

Australian election: The Howard government's big lie unravels

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Over the past 48 hours, Prime Minister Howard and two of his senior ministers have been caught out lying as part of their bid to whip up racist and xenophobic sentiment for today's general election.

On October 7, just two days after calling the election, Howard, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and Defence Minister Peter Reith accused Iraqi asylum seekers intercepted north of Christmas Island of throwing their children into the ocean in an attempt to pressure the crew of an Australian warship into picking them up and taking them to Australia. The three politicians claimed to be acting upon reports supplied by the navy.

The concocted story demonised the refugees, depicting them as evil and inhuman, in order to justify the government's use of the navy to repel leaking and over-crowded refugee boats. "I regard this as one of the most disturbing practices I've come across," Ruddock declared. "It was clearly planned and premeditated" with "the intention of putting us under duress".

Interviewed by the right-wing talkback radio host Alan Jones, Howard said he did not want people in Australia who "throw their own children overboard". He insisted that "genuine refugees don't do that," instantly painting them as fakers who should never be granted asylum.

Several days later, facing demands for proof of the allegations, the government produced two hazy photographs of a few people in the water. The pictures were obviously dubious. As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out on October 13, they proved nothing: "They showed six people, including two children, all with their faces blocked out, swimming in water, wearing life jackets. Who were these people? When and where were they photographed? Why were they in the water? What happened before they got there?"

No such questions bothered the media. The photos were splashed all over front pages and TV bulletins. "Proof that boat people threw children overboard" was the headline in Rupert Murdoch's *Sydney Daily Telegraph*.

Defence Minister Peter Reith insisted that the navy had a video that "shows a child being pushed into the water" and "the fact of the matter is that this did happen". Howard told the media that the video provided "starker evidence" of the government's allegations. Yet, for four weeks they refused to

release it, offering a variety of bizarre excuses. In the end, Reith cited "security reasons". The real reason was that they obviously knew that it contradicted their claims.

In order to protect the government, strict military censorship was applied. This has since been denounced by an outraged former navy chief, Sir Richard Peek, as Nazi-style censorship. Naval personnel were forbidden to speak to the media. After their tiny boat sank and the navy finally rescued them, the refugees themselves were denied access to reporters. They were held incommunicado on Christmas Island—locked up under tight security to keep them away from local residents—and then airlifted against their will to the remote Papua New Guinean island of Manus, where journalists have also been barred.

Despite these efforts, the lie began to unravel this week when naval officers, disgusted by the government's actions, told Christmas Island residents that the allegations were untrue. A navy consultant psychiatrist who had spent 30 days at sea on warships, boarding and threatening refugee boats, wrote to newspapers describing the military operation as "morally wrong and despicable," serving only to "harass, frighten and demoralise people who are already weak, vulnerable and desperate".

In an attempt at damage control, Reith released the video on Thursday, still claiming that it substantiated the government's charges. But the video did not show any children in the sea. Instead, it showed several people diving off a heavily-laden small boat that was wallowing dangerously in a heavy swell.

Naval sources then revealed that the government's photographs of people in the water had been taken 36 hours later, after the refugee boat finally capsized and the *HMAS Adelaide* rescued its passengers. Moreover, questioned by reporters, the navy chief Vice Admiral David Shackleton stated categorically that the navy had never reported that children were thrown into the sea.

With his entire fabrication collapsing, Howard was thrown into disarray. In desperation, he took the unprecedented step of quoting from a classified report by the Office of National Assessments (ONA)—a political intelligence agency attached to the Prime Minister's Office. According to Howard, it stated that "asylum seekers wearing life-jackets jumped into the sea and children were thrown in with them".

Shackleton was prevailed upon to issue a statement that he was not contradicting the Defence Minister. Performing a complete public about-face, he stated that “Defence” had advised the government that children were tossed overboard.

In another last-ditch effort to cover their tracks, Howard and Ruddock told the media that they had acted on informal accounts given to military commanders at a social function.

These twists and turns only made one thing clear. The navy did not supply the government’s fabrications. The closer the story got to the government, via the Defence chiefs, the ONA and the Immigration Department, the grosser the distortions became.

As soon as Shackleton issued his retraction, Howard demanded a new set of media interviews, including with the ABC TV *Lateline* program, with whom he had already recorded a final election interview.

Incredibly, Howard now argued that it made no difference whether children were actually thrown into the sea or not. All that mattered was that he acted on a report “in good faith”. In any case, he asserted, the video showed a man holding a child over the boat’s railing. This conduct was just as reprehensible, he maintained—a line echoed by Ruddock.

The next day, however, the *Australian* newspaper reported being told by a naval petty officer that the child was being displayed to show that children were on board. “They were holding them up to show ‘we have small children on board’. They were not holding them over the sides of the boat,” he said. “There were definitely no young people thrown into the water.”

Why the child was held up for sailors to see is obvious. As maritime experts have observed after viewing the video, the packed refugee boat was on the brink of sinking. Even more frightening for the boat’s passengers, the *Adelaide* had just fired a volley of at least 40 rounds toward their boat. This was carried out on the government’s orders, intended to terrify the 233 mainly Iraqi passengers, who included 54 children and 42 women, and force them to try to sail back to Indonesia, hundreds of kilometres away.

In his second *Lateline* interview, Howard dodged questions on when the now notorious photographs were taken, saying that only Reith could provide the answers. On Friday, however, Reith—who is not standing for re-election—went to ground. He left his office and refused to speak with the media.

Reith’s silence did not stop the same methods of vilification being applied to another boatload of Middle Eastern asylum seekers yesterday. At least two women drowned and another 160 people, including 30 children, had to be plucked from a capsized vessel after it was intercepted by a warship near Australia’s Ashmore Reef. Just as they did a month ago, Howard and Ruddock immediately damned the refugees, this time accusing them of deliberately setting the boat alight. Late last night and without explanation, Ruddock suddenly retracted the allegation, saying instead that the boat may have caught fire

accidentally.

The two women who died are the latest victims of Australia’s immigration policy. On October 19, more than 350 Middle Eastern asylum seekers drowned when their over-loaded Indonesian fishing boat sank in the Java Sea as they were trying to reach Australia. International Office of Migration officials confirmed that Australia’s naval blockade was causing people smugglers to herd larger numbers of refugees onto each boat. Members of at least five families perished as a direct result of the government having barred them from being reunited with their husbands and fathers, who are living as refugees in Australia.

Despite the disintegration of their credibility, Howard and Ruddock have gone into election day determined to maintain refugee bashing as the axis of their campaign. Yesterday, the Liberal Party took out full-page election eve newspaper advertisements, quoting Howard’s speech at his policy launch: “We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come”. Howard was pictured standing with fists clenched between two Australian flags.

The Labor Party has vowed to maintain the same brutal policy. In fact, ALP leader Kim Beazley stands equally exposed by the collapse of the government’s lie. When Howard, Ruddock and Reith reviled the asylum seekers, Beazley joined their attack. The asylum seekers had committed an “outrageous act,” he stated on October 8.

As the lie continued to unravel on Thursday, Beazley did his best to protect the government. At two press conferences, he refused to comment on the scandal. Only at a third conference on Thursday evening, with the story already raging, did he accuse Reith of lying about the video. But he steadfastly continued to refuse to condemn Howard.

In his attack on Reith, Beazley declared that “at the heart of this election campaign is a giant lie”. Nevertheless, he pledged to uphold the policy out of which that lie emerged. He reiterated his vow that a Labor government would continue to forcibly turn back “boat people” and retain the government’s so-called border protection legislation, which authorises the use of military force against refugee boats.

Thus, the official election campaign has ended as it began—with both major parties vilifying asylum seekers. From start to finish, the anti-refugee witchhunt has been whipped up as a cynical diversion from the deepening social crisis facing millions of ordinary working people, as a result of the free-market policies pursued by Labor and Liberal governments alike.



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