Humanitarianism from the Suburbs: Australian Refugee Relief and Activism during the 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation War

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The Bangladesh Liberation War against West Pakistan in 1971 triggered an exodus of ten million refugees, the deaths of approximately 1.5 million people and widespread destruction of villages, crops and infrastructure. Preoccupied with the Cold War and domestic politics, powerful nations such as the US and UK did not intervene directly and reluctantly provided aid. The Australian government, for its part, was particularly slow to offer aid, trailing efforts of New Zealand and most Western European governments. While the McMahon administration remained indifferent, Australians from diverse backgrounds engaged with this conflict by raising public awareness, fundraising and lobbying the Australian government to increase its aid contribution to Bangladeshis displaced by war.

At a time when Australian government policies focused on the war in Indo-China, Cold War politics and development in south-east Asia and the south Pacific, I consider the ways Australian individuals offered aid to Asian, non-Christian refugees, some of whom held Maoist views. Using archival materials, historical newspapers and census data, this article argues that, paradoxically, it was individuals with little political capital who spearheaded Australian efforts to aid Bangladeshi refugees. In short, the Bangladesh Liberation War provoked a groundswell of suburban activism that acted independently of government policies.

Vietnam, apartheid South Africa and the recognition of the People’s Republic of China. These three issues dominated foreign policy discussions in the Australian Parliament during 1971. But away from the manicured lawns of Parliament House, Australians of diverse backgrounds were also concerned about the ten million Bangladeshi refugees who had fled the indiscriminate violence and destruction of their homeland by West Pakistani armed forces during their war of liberation. Operating outside of government and non-government organisations (NGOs), unaffiliated individuals lobbied politicians, donated money to refugee relief organisations and staged public protests, all in an attempt to raise awareness and alleviate the distant suffering of others. This paper examines the humanitarian endeavours of people far removed from positions of power who differed widely in terms of age, suburb of residence, political orientation and class background. Rather than focusing on the actions and words of politicians, bureaucrats and professionals in the NGO sector, this article documents humanitarianism from the suburbs and argues that those on the periphery were in fact ahead of those at the centre of power.

To avoid confusion, throughout this article I will use the proper noun “Bangladesh” and will only use the historical terms “East Pakistan” or “East Bengal” when referring to a direct quotation or discussing the history of the region.

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The actions of Australians to aid Bangladeshi refugees were something of a historical anomaly and at odds with government policy. During the second half of the twentieth century, the Australian government supported and resettled refugees escaping communist regimes. In the immediate post-Second World War years, the newly created Department of Immigration gave explicit preference to anti-Communist displaced persons in Europe (and Europeans in China), a theme that has been recently explored by a number of Australian historians. But Bangladeshi refugees were not anti-Communist. In fact, Maoism was widely supported in Bangladesh and, in its first five years after independence (1972-1977), the government of the day implemented socialist policies, firstly through democratic processes and later by one-party military rule.

In other ways, too, Bangladeshi refugees were fundamentally different from Australians. Refugees were mostly Hindu and consequently there was no prospect of Christian solidarity across these two nations, as was the case with Australian support for Armenian refugees in the 1920s. The cultural distance between Australia and Bangladesh was also vast. At the time of the conflict, Asian immigration to Australia was still restricted. In the five years preceding the war, Australia admitted 66,597 Asian immigrants for permanent settlement but only 568 of these visas were issued to Pakistanis (modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh). There was therefore no existing immigrant Bangladeshi community to raise awareness or funds for their compatriots during the war.

Bangladesh was also not in the Australian imagination. Although Australians were taking eye-opening holidays to discover “India’s heart”, travel agents and airlines did not promote Bangladesh. “Study tours” of India and Southeast Asia were popular among members of charity organisations, such as Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam). But the itineraries of tour operators document that these study trips bypassed disaster-prone and famine-ravaged Bangladesh. Additionally, in the 1960s and 1970s the sub-continent became a magnet for counter-culture pilgrims in search of enlightenment and cheap hashish on the “hippie trail”. As adventurous — or reckless — as these

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3 There is extensive scholarship on the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Australia, for example the contemporary work of Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen and Nancy Viviani’s classic, The Long Journey. Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia (Melbourne, 1985).


6 For example, Air India ran an advertising campaign, “The new place is India” in the Australian Freedom from Hunger national newsletter in September 1971, see Folder 108, “Notes – Mr A. Smith, Documents – Mr A. Smith” in Box 19, Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1961-1973 [manuscript], held at the National Library of Australia (NLA).

7 For correspondence of the joint Community Aid Abroad/Freedom from Hunger Asian study tours, see “1971 Correspondence – Daily File”, NLA, folder 117, Box 20, Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, NLA.
independent travellers may have been, after travelling through India they too skipped a visit to Bangladesh, typically concluding their sojourns in Kathmandu, Nepal.\(^8\)

This article explores the myriad of ways in which Australians demonstrated empathy and took practical steps to provide relief to Bangladeshi refugees, the distant other. To avoid generic references to “the public” or the “ordinary citizen”, I will also unpack exactly who contributed to this humanitarian cause and in what ways. To do so, I will analyse who wrote to the Prime Minister about the Bangladeshi refugee crisis, documenting their suburb of residence, vocation, age and gender. Next, I will pin-point the leading donor suburbs in Victoria that contributed to the Australian Freedom from Hunger campaign to feed and shelter Bangladeshi refugees. Lastly, I will examine the activism of three individuals who, at first, were strangers but by the end of 1971 became collectively known around the country as the “freedom fasters”.

\textbf{State of the Field}

Given the extent of the destruction, and the blanket media coverage at the time, one would expect a voluminous historiography on the 1971 war in English, as occurred with the 1947 partition of India. However, the Bangladesh Liberation War remains one of the most understudied conflicts of the twentieth century, excluding partisan South Asian literature. This may be because there is little in the way of archival material: during and after the war, official government sources in Bangladesh were destroyed; Pakistani sources exist but remain closed to the public.\(^9\) Without access to textual material, historians are left with oral testimonies among survivors, though this requires a proficiency in local languages and lengthy field trips. A few historians of South Asian descent have pursued this avenue and, interestingly, their focus has typically been on women’s experiences.\(^10\) Secondly, the 1971 conflict has generally been understood as a local event only of relevance to the immediate region, ignoring the various ways that many countries were indirectly involved, including military support, refugee emergency aid and post-war reconstruction. There has therefore been little incentive for research on a seemingly local event in a peripheral nation.

What English language scholarship there is on the 1971 war typically addresses two questions: one, did the mass killings of Bangladeshis constitute genocide? And two, what was the response of other nations to the unfolding tragedy? Firstly, the question of genocide remains unresolved. While some scholars declare that the West Pakistani forces acted with deliberate intent to exterminate Bengalis, particularly Bengali Hindus, others argue that the violence was multidirectional and opportunistic, and that there was no deliberate attempt to exterminate a clearly defined racial or religious minority.\(^11\)

\(^8\) Agnieszka Sobocinska, \textit{Visiting the Neighbours: Australians in Asia} (Sydney, 2014), p.126. For a personal memoir, see Asta Gray, \textit{Travelling Rough on the Hippie Trail. Drugs, Danger and Dysentery} (Santa Cruz, 2016).


Irrespective of these scholarly debates, in Bangladesh and Indian narratives, it is beyond doubt that Pakistan committed genocide, which has repercussions for public memory and the quest for justice.  

Secondly, researchers have concentrated on diplomatic machinations of major governments, specifically the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and India. Drawing on recently declassified government files, the attitudes and actions of the aforementioned national governments ranged widely. The British government officially remained neutral but pragmatically supported India, who it believed would determine the outcome of the conflict. The United States openly sided with its ally West Pakistan, despite international opprobrium. At the time of the conflict, West Pakistan was providing an essential avenue of communication between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. The Canadian government also supported West Pakistan but for a different reason. In the wake of the rising (and increasingly militant) Quebec sovereignty movement, the Canadian government was loath to support a separatist movement in Pakistan. Canada was also a major donor of aid and military equipment to the Pakistani government, further entrenching its pro-West Pakistan bias. For the Indian government, the 1971 war represented an opportunity to reshape the power dynamics of the region and beyond. From the start of the conflict, the Indian government trained, funded and supplied the Muktibahini (freedom fighters), and then from December, deployed 250,000 troops that overran the West Pakistani forces in just over two weeks.

The role of Australians during the war has only been examined by scholars in passing. Patrick Kilby’s recent book on the history of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), one of the leading NGOs in the Australian humanitarian sector, only dedicates two pages to the Bangladeshi crisis. Nevertheless, Kilby offers the astute point that the 1971 war acted as a catalyst for professionalising and co-ordinating Australia’s emergency aid sector. Patrick Mullins recently published a biography on William McMahon, the Prime Minister of Australia from March 1971 to December 1972. With his tenure covering the entirety of the Bangladesh war and its immediate post-war reconstruction, one would expect some discussion on the actions (or indifference) of the Australian government under McMahon. However, Mullins only wrote eighteen words on Bangladesh in his 784-page tome. And with only one reference to Asia in the index, it seems that Mullins was more interested in documenting domestic political manoeuvring than exploring the impact of the McMahon government on the Asia-Pacific region.


12 An example of the Bangladeshi state promoting the genocide narrative can be found on the Liberation War Museum website: <https://www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/bangladesh-genocide/>.


Australian and western scholarship on the global dimensions of the Bangladesh Liberation War is limited and too oriented towards dispassionate diplomatic histories comprised of foreign service cables, government memoranda and media coverage. Although this government-centric history was part of the story, it fails to capture the actions of individuals, some of whom successfully shaped public attitudes, and ultimately, government policy. This paper aims to redress this imbalance by situating it within the burgeoning field of histories of Australian humanitarianism. It asks, precisely, who were the Australians so concerned about the welfare of refugees in India? And why did they care for distant Asian refugees?

In doing so, this paper builds on the innovative scholarship of Australian historians who have made important contributions to global understandings of histories of humanitarianisms. As Rob Skinner and Alan Lester noted in 2012: “Much of the history of the late twentieth century ‘new’ humanitarianism remains to be written”. Australian historians have risen to this challenge, using under-utilised archival materials to document the many ways in which Australians participated in global humanitarian activities in the post-Second World War context. For example, Joy Damousi has mapped how secular, feminist, socialist and religious organisations, who otherwise would have little in common, worked together to provide relief from suffering for child refugees. Jon Piccini, meanwhile, has examined radical social movements and their advocacy of human rights, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. Piccini persuasively argued that Australians developed an “ethic of solidarity” with overseas protest movements, with battles over human rights ideas and theories peaking during the 1970s. In a similar vein, Agnieszka Sobocinska has written a history of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme, the Australian student-led humanitarian organisation established in 1951. Combining disparate strains of thought, including internationalist idealism, anti-colonialism, missionary Christianity and development, the Volunteer Graduate Scheme offered a means through which individuals and civil society could engage with post-colonial development and modernisation. These histories of Australian humanitarianism are valuable as they provide an avenue through which everyday Australians connected to the wider world.

This paper also extends upon the international field of everyday humanitarianism in the mid-twentieth century. International scholars have observed the entwinning of humanitarianism and human rights from the 1960s and especially from the 1970s, a period of heightened citizen-driven political activism in which individuals agitated for global justice. The anti-Apartheid movement that swept across many western nations is a prime example. As documented by Kevin O’Sullivan, Rob Skinner and Simon Stevens, the consumer boycott of South African exports was one way in which individual...
Scandinavians, Britons, Irish and Americans could express solidarity with African liberation movements, irrespective of their government’s official policy toward Apartheid South Africa. Tehila Sasson’s doctoral research on consumer boycotts of Nestlé products in the 1970s similarly helps us look beyond “the experts” (who she broadly defines as elites, diplomats and technocrats at NGOs) toward the political activism of oft-overlooked individuals, including women, children, youth groups and businessmen. Sasson argues that local supermarkets became sites in which individuals could protest against overseas human rights violations. As shoppers began to identify with the notion of a universal, global humanity with each of us endowed with certain inalienable rights, empowered consumers used the marketplace to demand change, refusing to accept government or inter-government complicity or indifference.

Dear Prime Minister

The William McMahon papers, held at the National Library of Australia, are extensive, covering the entirety of McMahon’s parliamentary career from 1949 to 1982. As McMahon was Prime Minister during the Bangladeshi war, this manuscript collection offers insight into government deliberations on the crisis. At the time of writing, much of this collection is closed to the public and a request to access more material is currently under review. However, what material is currently open is more than adequate for this research. Specifically, the McMahon papers include meticulously organised constituent correspondence to the Prime Minister during 1971 and 1972. In all, this correspondence spans 100 folders. As the folders are organised by date not subject, I manually scanned every letter for references to Bangladesh and with every relevant letter, I noted the title and name of the sender to deduce gender, age and possibly profession. I documented the date of each letter to consider if events in Bangladesh (or more precisely, media coverage of the war), influenced when and why citizens corresponded with the Prime Minister. Lastly, I noted the postcode of each letter writer to examine the geographic spread of citizen activism.

Research on constituent correspondence within western democracies is limited. Within the British Westminster system, constituent correspondence to MPs increased drastically during the twentieth century for a few reasons: the development of mass enfranchisement brought more adults into the political realm; increasing levels of education and literacy provided citizens with the necessary written communication skills; declining costs of communication, particularly with the mass adoption of internet and communications technologies. The up-turn in constituent correspondence was most pronounced during the final decades of the twentieth century. Up until the early 1960s, British MPs received between one and three constituent letters per week; by 1970, most MPs received between twenty-seven and seventy-five constituent letters per week, a significant increase in constituent casework and service. In the American congressional

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system, children had long been encouraged to “write your Congressman” in school civics classes. The US Congress also provided free postage through its franking system, an incentive established during the colonial period to encourage legislators to inform the citizenry that was also technically available for constituent letters. Despite mass enfranchisement and relatively low associated costs, writing to one’s local member or head of government remained a pastime of the few. In 1974, political scientist James Rosenau estimated that 15 per cent of the adult population had at some point written to a politician and only three per cent did so as “regular practice.”

From April 1971 to January 1972, 108 citizens wrote to Prime Minister McMahon explicitly about Bangladeshi refugees. These letters typically advocated an increase in the government’s financial and material aid to help the refugees and were usually emotive in tone. By way of example, this letter from a constituent near Newcastle is indicative of the style and content of correspondence with the Prime Minister:

[Address redacted by author]

Sunday, November 28

Dear Sir,

I write to express my sincere concern at the calamitous situation, caused by the flow of nearly nine million refugees into India; and Australia’s very limited official assistance to the problem. The UN High Commission for Refugees has launched a second appeal for assistance to India to care for the refugees, after receiving only one quarter of the figure it required from countries to its first appeal. It has emphasized that assistance in cash is the most urgent need.

I respectfully request that the Australian Government immediately increase its grant to at least twelve million dollars and remain receptive to future needs for the rehabilitation of people in India and East Bengal.

Further, I request the Commonwealth Government to take meaningful action to help try and bring about a political settlement in Bengal.

Yours Sincerely,

[name redacted by author]

Typical themes among constituent letters included general distress at the scale of displacement, outcry over the perceived miserly amount of government assistance already offered and an emphatic call for the government to give more. It should be noted that refugee resettlement in a third country, for example in Australia, was not considered; it was always expected that the refugees in India would return to their homeland after the cessation of hostilities. It was customary that the Prime Minister’s office acknowledged receipt of a constituent letter and provided a brief explanation of the particular government policy in question. The government replies were usually penned by the Prime Minister’s private secretary; only rarely did McMahon reply himself.

The demographics of the constituents can be deduced from their letters. Of the 108 constituents, seventy-five were male, fourteen were female, nine were school-aged boys and six were school-aged girls. Six married couples also sent letters. The fact that women and girls penned a sizable minority of the letters may be seen as an outcome of the renegotiation of gender roles across broader Australian society at that time. Furthermore, women have long used charity and humanitarian work as a legitimate avenue for political participation. The Australian Red Cross has traditionally been viewed as a “women’s

25 File 106 J, Box 448, Subseries 17/8 Correspondence, 1971-1972, Series 17 Prime Minister 1967-72; Papers of William McMahon, 1949-1987 [manuscript], NLA.
organization”, albeit one run by men. As for the activism of school children, their engagement may have been due to aid agencies targeting schools for fundraising activities. For example, the Freedom from Hunger Campaign deliberately approached schools, providing teachers with classroom-ready materials as a way to raise funds and stimulate publicity in the local community (discussed later in more detail). In any case, judging from the content of children’s letters, their concern about Bangladeshi refugees was shared by their classmates. The role of school teachers in the letter-writing process is unclear from the children’s letters and consequently, it is difficult to deduce whether the teacher or children initiated the correspondence.

The background of constituents indicates that refugee activism was driven by everyday people and not elites. Of the 108 letters, the majority (56 per cent) were written by individual citizens worried about the fate of the refugees. Religious leaders representing eastern and western Christianity and the Quakers were the next largest group with nearly a quarter of all letters received (24 per cent). Given their long-established role of charity, development and evangelism in the region, the interest among Christian organisations is understandable. During this ten-month period, there were only eight letters from humanitarian organisations, specifically from Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam), Freedom from Hunger and AustCare (Australians Care for Refugees). It is evident from the data that concern for Bangladeshi refugees was a grassroots cause that had a momentum independent of elite or NGO activities.

The timing of constituent letters also supports the argument of a citizen-driven movement. As mentioned earlier, hostilities began on 25 March 1971. As one would expect, the indiscriminate violence quickly triggered an exodus of Bangladeshis across the border into India, with daily arrivals of refugees peaking in late May and early June. Constituent correspondence mirrored refugee movements, with the large majority of letters arriving in early June (81 per cent). It is interesting to note that most citizen letters arrived at the same time as Church, NGO, academic or political party correspondence, indicating again that elites or organisations were not responsible for mobilising citizen activism. Numbers of letters received by month and background of author can be seen in Table 1.

| Table 1. Constituent Letters by Month of Receipt and Background of Author |
|-----------------|----------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Citizen | Church | NGO | Political | Academic | Military | Total |
| May | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| June | 49 | 25 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 87 |
| July | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Aug | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Sept | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Oct | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Nov | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Dec | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Jan | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Total | 60 | 26 | 8 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 108 |


26 Melanie Oppenheimer, The Power of Humanity: 100 years of Australian Red Cross 1914-2014 (Sydney, 2014), p.84.
A number of scholars have noted the importance of media in generating feelings of empathy among onlookers and how this promotes compassion for the suffering of others. The connection between media and emotional engagement with man-made or natural disasters is not new. Christina Twomey and Andrew May examined how photographs of the Indian Famine (1876–8) facilitated a sense of “empire compassion” among Australian viewers. In a later article, Twomey explained that photography elicits emotion as it can concomitantly collapse distance between the subject of suffering and viewer while at the same time, reinforce a sense of difference, an “us and them”, which is essential to arousing an empathetic response.27 The mass adoption of television in the 1960s further collapsed the distance between viewer and sufferer. The immediacy and intimacy of television enabled journalists to broadcast catastrophe nearly as it happened, as demonstrated with shocking effect during the Biafran war in the late 1960s. As the first “televised disaster”, TV viewers found it harder than previously to maintain apathy or indifference to the suffering of others, and charitable organisation began using this medium to raise awareness and money.28 These arguments have merit but they do tend to treat the viewer as passive and reactive. The evidence from this research suggests news media content at most reinforced existing constituent views on the Bangladesh refugee crisis.

In Chart 1, I compare the volume of constituent letters against Canberra Times newspaper articles on “East Pakistani refugees” by month. I selected the Canberra Times newspaper for two related reasons: one, it is currently the only digitised newspaper on Trove that covers 1971-2; two, at this time much of the world news was syndicated content produced by global news companies such as Reuters, Associated Press, as well as influential and well-resourced newspapers including the London Times and the New York Times. It can therefore be safely assumed that news articles on Bangladeshi refugees published in the Canberra Times were also produced in other metropolitan broadsheets, for example, The Age in Melbourne and the Sydney Morning Herald.


Using the Trove search engine, I searched for “East Pakistani refugee” as a keyword in “any of the words” in the *Canberra Times* between 1 April 1971 and 1 February 1972. Over this ten-month period, “East Pakistani refugee” appeared in 334 items, including news articles, opinion pieces, editorials, letters to the editor and advertisements. In both newspaper items and constituent letters, volume peaked in June. Interestingly, in June there were more constituent letters to the Prime Minister than newspaper items. After June, however, constituent letters petered off while newspaper items remained steady between twenty-two and forty-seven items. The relationship between newspaper content and citizen concern is therefore not straightforward. To be sure, citizens who write to their political leaders are a small minority and perhaps more globally aware and politically engaged than the average citizen. They were the ones who believed their letter writing may have some effect on policy, even if the common view among activists was that such letters were ineffectual, and therefore they favoured direct campaigning, either through protests or fundraising. These letter-writing constituents were therefore atypical; they were the “early adopters”, to use contemporary parlance. Possibly, media content was most effective at activating the otherwise disengaged to donate money rather than proactive citizens willing to invest time and money (postage) to write to the Prime Minister.

The letters to the Prime Minister also provide an avenue to explore exactly from where citizen activism originated. With the address of the sender on every letter, it is possible to create a dynamic heat map of concern, which can be viewed online. When creating the heat map, I converted all postcodes into latitude and longitude coordinates, which were then entered into a free map-making web service. The heat map is dynamic in the sense that the user can scroll in and out to gain a clearer sense of the geographic locations of letter senders.

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29 Heat map can be viewed at: <https://mapmakerapp.com/?map=5bac9397b87757220300613cbb1c>.
The heat map, along with the full addresses of constituents, clearly indicate that Bangladeshi refugees were mostly a concern for the south-east of the country. By state, Victoria had the highest number of constituent letters with thirty-three, followed by New South Wales with twenty-four, South Australia with seventeen and the Australian Capital Territory with sixteen letters. Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania trailed with seven, six and five letters, respectively. When weighted against state populations from the 1971 Census, the leading regions were, in order, Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.30

The large majority of letters were sent by citizens in the suburbs of major cities. In Victoria, thirty-one of the letters were residents of Melbourne. Affluent inner eastern suburbs were over-represented, but they were also joined by solidly middle-class middle-ring suburbs including Box Hill, Doncaster and Moorabbin. Letters were also sent from working-class, manufacturing suburbs such as Preston and Coburg. In Canberra, the majority of letters were sent from Acton, home of the Australian National University. Canberrans from the suburbs were also involved, from the affluent southern suburbs around Griffith and Kingston, to the less salubrious areas, including the outer suburbs around Dickson and Woden. In Sydney, more letters were sent from middle-class northern suburbs around Epping and Ryde than upper-middle class eastern suburbs. The industrial working-class town of Newcastle was home to four constituents who wrote directly to the Prime Minister, as well as a very active local member, Charles Jones (Labor), who also wrote to the Prime Minister on three occasion on behalf of his constituents.

**Freedom from Hunger Campaign**

The Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC hereafter) was established in 1961 following a successful United Nations appeal of the same name in 1960. The FFHC was one among many active aid agencies in Australia at that time, each competing for media coverage, donations and political influence. For the FFHC, their focus was on providing famine relief and aiding development, with a particular focus on the Asian region. Under its National Executive Officer, Alan Smith, the FFHC lobbied MPs in the Australian Parliament for foreign aid and solicited donations in churches and schools.31 They were also overtly political in their orientation and activities, unlike non-partisan organisations such as the Australian Red Cross and Austcare.32 Despite their political differences, the FFHC allied itself with Austcare and often coordinated activities to reduce costs. In 1971, the two aid agencies considered but ultimately rejected a proposal to merge formally. While there were obvious cost benefits to sector-wide cooperation, the FFHC found itself in fierce competition with its closest rival, Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam). During July 1971, leaders of the two organisations exchanged a series of letters airing grievances against each other, culminating in October with Alan Smith urging cooperation rather than individual competition to “preserve agency

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31 Alan Smith corresponded directly with Frank Crean (ALP), Member for Melbourne Ports, Al Grassby (ALP), Member for Riverina, Kim Beazley Sr (ALP), Member for Fremantle and Len Reid (Lib.), Member for Holt. See Folder 82, “Brochures Bangladesh”, Box 13 and Folder 315, “Cables”, Box 56, Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, *Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1961-1973* [manuscript] 1961, NLA.

Unlike FFHC, Community Aid Abroad failed to find traction with their donors during their Pakistan refugees appeal in 1971. Ill-will between competing Australian humanitarian organisations continued in 1972, when Austcare openly lobbied larger agencies to divert projects (and funds) away from Community Aid Abroad.34

Within this context of sector-wide machinations and inter-agency obstructionism, the success of FFHC’s 1971 appeal was all the more striking. In a sign of presumptive confidence, the FFHC chose to ear-mark at least A$200,000 from the 1971 appeal (valued at $2.2 million in 2018) to help feed and shelter Bangladeshi refugees in the camps.35 The faith of FFHC’s leaders was perhaps understandable. As an ongoing humanitarian organisation, the FFHC was well positioned to respond to the refugee crisis and benefited from existing connections with Indian relief organisations. For example, in the Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, there were numerous cables exchanged between Alan Smith and J.B. Singh of CARE/AgriIndia in New Delhi. These cables document the flow of funds from Australia to India as well as discussions on fundraising and relief activities.36 Arguably, the raison d’être of the FFHC — famine relief — was also the most closely aligned with the plight of Bangladeshi refugees, millions of whom faced starvation in the camps. In the minds of Australian individuals then, it is likely that FFHC was viewed as one of the most suitable organisations to support financially.

By 1971, FFHC maintained a slick communications and marketing machine, and therefore was able to capitalise on community sentiment and media discourse. Their monthly magazine, Hungerscope, was professionally published and, with its nation-wide distribution, provided an ongoing source of revenue. Their newsletter was provided freely to members of Parliament and the media. They also engaged in a form of direct marketing with primary and secondary schools, offering posters, leaflets and display kits on the activities of FFHC.37 The motives of the FFHC went beyond the purely educational. FFHC knew the value of a heart-warming human-interest story for news producers, particularly those involving school children. During their annual appeal in 1971, some school students participated in “starvathons” as a way to raise money, for example, at Hawthorn and Macleod primary schools in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs, and at Devonport Secondary College in northern Tasmania. These schools raised $30 at Hawthorn, $71 at Macleod and $200 at Devonport. From the perspective of FFHC, these school fundraisers were invaluable as a source of media exposure. By using children, FFHC prepared human-interest stories, ready for publication in metropolitan and community newspapers with the potential to influence citizen-readers as well as political leaders.38 The mobilisation of children and youth was not unique to the Australian FFHC.

36 Folder 315, “Cables”, Box 56 and Folder 357 “Cables”, Box 62, Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, NLA.
38 For coverage of Victorian school starvathons, see “Boys give up lunch for others”, Melbourne Herald, 30 September 1971; “Just rice for lunch. Children give $71 towards hunger appeal”, Diamond Valley News, 28 September 1971; “‘Refugee lunch’ ends fast”, Melbourne Sun-News Pictorial, 6 October 1971. All press clippings in Folder 399 “Vic Press Clippings 1971”, Box 66, Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign. For Tasmanian coverage, see “After Their Fast”, Launceston This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.
As documented by Anna Bocking-Welch, the British office of FFHC similarly harnessed the idealism of youth to promote their cause while at the same time attempting to mould British young people into model citizens. It was a means to allay adult concerns about delinquent teenagers and simultaneously create the next generation of international humanitarians.39

In a Victorian State Committee report on the 1971 appeal, State Director Ron Butt proudly declared that his branch had received the highest number of donations since 1963. With $523,000 donated by mid-December 1971, Victoria was the best performing state, followed by New South Wales with $400,000, South Australia with $145,000 and Queensland with $110,000. Butt recognised a number of factors contributed to the success of the Victorian branch, including the use of “not at home” envelopes for donations and the inclusion of churches in the fundraising activities. Butt drew particular attention to the influence of young people in fundraising, specifically schools and fasters. He wrote to the national committee:

d) SCHOOL MAILING. We believe our 1971 School mailing “hit the spot”. Hundreds of schools phoned or wrote asking for posters, leaflets, display kits, slides etc. The financial response this year has been staggering in its proportions.

e) THE FASTERS. These remarkable young people acted as a real catalyst within the community. They had tremendous value in the fields of:--

PUBLICITY  
FUNDRAISING  
CHURCH AND SCHOOL FUNDRAISING  
POLITICAL INFLUENCE [capitalisation and underlining in original].40

It is evident that children and youth were critical elements in making the 1971 Appeal one of the most successful years in FFHC history. As its appeal was restricted to the month of September, FFHC was not the leading organisation for donors. Austcare received the highest number of donations with $705,776 by year’s end.41 Much of this success was attributable to the untiring efforts of its founder and leader, Major General Paul Cullen. A decorated war veteran, banker and philanthropist, Cullen (born Cohen), was from a wealthy, “establishment” Anglo-Jewish family with ties to Sydney since 1833. As an influential man with connections in high places, Cullen’s Austcare became the primary charity associated with the Bangladeshi refugee crisis, coordinating the


public appeal for donations from Australians as well as funnelling funds from other aid organisations onto India.\textsuperscript{42}

With nearly half of all contributions to the FFHC appeal from Victoria, it is worthwhile considering from where the donations were sent. As was the case with constituent letters, materials from the Records of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign allow us to document the suburbs and regional towns with the highest dollar value of donations. As the data show, donors came from working-class, middle-class and affluent suburbs, indicating that individual Australians donated irrespective of economic background. Table 2 lists the top fifteen donating suburbs by local government area or municipality against economic background using data from the 1971 Census. Unfortunately, 1971 census data by local government area did not include household income and, as a substitute, I have used occupation and rental prices to ascertain the broad economic background of each neighbourhood. I have classified “white collar” as professional and administrative work, so these percentages may also be viewed as indicative of educational background.

The inner-eastern affluent municipality of Camberwell was by far the leading donor area. This municipality in 1971 included wealthy suburbs of Toorak as well as Camberwell. The industrial satellite town of Geelong was second. It is interesting to note that the two top donor suburbs were home to markedly different residents, as indicated by income (or rent) and education. The next eight municipalities were all along the south-eastern suburban corridor, a broad middle-class region, with the exception of Melbourne, whose population lived mostly in the suburb of Carlton, adjacent to Melbourne University. The low rents in this area was most likely the result of a mix of cheap student housing, public housing and old workers’ cottages. The economically disadvantaged area of Sunshine, in Melbourne’s outer northern suburbs, was listed as the eleventh-highest donating municipality. Home to many labourers as well as suffering high rates of unemployment, the presence of Sunshine on this list was unexpected. When most of the municipalities listed were broadly middle-class, why did the working-class residents of Sunshine and Geelong donate to FFHC?

Table 2. Top 15 Donating Municipalities in Victoria against Economic Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Money received ($)</th>
<th>% White collar*</th>
<th>Av. weekly rent ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Camberwell</td>
<td>27900</td>
<td>34.62</td>
<td>22.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Geelong</td>
<td>17205</td>
<td>14.64</td>
<td>14.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Prahran</td>
<td>16367</td>
<td>25.92</td>
<td>20.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>16120</td>
<td>24.35</td>
<td>15.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Waverley</td>
<td>15351</td>
<td>27.22</td>
<td>22.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Moorabbin</td>
<td>12633</td>
<td>19.59</td>
<td>20.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Heidelberg</td>
<td>11261</td>
<td>22.97</td>
<td>20.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Doncaster</td>
<td>10742</td>
<td>31.65</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kew</td>
<td>10581</td>
<td>35.32</td>
<td>22.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Australia, there is a long history of trade unionists and members of the Communist Party of Australia supporting far-away causes. In the 1920s, Australian trade unions were sympathetic to Shanghai workers, who, like them, had been oppressed by the British race. In the 1930s, the trade union movement turned its attention to the unfolding Spanish Civil War, providing monetary and material aid to the Republicans. It is probable that union-affiliated workers in Sunshine and Geelong were informed and influenced by this left-wing humanitarianism.

Furthermore, the inter-class interest in the FFHC appeal may also be attributable to the activities and infectious passion of school children across metropolitan Melbourne. The idealism and earnestness of children and young people “cut through”, to use a marketing phrase, to residents in a way not possible for organisation-led campaigning, which sometimes triggers feelings of suspicion and parochialism. Students from both Sunshine High School and Geelong’s Gordon Institute of Technology initiated a range of fundraising activities, such as public fasting, walkathons, dances, car washes and raffles, as did students at the elite Catholic private schools St Kevin’s College and Loreto in upper-class Toorak. Rather than simply asking directly for money, these school children of diverse backgrounds offered a performance of some kind in exchange for donations. The performative nature of school fundraisers was critical as donors could see how their donations were educating young people to become compassionate and civic-minded.

**A Poet from Kew, a Truck Driver from Belgrave and a Student from Malvern**

Possibly taking the lead from student “starvathons” during September, in October 1971 thirty-six-year-old Indonesian-born poet Paul Poernomo began a hunger-strike on the steps of the Melbourne General Post Office (GPO). Poernomo had arrived in Australia as an international student during the Colombo Plan in 1955, studying at the University of Queensland. Staying in Australia at the completion of his studies, Poernomo moved to Melbourne, settling in the upper-class suburb of Kew. At the corner of Elizabeth and Bourke streets, Poernomo began raising awareness and funds on one of Melbourne’s

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45 It is interesting to note that the government file on Poernomo, held at the National Archives in Canberra, has restricted access: while the bulk of the 2cm file is open, the archival content from 1971 and 1972 remains closed. See, “Colombo Plan – Indonesia – Facilities in Australia – Soerodipoero, Poernomo former Colombo Plan Student”, NAA: A1838,2010/5/12/32. I thank the reviewer for alerting me to this file.
busiest intersections. As people walked by, some asked Poernomo questions about the Bangladeshi refugees and their plight; others donated money directly to him, which he then passed on to the Freedom from Hunger Campaign. One passer-by, nineteen-year-old truck driver Steve Rooney from the outer eastern suburb of Belgrave, was so moved by Poernomo’s appeal that he, too, began fasting at the GPO. They were later joined by twenty-year-old student Geoff Evans of Malvern, a well-to-do inner south-eastern suburb. The trio were a motley crew and came from very different backgrounds and suburbs of Melbourne. But together they became widely known across Australia as the “Freedom Fasters”, a historical reference to the Freedom Riders for Indigenous rights in 1965.

The Freedom Fasters continued their hunger strike at the GPO, attracting others to join the fast for varying amounts of time. They also inspired copycat hunger strikes in Sydney, Adelaide and Catholic churches across Victoria. The continued presence of the strikers outside the GPO did attract some criticism from a small but vocal minority who were inconvenienced when trying to buy postal stamps. Victorian Postmaster-General Sir Alan Hulme similarly lost patience with the protesters and summoned federal police officers to arrest the Freedom Fasters who refused to leave the steps of the GPO. The heavy-handed tactics of police officers triggered outrage among the public, and sensing a change in the public mood, Deputy Premier Dick Hamer intervened and reversed the decision of the federal police to arrest the fasters. A donations box was installed at the GPO and the fasters found a new site for their protest, this time on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral at the corner of Flinders and Swanston streets. The church proved to be a hospitable environment with the Dean of St Paul’s, Reverend Thomas, personally endorsing the actions of the hunger strikers.

After three weeks of fasting on Melbourne’s streets, the Freedom Fasters took their protest to the nation’s capital, setting up camp on the public lawn opposite (old) Parliament House where the Aboriginal Tent Embassy is currently located. During the day, the fasters talked with politicians as they arrived at Parliament and urged them to increase Australian aid for Bangladeshi refugees to $10 million. The imagery of dishevelled, emaciated men on the steps of Parliament House proved irresistible to journalists who readily reported on their cause. Journalists reported that Paul Poernomo and Steve Rooney were prepared to become martyrs unless the McMahon government increased significantly their refugee relief activities. This declaration by the fasters was more than mere rhetoric: after several days of fasting, Poernomo was admitted to Canberra Hospital and fed through an intravenous drip. It is unclear if Poernomo voluntarily admitted himself to the hospital or if the feeding was coerced.46

In the end, FFHC estimated that these three men directly raised nearly $50,000 towards the refugee appeal. Indirectly, the influence of the fasters is hard to quantify. Liberal MP Len Reid believed that their actions contributed to the decision of the Australian government to increase Bangladesh refugee relief by $500,000. The fasters also raised awareness in the community, forcing passers-by to bear witness to the suffering of the strikers, and by extension, the suffering of Bangladeshi refugees. In their December newsletter, FFHC concluded:

It was a magnificent act on the part of these young people. They gave of themselves to an ultimate degree of selflessness [...] That Australia and Australians should see their place as a cooperating part of a new global neighbourhood is no longer an abstractly visionary thing but a subject of

46 The narrative of the Freedom Fasters has been compiled from various news articles in Folders 398 and 399 “Vic Press Clippings 1971”, Box 66; Folder 433 “1971 Interstate press clippings (SA, ACT)”, Box 71 and Folder 434 “Interstate press clippings (Tas)”, Box 71, Records of the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign.
immediate, practical relevance to us all. And what the fasters did was beautiful. It showed what humanity is all about.47

Like the school students earlier in 1971, the Freedom Fasters were effective political communicators because they triggered an emotional response from the public. As Johanna Siméant explains, the personal suffering of the hunger striker renders indifference impossible, for the public or the state.48 Furthermore, the potential for martyrdom — intrinsic to any high-risk protest — created a spectacle, a drama unfolding. By depriving themselves of food day after day in public spaces, the fasters became physically weaker but symbolically more powerful. Hunger strikes are generally successful because this method empowers people who are otherwise powerless. It is a confrontational form of protest; non-violent but still somehow aggressive, forcing passers-by to know the suffering of others.49 With conviction, these three, unrelated men from the suburbs of Melbourne humbly but forcefully demanded assistance for the Bangladeshi refugees, and did so arguably with greater success than well-resourced NGOs and members of Parliament.

Conclusions
This article contributes to the field in three main ways. Firstly, it extends our understanding of western nations involved indirectly in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Existing scholarship typically focusses on the activities of western governments, and while this area of history is important, it does not tell the whole story. The activism of individuals outside of the NGO sector proved critical, and in a sense, can be viewed as part of the protest movements that spread across the world during the 1960s and 1970s. Secondly, this paper enhances our knowledge of Australian attitudes towards refugees in the second half of the twentieth century. The resettlement of post-Second World War anti-communist refugees is a burgeoning field; the arrival of Indo-Chinese refugees and asylum-seekers has also been well documented by historians. What is less well known is the degree of empathy and charity shown by Australians, and belatedly the Australian government, towards Bangladeshi refugees. Australians have a long history in Bengal, from nineteenth century Baptist evangelists to Lord Richard Casey’s governorship from 1944 to 1946. Hopefully future research will continue this exploration of Australians in South Asia. Thirdly, this research adds to the flourishing field of histories of everyday humanitarianism by analysing under-utilised archival materials, including constituent letters to politicians and donation data. In doing so, this article draws our attention to the suburban nature of Australian refugee relief efforts, at least during the 1971 war.

This article argues that Australian aid efforts for Bangladeshi refugees was primarily a citizen-driven, grassroots movement that had a momentum independent of media coverage, NGO campaigning or political posturing. It aims to draw our attention to the ways in which individuals on the political margins found innovative ways to influence aid outcomes and government policies. This article demonstrates that groups of people traditionally silenced in political discourse, for example, children, adolescents and working-class adults, were in fact very active during the 1971 refugee crisis, and their

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actions had impact. It almost seems that in this episode at least, conviction was more important than cash. One can only hope.
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