

Australian general election:

Both parties stoke anti-immigrant prejudice

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9 October 2001

Australian Liberal Prime Minister John Howard has brought anti-immigrant xenophobia to the centre of his strategy for winning the November 10 general election. By playing on the economic insecurities created by his own government's policies and demonising asylum seekers, he hopes to claw back disaffected sections of the electorate that deserted the conservative Liberal-National parties over the past five years for the racist and populist One Nation party. At the last general election in 1998, One Nation attracted around one million voters.

Last week the government sharply escalated its ongoing campaign against "boat people," conducting a highly publicised four-day military operation, using combat soldiers and federal police, against a group of desperate, frightened asylum-seekers off the coast of Nauru, a tiny Pacific island to Australia's north.

On October 1, under orders from Defence Minister Peter Reith, Australian soldiers in full battle fatigues began forcing the asylum-seekers off the military troop carrier *HMAS Manoora*, so that they could be bussed to a refugee detention camp on Nauru. For two weeks the asylum seekers had refused to leave the *Manoora* in protest at the denial of their rights, under international law, to apply for refugee status in Australia.

The 267 refugees, many of them women and small children, were initially compelled to board the *Manoora* by navy personnel one month ago. Their small fishing boat the *Aceng* had been intercepted by a navy frigate, *HMAS Warramunga*, at Australia's Ashmore Reef. On the *Manoora* they joined 433 Afghan refugees seized by Special Air Services (SAS) troops days earlier off the Norwegian freighter, the *Tampa*.

Television footage showed helmeted and armed soldiers frog-marching ashore two groups of six Palestinians and Iraqis, including one woman, all singled out as leaders of the *Manoora* protest. They were then herded single-file onto waiting minibuses. Apparently deceived into leaving the *Manoora* with promises they would meet with immigration officials, the refugees called out to reporters, condemning the government's actions: "We are escaping from Saddam Hussein. Then we are arrested here. Australian government, the second face of Saddam Hussein," they shouted.

The next day, the Nauruan government raised concerns with

its Australian counterparts about the use of force against the refugees. Having agreed to detain the asylum-seekers in hastily erected camps in return for more than \$20 million in Australian aid—boosted last week by another \$4 million (needed to pay the salaries of government employees)—Nauru's government was clearly nervous at the prospect of managing a potentially rebellious population of captives. Chief Secretary Matthew Batsiua insisted that only asylum-seekers leaving the *Manoora* voluntarily would be accepted ashore.

While Howard's ministers assured the Nauruan government they would respect these terms, back home Howard made clear there would be no retreat, telling one of his favourite talkback radio hosts: "We are respectful obviously to Nauru's sensitivities but it has to be also understood that there's no way that these people are coming to Australia."

The next day soldiers, joined by Australian Federal Police and Protective Service officers, transferred three more groups of refugees from the *Manoora*. But the operation was halted by Nauruan police officials when it became clear that asylum-seekers were again being forced ashore against their will. The third group was prevented from disembarking after a struggle broke out on the landing craft. The occupants—including women, small children and a baby—remained stranded in burning heat for more than two hours before being transferred under guard by Australian soldiers.

By Thursday evening the remaining 160 refugees, mostly women with small children whose husbands were by now already in the detention camp, had been taken ashore. Australian authorities again claimed their prisoners were leaving voluntarily, but TV images showed refugees shouting angrily at reporters, with many crying or otherwise visibly distressed, as they were loaded onto waiting buses.

While the *Manoora* has now been "cleared", *HMAS Tobruk*, still in use as a floating prison for 259 refugees seized on September 13 near Ashmore Reef, is heading for Nauru. But, following the Howard government's treatment of the *Manoora* refugees, the UNHCR has stated it will not process the refugee claims of those on board the *Tobruk*. Australian officials will reportedly travel to Nauru to process these claims, although the legality of any such effort is far from clear.

By the end of next week, the total number of refugees being

held on the island could reach close to 1,000—nearly 10 percent of the population. Facilities on Nauru, stripped bare by decades of Australian phosphate mining, will be stretched to breaking point with the *Manoora* asylum seekers forced to swelter in makeshift tents and construction of a second camp, meant for those on board the *Tobruk*, not even begun.

These measures provide an initial glimpse of what the legislation, recently rushed through federal parliament, will mean for thousands of people fleeing war and economic devastation in Central Asia and the Middle East. The Border Protection and Migration Amendment acts, passed with the support of the Australian Labor Party, give the federal government sweeping powers, including the use of military force, to prevent refugees applying for asylum in Australia, remove them to another country and strip them of any right of appeal.

Opposition Labor leader Kim Beazley has been at pains to portray his party as even tougher on “border protection” than the Liberals. After *HMAS Adelaide* forced another refugee boat out of Australian waters over the weekend, Beazley attacked Howard’s anti-immigrant measures, saying they were “not working”. He held up as the alternative Labor’s proposed national coast guard, which, he claimed, would mean “a cop on the beat for 52 weeks of the year” as the only way to keep asylum-seekers from Australia’s shores.

Both Howard and the Labor opposition are working to make refugees the scapegoats for mounting social tensions within Australia. After the SAS seizure of the Afghan refugees aboard the *Tampa* on August 27, a naval cordon, codenamed Operation Reflex, was established, with bipartisan support, along Australia’s northern coastline to chase away boats carrying asylum seekers. As well, Howard has announced the construction of three new detention centres on the Australian mainland and is pressing ahead with plans to build an asylum camp next to a dump on Christmas Island, despite protests by locals. With facilities on Nauru close to full, immigration and foreign affairs officials are scouting the Pacific Ocean for new penal campsites. They are reportedly close to reaching a deal with Kiribati for the use of far-flung Kanton Island, the site of a disused military base.

Among sections of the Australian ruling elite, Howard’s anti-immigrant campaign has evoked a degree of consternation. An editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* on Wednesday declared that Nauru’s veto on the use of force had exposed Howard’s strongarm tactics as a costly and ineffective “stunt”. Former Labor prime minister Paul Keating, whose government introduced the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in 1992, warned that the Liberal government’s actions were damaging Australia’s substantial economic interests in the Asian region. “We are now nothing in this part of world... after three terms of Howard, we’ve got marginalisation in Asia,” he declared.

Howard, Reith and Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock have all taken to talkback radio to promote the government’s

actions. Ruddock claimed that those asylum-seekers who protested their forced landing at Nauru were simply playing to the TV cameras and pulling “a few stunts”. Howard asserted that “anybody who criticises what the Australian government has done [is] out of touch with what people think”.

Just a few months ago, the Coalition was trailing Labor in the opinion polls by more than fifteen points, with the Liberal and National parties suffering a series of heavy defeats in state and territory elections during the course of the year. Following the Howard government’s use of SAS troops against refugees on the *Tampa*, opinion polls showed the Coalition moving ahead of Labor. At the end of September, polls indicated that Labor was trailing the Coalition by up to 15 points. That the Prime Minister is tapping into One Nation’s constituency has been underscored by the extreme right-wing outfit itself. One Nation’s Senate ticket leader in Western Australia, Graeme Campbell, applauded Howard’s anti-refugee stance and declared that One Nation in that state would allocate its election preferences to the Liberals.

The founder of One Nation, Pauline Hanson, issued a press release last week congratulating Howard on his decision to use troops against the *Manoora* asylum seekers. “This is a positive sign,” she declared, “but these illegal boat people should have been forced to disembark weeks ago”. She went on to claim credit for the government’s actions. “John Howard must have visited our website and read my press release on this issue... John Howard is following my lead and then claiming my ideas as his own. I am the unofficial Liberal Party advisor.”



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