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THE IMPACT OF ASYLUM POLICY ON THE WELL-BEING OF ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN IN THE UK, AUSTRALIA & CANADA: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY.

Globally over two million children have been killed in armed conflicts during the past decade resulting in a further twenty million children being forced from their homes (United Nations 2010). This situation has given rise to an increasing number of people seeking safety and asylum outside of their home country. These demographic changes are socially and politically controversial for Governments mainly in Western nations as studies indicate that these nations are regarded as the preferred destinations by refugees (Thomas 2004).

Asylum has rapidly become a highly political and controversial issue over the past twenty years and continues to attract attention as a key political concern in many Western Countries. The Sovereign governments of these mainly developed nations have normally responded to these concerns with punitive and restrictive sanctions manifested through the implementation of immigration policy and legislation.

The opening of borders within the European Union in the early part of this decade some would argue has led to greater European cooperation and economic prosperity for many nations. However there has also been considerable public and political pressure growing within nation states to 'control' immigration and protect the country's borders. The political responses to these 'threats' and 'concerns' have to some extent also been legitimized by the routine incarceration and deportation of individuals seeking asylum or refuge including many children with devastating effects for their wellbeing.

'A growing body of medical evidence, including a report from the royal colleges of pediatricians, GPs and psychiatrists, has found that the detention of children in the asylum system is linked to serious physical and psychological harm and the policy has been criticized by the government's own inspectorate and the children's commissioner for England' (Guard 2010).

In Australia similar practices of detention have been evident with the most controversial policy, being that of detaining asylum seekers arriving by boat in Nauru and Papua New Guinea in the early part of this decade. This policy administered by the Defence Force operation 'to deter and deny' asylum seekers as part of the 'Pacific solution' attracted much international condemnation. This led to allegations being directed at the government from refugee lawyers and human rights scholars that *'the level of protection in Australia, has, over recent years, been eroded so significantly as to seriously challenge our (Australia's) international obligations'* (Johnston 2009).

In Canada the asylum and immigration system is seen as one of the fairest in the world. However, this nation is not without its controversies in particular when 90 'boat people' were forcibly returned to China in 2000 without having their applications heard.

The current asylum reforms in Canada set to reduce the processing times for applications and according to immigration minister Kenney, Canada's existing system is hampered by long delays which results in many claims taking years to resolve.

"Canada's asylum system is broken....We must act to avoid a two-tier immigration system: one for immigrants who wait in line – often for years – to come to Canada, and another for those who use the asylum system, not for protection, but to try to get through the back door into Canada." (Kenney 2010).

The aim of this doctoral research is to consider current government policy and legislation in relation

to the issue of asylum and in particular its impact on the well being of children. Children are considered as one of the main groups seeking asylum and protection within Western countries. The review will consider legal and policy developments in the UK, Australia and Canada within a comparative context over the past 20 years. These countries are selected as they operate similar welfare regimes and are similar in social-economic make up.

Therefore the aim is to explore the points of convergence and also points of conflict in the underlying rationale for the recent developments in policy and legislation related to immigration. The review will also establish the nature of the relation assumed within these policies between 'the child' and the sovereign state and the states obligation to offer protection under international laws and treaties to these children within their respective countries regardless of their legal status.

It is hoped that the research will identify the extent to which inadvertent policies and legal frameworks act against the interests of asylum children and therefore offer insights into the future directions that political agendas can evolve within the context of human rights and under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Equally, it is intended that the current role of social work can be critically examined in relation to this issue and what form and identity social work needs to adopt in the future in order to fulfil its underlying ambitions to promote social equality and the well being of these children.