

Australian government resorts to anti-African witch hunt

Will Marshall, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Melbourne
12 October 2007

With a federal election imminent and opinion polls predicting a rout for the government, Australian Prime Minister John Howard is once again playing the race card, this time directed against Sudanese and other African immigrants. As he has done repeatedly over the past decade, Howard is deliberately encouraging divisive racist sentiment to divert attention from his own government's responsibility for the slashing of essential services and deepening social inequality.

Howard's front-man this time is Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews. Andrews, who two months ago cut the quota for African refugees, made much publicised comments last week, blaming them for failing to "integrate" and "adjust into the Australian way of life". Without any evidence whatsoever, Andrews declared that Africans were over-represented in "crime, the incidence of gangs and other undesirable activities". He persisted even after Victorian Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon reported that Sudanese were actually under-represented in crime statistics.

Andrews's comments come amid a filthy media campaign in Melbourne, in which even the tragic death of a 17-year-old Sudanese refugee, Liep Gony, has been cited as evidence of "African gangs". Those charged with bashing the teenager to death are two non-Africans. In this poisonous climate, another African teenager, Anjang Gor, was violently attacked in Melbourne on Tuesday. In an attempt to further inflame tensions, Andrews used an assault on a Melbourne detective on Thursday, allegedly by Sudanese youth following Gony's funeral, by again highlighting violence involving the Sudanese community.

Andrews has denied that his comments and actions are racist. But singling out and discriminating against any segment of the population on the basis of skin colour and country of origin constitutes a classic case of racism. Andrews has chosen to victimise one of the most oppressed and vulnerable segments of the working class: African refugees forced to flee war, political persecution and deprivation. Andrews may be cautious with his words, but there is no doubt that he is encouraging an anti-African witch hunt.

Sudanese Community Association of Australia president Samuel Kuot said Andrews's remarks had inflamed feelings against African immigrants. "The Sudanese community, as well as the African community, expects an apology from the minister. The community is angry, many people are crying and emotional. We came to this country and expected it to be safe, and if you bring someone you need to protect them—you can't turn against them."

Far from apologising, the minister yesterday stepped up his campaign, telling an International Metropolis Conference that "public confidence" in the immigration program would be undermined if "community concerns" about Africans were not aired. Andrews said there had "always been a section of the community who have been nervous about the potential for migration to impact detrimentally on them".

These comments deliberately encourage the most socially deprived layers to blame immigrants, in this case Africans, for the lack of jobs, the deterioration of social services and falling living standards created by the Howard government's policies. The claims of an "African crime wave" echo the government's lies about "children overboard" during the 2001 election campaign. To demonise Middle Eastern asylum seekers, Howard and his ministers falsely accused refugees of throwing their own children into the ocean to force naval vessels to rescue them.

With Howard under pressure to announce an already overdue election, the timing of Andrews's comments is not accidental. He initially unveiled a reduction in the refugee intake from Africa back in August, justifying it on the basis that extra places were needed for Iraqi and Burmese asylum seekers. The immigration minister announced a freeze on African refugee arrivals until July 2008, reducing the proportion of African humanitarian migrants in the small 13,000 annual intake from 70 percent in 2004-05 to 30 percent.

Refugee groups pointed to the obvious inhumanity and hypocrisy of the government's decision, given the dire situation in Sudan. They also noted the government's previous vilification of Iraqi refugees and the fact that seven Burmese asylum seekers have been languishing for more than a year in an Australian-financed detention camp on the remote Pacific island of Nauru. Nevertheless, the decision attracted little publicity.

Andrews deliberately ignited the anti-African crusade in an October 2 interview with radio talk-show host Neil Mitchell. Referring to Sudanese immigrants, Andrews declared: "There does seem to be something occurring in terms of their ability to be able to settle at the kind of rate that you would normally expect migrants to settle into Australia."

Repeatedly challenged to produce data to back his charges, Andrews has simply asserted that Sudanese refugees have had little schooling and many have spent years in refugee camps. But it is precisely such conditions, faced by millions in Africa and the Middle East, that force people to seek refuge in other countries. By

Andrews's logic, the world's doors should be slammed shut against the neediest refugees.

If traumatised and impoverished people are having difficulty "settling" in Australia, it is first and foremost because of the government's refusal to provide adequate English-language classes and other educational, employment, housing and welfare services for them. New arrivals receive only 510 hours of English lessons, for example, leaving many unable to communicate well enough to get jobs, read basic information or make new friends. According to a recent study, the proportion of people who graduate from the government's adult English-language programs with functional English has fallen to 1 out of 10.

Asked to prove his "crime wave" and "gang" claims, Andrews has maintained that he can only cite anecdotal evidence from unnamed police and other sources, because the reports he relies upon are "cabinet in confidence". Andrews used similar methods—selective leaks to the media from supposedly confidential documents—in the government's last scare campaign: its ultimately discredited attempt to frame-up Indian Muslim doctor Mohammed Haneef on "terrorism" charges.

As with Haneef, gutter journalism has played a prominent part in the anti-African campaign. Two days after Andrews's radio interview, Rupert Murdoch's Melbourne *Herald-Sun* reported that Sudanese gangs were creating havoc in entire suburbs, leaving residents "living in terror".

The previous night, the Seven, Nine and Ten television networks all ran footage purportedly showing Sudanese youth bashing a victim, threatening a shopkeeper and robbing a liquor store. Channel Seven's coverage screamed: "Sudanese gangs caught on camera as the government shuts the door on African immigrants.... Tonight we can show you the terror experienced by a Noble Park shopkeeper at the hands of an ethnic gang. They've been identified by police as predominantly Sudanese youths caught on camera stealing and striking fear into those around them."

But, as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Media Watch" program documented last Monday, none of those involved in the violence was African. Victorian police emphatically denied Seven's claims about a separate incident that an African man vowed to rape and kill a female police officer.

Not surprisingly, right-wing Senate candidate Pauline Hanson, the former One Nation party leader, joined the fray, insisting that the government cut African refugee numbers to keep crime and disease out of Australia. "You can't bring people into the country who are incompatible with our way of life and culture," she declared. Hanson mounted a strident anti-refugee and anti-Aboriginal campaign in the late 1990s, seeking to exploit the discontent generated by the Howard government's assault on social conditions, before the government itself adopted virtually all of her platform in the lead-up to the 2001 election.

No less predictable has been Labor's response. On this issue, like every other, it has backed the government to the hilt. In a series of interviews, shadow immigration minister Tony Burke strongly defended the cut in the African intake as a necessary "rebalancing" of the humanitarian program. Burke refused to accept that the Liberals were playing the race card, saying successive governments had always considered whether a "person

will be able to be successfully settled in Australia" before granting a humanitarian visa.

Burke also emphasised that immigration policy had long been maintained on a "bipartisan" basis. Indeed, it was Labor that began the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in the early 1990s, a policy to which it remains completely committed. In 2001, Labor lined up behind Howard's election declaration that "we will decide who enters this country" and supported the forced removal to Nauru of the 439 refugees who had been rescued at sea by the captain and crew of the Tampa, a Norwegian container ship.

Burke's solidarity with Andrews is not simply a clever electoral tactic. Labor is as committed as the Howard government to upholding the entire framework of national immigration controls, which allow governments to arbitrarily restrict the movement of poor and working people, including the most desperate refugees, while welcoming the wealthy and "cashed up" with open arms. Like the government its aim is to split and divide working people and prevent the development of a conscious political movement directed at the real cause of social deprivation and inequality—the profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally condemns the Howard government and the Labor opposition for their racist scapegoating of African refugees. We stand for the fundamental democratic right of all, regardless of race, colour, ethnicity, religion or class, to travel, live and work where they choose, with full political, legal and social rights. This basic internationalist principle is an essential component of the fight to unify the struggles of the working class internationally for the global reorganisation of economic and social life along fraternal, egalitarian and socialist lines.

Authorised by N. Beams, 40 Raymond Street, Bankstown, NSW



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact