

From Scepticism to Alarmism

Conceptualising Climate-Related Movement

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Climate Change and Migration in the Asia-Pacific
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Episode 0: An ancient phenomenon



John Steinbeck
Les raisins
de la colère





Conceptualising the climate-migration nexus

- ▶ Two different perspectives:

Scepticism vs Alarmism

- ▶ Different advocates
- ▶ Different agendas
- ▶ Different arenas

- ▶ Organised around a key question:

Is climate-related movement a new category of migration?



Episode 1

The sceptical perspective

- ▶ Made up primarily of migration scholars and refugee lawyers
 - ▶ Dismisses the idea that climate-related movement is anything different, and insists on the multi-causality of migration
 - ▶ Does not advocate the development of new policy/legal instruments
 - ▶ Policy agenda: protect current rights of migrants and refugees
 - ▶ *Initially dominant.*
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Episode 2

The return of the alarmist perspective

- ▶ Made up primarily of environmental scholars, NGOs, and the media.
- ▶ Sees migration flows as one of the most devastating consequences of climate change.
- ▶ Policy agenda: mobilise action around climate change.
- ▶ *Soon overthrown the sceptical perspective as the dominant perspective*



A dramatic discourse – ‘The Phantom Menace’

- ▶ Migrants portrayed as expiatory, resourceless victims of climate change.
 - ▶ The ‘human faces’ of climate change
- ▶ A direct, causal relationship between climate change and migration is assumed.
- ▶ Expectation that these displacements will be forced and international.
- ▶ Environmental determinism: assumption that the nature and extent of the migration flows will depend upon the impacts of climate change.
- ▶ Perceived as a threat to security.
 - ▶ A ‘disaster ready for consumption’ (Farbotko, 2011)





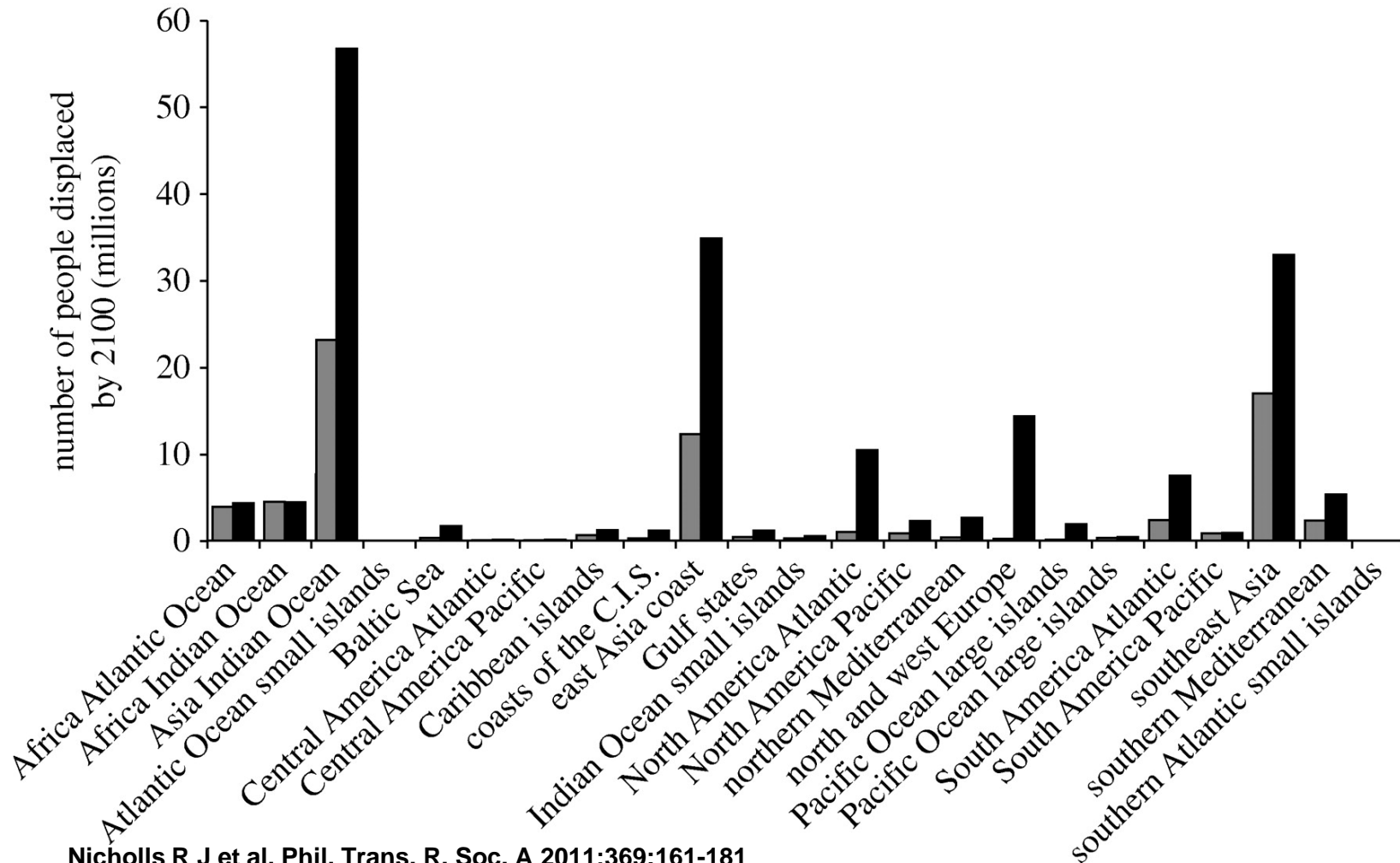
London Futures, exhibition at the Museum of London





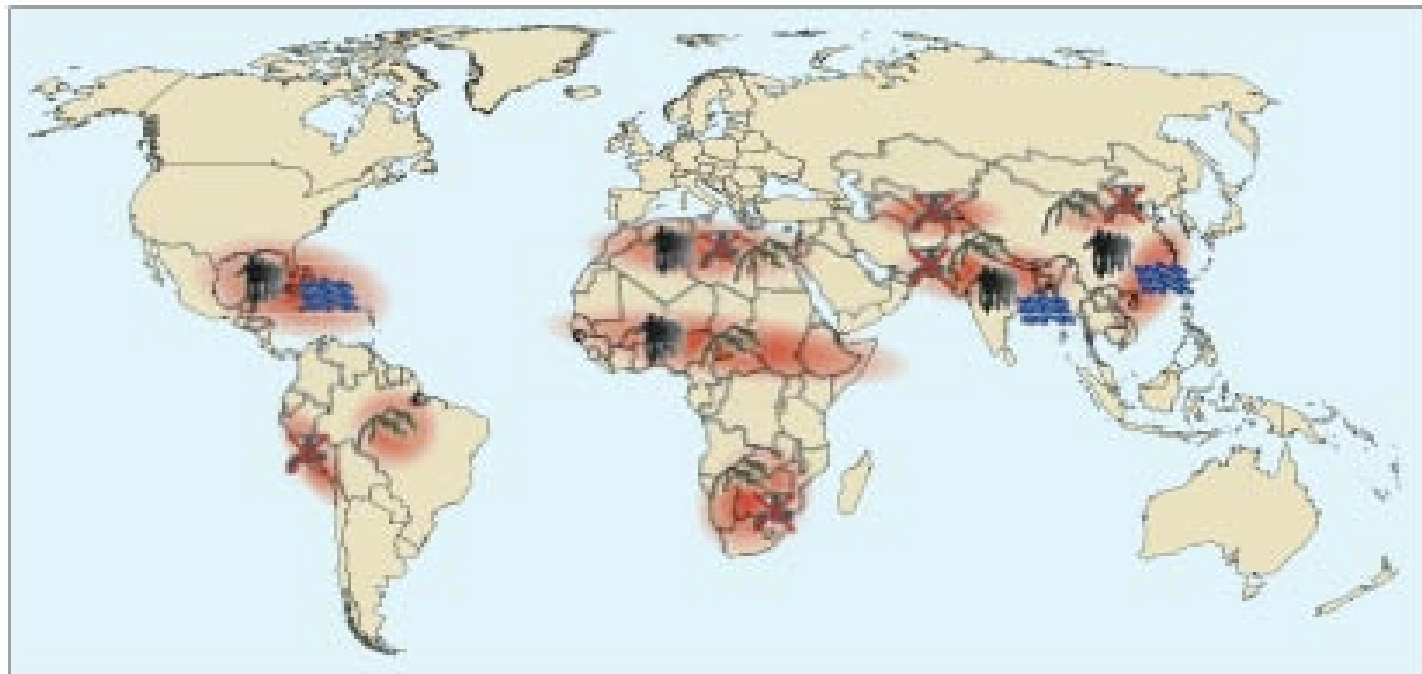
A deterministic perspective

The distribution of net population displacement over the twenty-first century by region assuming no protection for a 0.5 m (grey bars) and a 2.0 m (black bars) rise in sea level.



Nicholls R J et al. Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A 2011;369:161-181

A security agenda



Conflict constellations in selected hotspots



Climate-induced degradation
of freshwater resources



Climate-induced decline
in food production



Hotspot



Climate-induced increase
in storm and flood disasters



Environmentally-induced
migration

CLIMATE REFUGEES

There is a new phenomenon in the global arena called "Climate Refugees". A climate refugee is a person displaced by climatically induced environmental disasters. Such disasters result from incremental and rapid ecological change, resulting in increased droughts, desertification, sea level rise, and the more frequent occurrence of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, cyclones, fires, mass flooding and tornadoes. All this is causing mass global migration and border conflicts. For the first time, the Pentagon now considers climate change a national security risk and the term climate wars is being talked about in war-room like environments in Washington D.C.



A powerful instrument:
Small island states as laboratories of climate change



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- ▶ Islands are viewed as the incarnation of the impacts of climate change
 - ▶ Islanders as the first witnesses (and the first victims) of climate change
 - ▶ This representation has increasingly been used by SIDS governments make their voices heard in the negotiations

Islands seem to matter only because they disappear





17 October 2009



In Copenhagen, they had forgotten to put the small islands on the giant globe that was in the middle of the conference hall.



Canaries in the coalmine

- ▶ Canaries were used in coalmines to alert miners about the presence of toxic gases.
- ▶ Likewise, ‘refugees’ from small islands are supposed to alert us about the dangers of climate change.
- ▶ Deterministic perspective: migration presented as unavoidable.

Though well-intentioned, this rhetoric is deeply self-centred:

- ✓ « Look at them to see what’s going to happen to us »
- ✓ In the coalmine, canaries were never saved
- ✓ ‘Climate refugees’ are the living proof that climate change is happening



Policy-wise, an excessive focus...

- ...On the development of new legal instruments
At the expense of migration governance
- ...On climate change
At the expense of natural disasters and other environmental changes
- ...On humanitarian challenges
At the expense of adaptation, development and justice
- ...On those who leave
At the expense of those who stay behind



The Parliament of the
Commonwealth of Australia

THE SENATE

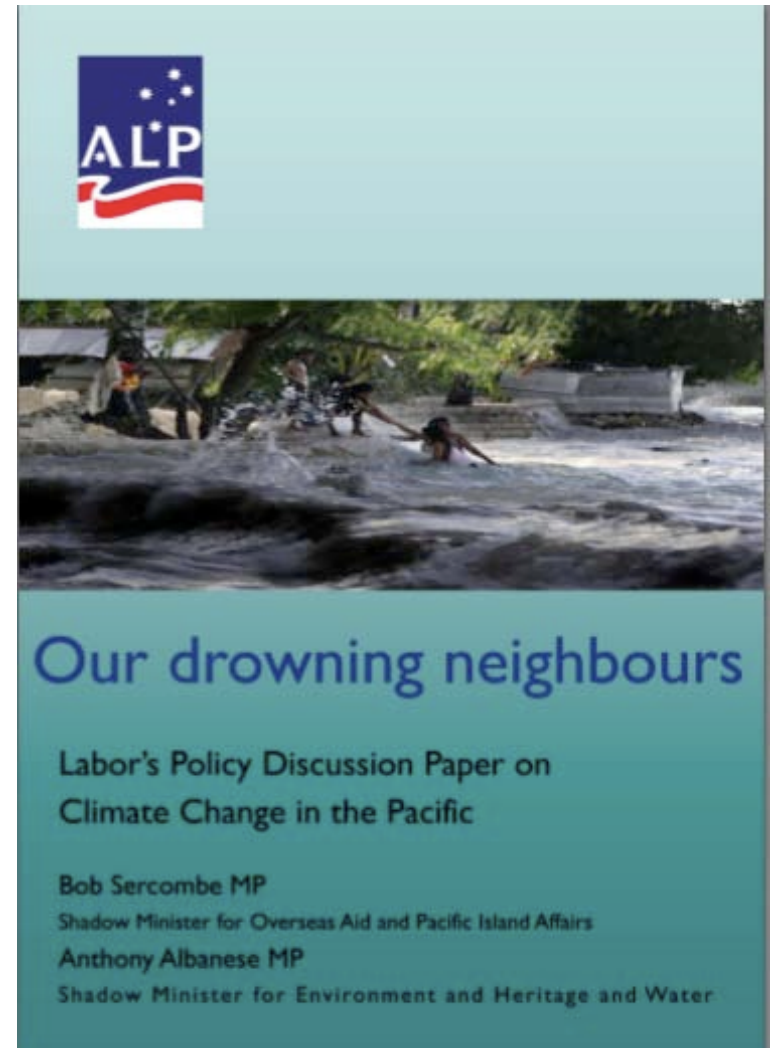
Presented and read a first time

Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill 2007

No. , 2007

(Senator Nettle)

**A Bill for an Act to recognise refugees of climate
change induced environmental disasters, and for
related purposes**



Some well-intentioned reactions in Australia

Episode 3:

The sceptical perspective strikes back



Families in Bangladesh seek safer areas after severe floods in 2007.

Migration as adaptation

Mobility can bring opportunities for coping with environmental change, say **Richard Black, Stephen R. G. Bennett, Sandy M. Thomas and John R. Beddington.**

POLICY RESEARCH WORKING PAPER

5270

BACKGROUND PAPER TO THE 2010 WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Accommodating Migration to Promote Adaptation to Climate Change

*Jon Barnett
Michael Webber*

Some conclusive thoughts

- ▶ Climate-related movement is now largely established as demanding specific attention
 - ▶ The sceptical perspective aims to re-embed it as part of global migration dynamics
- ▶ New defining question:
Is migration a failure to adapt, or an adaptation strategy?
- ▶ *End result:* Current drift towards UNFCCC as the best framework to address the issue
 - ▶ Environmental migration becoming a matter of environmental policies rather than of migration policies
 - ▶ Environmental displacements not related to climate change are forgotten
- ▶ At the end of the day: The issue is both an empirical reality and a political construction... but they don't match with each other.

