australian responses to refugees could inform our stance in the present. In terms of the current debate about refugees and asylum seekers, the case of the Asians from Uganda may be relevant in three respects: First, it draws our attention to the long tradition of bipartisanship regarding Australia's approach to refugees. Anybody expecting the Labor Party to pursue a small target strategy (with regard to refugee issues) during the election campaign, and then, if elected, close the detention centres, give permanent residence to all TPV holders, declare an amnesty for illegals, triple Australia's refugee intake, and substantially increase its contribution to the UNHCR ought to have a good look at the policies of previous Labor governments.

Second, the story of the Asians from Uganda alerts us to the fact that new policies can only be implemented if the department charged with their implementation does as it is told. Irrespective of directions issued by successive ministers for immigration, the Department of Immigration developed a culture in which Australia's supposed national interest was more highly valued than anything else. Immigration officers did not need to be reminded by the minister of the day that Australia was not interested in refugees who could not be considered a migration gain. They knew, and acted accordingly. They strongly identified as gatekeepers who ensure that those who migrate to Australia (or who are resettled here) will always be a migration gain rather than a liability.

This departmental culture of assessing prospective settlers according to whether or not their immigration is in the national interest, of tightly controlling access to permanent residence in Australia, and of seeing the Department of Immigration in the forefront of agencies entrusted with ensuring the inviolability of Australia (and this included, at least until 1973, its racial purity) has had more than fifty years to develop. It will be difficult, if not impossible to change that culture overnight. Therefore, in my opinion, if a future government were prepared to make substantive changes to Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policies, it would need to create an agency to implement those changes, rather than entrust its implementation to the Department of Immigration.

Third, the story of the Asians from Uganda is instructive because of who is left out of it. I think it is justified to criticise the McMahon and Whitlam governments for their lack of compassion. But we should see the case in perspective. After all, we are talking about only 50,000 refugees. More than ninety per cent of them had been offered a refuge within the ninety-day deadline set by Idi Amin. Think of the millions of Afghans languishing in camps in Iran and Pakistan for years. Think of Somalis living for years in refugee camps in Kenya. Think of what's happening right now in western Sudan. These are more recent cases, you may say; surely things were better thirty years ago. At the same time as public opinion in Europe, North America, South Asia and Australia was outraged at Idi Amin's expulsion order, the Sudanese government appealed to Australia to provide aid for the resettlement of southern Sudanese refugees. This appeal was strongly supported by the UNHCR. The Minister for Foreign Affairs flatly refused Australian help but said that Australia planned to increase its annual contribution to the UNHCR by \$25,000 and was hoping that the Sudan would be one of the beneficiaries of such largesse. The plight of the Southern Sudanese did not make it into the Australian newspapers and was not debated in parliament. I know about it because a Foreign Affairs official by the name of Truelove wrote a memorandum to his superior pointing out that Australian interests in Africa would be better served if Australia supported the resettlement of Sudanese refugees rather than the resettlement of Asians from Uganda. His superior noted on the margins of this memorandum: 'There is a good deal of logic in what Mr Truelove says but the domestic political reality is that while the Govt. is prepared to stump up funds for Uganda, there is no pressure on it to do likewise for the Sudan.'

Fourth, the story of Australia's response to the expulsion of Asians from Uganda alerts us to crucial differences between the early twenty-first century and the early 1970s. An analysis of what happened in the past may usefully inform our conduct in the present for at least two, fairly basic reasons: First, histories can make us aware of how the past lives on in the present (and I think, in that respect, it is useful, for example, to draw parallels between the ALP's official line on refugees before the 1972 and 2001 elections). But histories are also relevant if they make us aware of the exceptionality of the present. They can teach us that the present is not just a continuation of the same old story but something that should surprise us. They also teach us that the present is not the seamless and inevitable outcome of the past.

My book does not promote a black-armband view of Australian responses to refugees and asylum seekers. In John Howard's Australia, many of us have come to accept as self-evident that the government draws on collective angst, indeed manipulates and fans this angst, in the pursuit of electoral gain. Previous governments recognised the dangers inherent in such an approach. In 1938 and 1939, Joseph Lyons and his government were opposed to resettling large numbers of European refugees. Their response to the tragedy unfolding in Europe was hard-hearted. It made also good political sense: the majority of Australians would not have welcomed a sizeable refugee intake. But Lyons did not encourage the public's xenophobia. He did not amplify widely held fears about the immigration of Jewish refugees.

In 1946 and 1947, public opinion was not in favour of Australia's acceptance of Jewish survivors. Repeatedly, the influential president of the Australian Natives Association warned that Australia should not accommodate the 'refugee of Europe'. Returned servicemen's organisations issued similar warnings. In response to such

opposition, Labor's Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, curtailed the entry of Jewish survivors. But he did not endorse the views put forward by the Australian Natives Association. Although their policies were at times as mean-spirited as those of the Howard government, the Lyons and Chifley governments of the late 1930s and mid-1940s refused to parrot anti-refugee sentiments that were motivated by racism. John Howard, by contrast, has legitimised the fears articulated by Pauline Hanson.

During the 1972 election campaign, McMahon and Forbes did not highlight the fact that they had effectively barred the entry of Asian refugees from Uganda. They suspected that the Australian electorate would punish a government that responded generously to the plight of Asians from Uganda. And therefore they did not follow the Canadian lead and instead declined British requests for assistance. But they did not try to appeal to a collective xenophobia in the way Arthur Calwell did at the same time. Rather than emphasising Australia's restrictive immigration policies the government quietly ensured that only a very small number of Asians from Uganda submitted successful applications for immigration to Australia. Just imagine what Howard and Ruddock would have done in that situation.

As you no doubt realise, I am fascinated by the often unexpected outcomes of a juxtaposition of the past and the present. Let me conclude with one of the more bizarre affinities between the 1972 events and Australia's current refugee policies. You will be aware that currently factions within the British, German and Italian governments are pushing for the establishment of detention centres in North Africa for refugees intercepted in the Mediterranean. This proposal is likely to have been influenced by the alleged success of the Australian government's Pacific Solution. But could Australia really lay claim to having invented this solution?

In December 1972, when it became clear that, first, few countries were willing to resettle United Kingdom passport holders and that, second, Britain might also have to accommodate some of the stateless Asians, the British government seriously explored the possibility of resettling Ugandan Asians in one of Britain's dependent territories. It was apparently Lord Carrington, at the time Secretary of State for Defence (and later Secretary-General of NATO) who proposed to pursue this idea despite strong opposition from the Foreign Secretary. Lord Carrington went so far as to identify what in his eyes was the most suitable dependency: the British Solomon Islands. At the end of the day, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office could convince the government that such a Pacific Solution would be impracticable. Not any more impracticable, I would have thought, than that to accommodate Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers on Nauru.

Thank you for your attention.

Klaus Neumann

As announced during the election campaign, President Trump is adopting a tough approach to US refugee policy. According to several detailed reports in the media, he is set to shortly sign a presidential decree to reshape American refugee policy. The apparent plan is to suspend any intake of refugees for a total of 120 days in order to determine which countries are to be classified as safe. Furthermore, accepting refugees from Syria will be completely and permanently suspended. In addition, it is apparently planned that the overall intake of refugees in the current financial year will be reduced from Barack Obama's advised level of 110,000 refugees to only 50,000. While Australia's policies towards refugees and asylum seekers did not appear to feature prominently in the 2016 election campaign, this was largely due to a confluence of circumstances, not all of which were of the Coalition's making. To be little political mileage to be gained from foregrounding the issue of Australia's refugee laws and policies during the campaign. Instead, the election contest predominantly played out across more traditional issues of economic and social policy, such as job creation and the funding of healthcare. Despite being a highly volatile political issue, refugee policy could rarely be seen to determine the outcome of elections—perhaps with the exception of the Coalition's major 2001 electoral victory in the wake of the Tampa affair. The state of asylum: democratization, judicialization and evolution of refugee policy in Europe. Matthew J. Gibney. Refugee Studies Centre University of Oxford. Since the late 1970s, all Western states have resorted to increasingly restrictive measures in an attempt to reduce the number of asylum claims they receive. In particular, they have used a range of common practices—such as visas, carrier sanctions, airport liaison officers and international zones—to prevent asylum seekers from arriving at frontiers where they could claim the protection of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. Syrian refugee crisis has prompted party leaders to put a renewed emphasis on their immigration and refugee policy promises. Early in the campaign, Harper announced Canada would welcome 10,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees from "persecuted ethnic and religious minorities in the region" to Canada over the next four years, adding to the 10,000 Syrian refugees the government previously said it would accept over the next three years. Ottawa has also announced an emergency relief fund for Syria matching Canadian donations up to \$100 million. But will this be enough to win voters? And what do the three parties have planned for immigration policy overall? The elections board in Franklin County, Ohio, said the ballot error was a "serious mistake" but in its response to the president's tweet, it added: "Our board is bipartisan and our elections are fair. And every vote will be counted." The error came through a technology malfunction - a high-speed scanner stopped working - that meant a chunk of more than 250,000 absentee ballots, for those not voting in person in their state, sent out were inaccurate. Everyone affected now has the correct voter slip, the elections boards said, and there are various safeguards in place to make sure no one votes twice. "Dumped" ballots. In September, pictures of ballot envelopes in California were shared thousands of times on Facebook along with further unsubstantiated claims of "vote rigging".