

# “Pressure politics” at Sydney protest over asylum seekers

Mathew Benn  
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A demonstration outside the Department of Immigration and Citizenship was held yesterday in Sydney to protest the Rudd Government’s callous treatment of Tamil asylum seekers, who have been refused entry to Australia.

The rally was called by the Refugee Action Committee (RAC), backed by the protest group Solidarity and Labor Party members. Around 100 people participated, with Greens supporters in the majority, along with Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance members who held up placards against the Rudd government’s refugee policy. The event concluded with the handing over of a letter, addressed to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Chris Evans and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, to an official.

The most significant feature of the protest was that not a single speaker expressed a word of opposition to the fundamental basis of the government’s reactionary refugee policy—its restrictions on the rights of refugees. On the contrary, speaker after speaker demanded that the existing restrictions be simply modified to allow for a more “compassionate” approach.



The political line was set by the RAC’s Ian Rintoul, a leading member of Solidarity. “We are here to send a very clear message to Kevin Rudd and the Labor

Government that we want a welcome refugee policy. We don’t want any more of the kinds of policies that we saw under the Howard regime.” He and other speakers made repeated appeals to the Rudd government to show “compassion” to asylum seekers.

Retiring Greens state MP Sylvia Hale made clear that such appeals were compatible with the defence of the government’s racist immigration restrictions: “It is Australia’s responsibility to recognise its obligations and grant asylum to those people who meet the requirements. And if there are people who do not meet the requirements for asylum then they should be returned in a manner that is safe and respectful and ensures their safety.”

Hale’s comments drew shocked looks from those attending who had perhaps not thought through the implications of maintaining border entry requirements. But neither Rintoul nor any of the other groups opposed Hale’s position.

Discussion was kept entirely within the parliamentary framework, with heavy doses of Australian nationalism. Adrian Francis of the Tamil Youth Organisation opened his speech by quoting two lines from the Australian national anthem “Advance Australia Fair”: “For those who’ve come across the seas we’ve boundless plains to share.” This drew cheers from some in the audience and after his speech, Rintoul asked him to repeat the lines.

Francis went on to cite some of the appalling conditions in Sri Lanka from which refugees are fleeing, and then declared “so it’s really important that we here put as much pressure on the Australian

government to be as compassionate as possible... We ask them to look into their hearts deep down inside and to look at this from a human perspective not a political perspective.”

Rintoul praised as “a breath of fresh air” the comments of union leaders, such as Australian Council of Trade Unions president Sharan Burrow who had earlier stated, “The government should demonstrate Australians’ strong humanitarian values by stepping in and bringing these people to Australia”. No-one mentioned the record of the unions in fostering anti-refugee sentiment or sought to make any deeper analysis as to the political motives behind Burrow’s comments.

The entire event was aimed at fostering false illusions in the Labor Party and the unions. Jenny Haines, founder of the ALP breakaway group “Labor for Refugees” and a former union official, sought to reassure those attending, “Don’t think that you are alone, there are thousands of people inside the [Labor] Party who are just as appalled as you are today at the way in which Kevin Rudd is behaving.”

She went on: “The party policy has changed twice at a national level in 2007 and again this year in 2009, so it’s not the policy that’s the problem within the party, it’s the practice by the politicians, in particular, Kevin Rudd.”

Haines was utilising the stock-in-trade of protest politics: attempting to refashion Labor as being an essentially progressive party, but with a few bad people in power. Her claim that Labor policy “is not the problem” constitutes a complete white-wash. Labor’s refugee policies are virtually identical to those of the previous Howard government, with Rudd boosting funding and resources to “national border protection” and to the ongoing incarceration of asylum seekers.

There is no essential difference between the Howard government’s treatment of refugees on board the Tampa in 2001, and the Rudd government’s actions toward Sri Lankan refugees on the Oceanic Viking. Even more ominously, the drowning deaths of 353 asylum seekers on the ill-fated SIEV X, in October 2001, has proven to be the precursor of 5 refugee

deaths several months ago, and at least another 11 by drowning over the past two days—under Rudd Labor. Both governments, like their predecessors, have utilised anti-refugee racism to whip up xenophobia and to suppress the development of class consciousness in the working class, as economic and social conditions deteriorate.

“Alex”, a Tamil refugee on board a wooden vessel that is languishing in Indonesia’s Merak harbour, communicated via mobile phone to the demonstration. He, along with 250 other refugees have refused to exit from the boat, which attempted to enter Australian waters some three weeks ago.

“Alex” made direct and heart-felt appeals, “We hope that by our struggle that the world changes, that a new order comes into this world to take more consideration for refugees who are risking their lives travelling by such methods....My heart is crying right now for your support.” After chants to the Rudd Government to “let the boats land” “Alex” broke down into tears.

The political purpose of the protest was to corral growing hostility, particularly among workers and young people, back behind the Rudd government on the basis that the ALP as a party would bend, if not to mass pressure, then to emotional appeals. It was yet another display of the bankruptcy of pressure politics.



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