

Australian government's "Indonesian Solution" in disarray

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Nearly two weeks after an Australian customs ship rescued 78 Tamil asylum seekers from a boat in waters north of Australia, the unresolved standoff over their future has focussed attention on the Labor government's inhumane and illegal treatment of refugees.

Instead of transporting the asylum seekers to Australia's Christmas Island, just 80 kilometres away, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd claimed that Jakarta had agreed that the refugees could be taken to an Indonesian immigration detention centre. This, he declared, was in line with a long-term deal that his government was finalising with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to incarcerate more asylum seekers in Indonesia.

Dubbed the "Indonesian Solution" by the Australian media, the agreement was in disarray last week after the refugees from Sri Lanka refused to leave the ship, the *Oceanic Viking*, and local Indonesian authorities announced they would not forcibly remove them. It was an "Australian problem", an Indonesian government spokesman declared.

Faced with this political impasse, Rudd continued to insist that the refugees would be detained in Indonesia while absurdly declaring that his government was implementing a "humane" asylum-seeker policy. Foreign Minister Stephen Smith falsely claimed that the refugees had no legal right to have their refugee status assessed on Australian soil and refused to rule out the use of force to disembark them in Indonesia.

The determination of the Tamil refugees not to be bullied by Australian authorities and growing disgust amongst broad layers of ordinary Australians over the callous treatment of the asylum seekers has brought to the surface tactical differences in the Australian political establishment over how to respond.

One section has demanded that the Rudd government maintain its tough stance and end the impasse by forcibly removing the asylum seekers from the *Oceanic Viking*. Writing in the *Australian* last Friday, foreign affairs editor Greg Sheridan called on Labor to "bite the bullet". The headline "Rudd must stand firm over his Tampa" was a reference to the

Howard government's ruthless use of the military in August 2001 to prevent over 400 asylum seekers entering Australia's migration zone.

Sheridan declared that the forcible removal of the Tamil refugees "was always implicit in the decision" to pick them up and called for Australian Federal Police and/or Australian navy personnel "to do the job". "If the government ultimately backs down and brings the boat directly back to Christmas Island, and thereby effectively delivers permanent residency to all its occupants, this would be a tremendous defeat for the government," he declared.

The *Australian* editorial on Saturday—"Nation needs bolder leadership from PM"—reinforced the point. "Border protection"—a euphemism for the mandatory detention and other anti-democratic measures against asylum seekers—was "the unwritten contract that has underpinned Australia's sense of itself as a nation," the newspaper declared.

The "unwritten contract" in fact refers to the stock-in-trade of the political establishment for well over a century: the use of anti-immigrant racism to divert attention from unemployment, poverty and the failures of government policy and to divide Australian workers from the working class in Asia and internationally. It is no accident that the present anti-asylum seeker hysteria from the Rudd government, urged on by the Liberal-National coalition and the media, has emerged with the social distress caused by the developing global economic crisis.

Other sections of the Australian political elite have criticised the "Indonesian solution" and raised nervous concerns about the continuing standoff over the *Oceanic Viking*. Various media commentators and trade union bureaucrats have described the impasse as a "fiasco" and called for a "humane solution".

These comments are animated not by concerns over the fate of the Tamil asylum seekers and other poverty-stricken men, women and children attempting to find a safe and secure future, but by anxiety over Australia's business relations in Asia and

elsewhere and growing popular opposition to the policy at home.

Brendan Nicholson in the *Age* on October 30, for example, warned that it was necessary to take Tamils to Christmas Island in order to minimise “political damage” to the Rudd government and “prevent serious, long-term damage to Australia’s crucial relationship with Indonesia”.

“Neither government [Australia or Indonesia] wants images out on the international media of military or security personnel from either country manhandling the asylum seekers off the ship leased by Australian Customs,” Nicholson wrote.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) placed advertisements in the press today calling for “strong leadership” and a “humane response”. Demonisation of asylum seekers is “not in the national interest”, the advertisements state, and is doing “enormous damage to Australia’s international reputation”.

The ACTU, however, fails to specifically name the Rudd government and passes over the fact that the unions—from the infamous White Australia policy in the early 20th century to their backing for the mandatory detention of asylum-seekers first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992—have played a key role in supporting Australia’s racist immigration policies.

With a federal election due next year, the ACTU and other sections of the union bureaucracy are warning the Rudd government that it is losing support. Those who voted Labor in the last election in the hope that its immigration policies would be different from the former Howard government are becoming more vocal, with a growing number of letters to the press denouncing Rudd.

Australian Workers Union national secretary Paul Howes has been featured in the media calling on Rudd to tone down his anti-asylum seeker rhetoric and for the Tamil refugees to be transported to Christmas Island. This, he claims, would be a “humane solution”. But even if the Tamils were sent to Christmas Island they would be incarcerated for months or years, denied access to the Australian legal system and forcibly deported back to Sri Lanka if not officially recognised as refugees.

Irrespective of their tactical differences, all sides agree with the ongoing flouting of international law by governments, Labor and Liberal-National coalition alike. Whether it is the “Indonesian solution” or the previous Howard government’s “Pacific solution,” the aim is to prevent refugees from exercising their rights under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention

to apply for asylum, by excising Christmas Island from Australia’s “migration zone” and using other countries as holding pens.

There is scant reference in any of the media debate to the horrific conditions from which the refugees are fleeing. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Rudd government tacitly backed the Colombo government’s communal war that ended in May and the subsequent incarceration of a quarter of a million Tamil civilians in squalid detention camps.

The government is now doubling the capacity to detain asylum seekers on Christmas Island to 2,300, including by the use of tents. It has also deported another 12 Sri Lankan asylum seekers from the facility, bringing the total number of deportations, including several forcible removals, to 115 so far this year.

At the same time, Labor has stepped up security on the overcrowded Oceanic Viking, with Australian authorities attempting to block all contact between the refugees and the media. Another 250 Tamil refugees intercepted trying to sail to Australia on a 30-metre wooden boat in early October are still languishing in Indonesia’s Merak harbour, also refusing to disembark.

Prior to the election of the Rudd government in November 2007, sections of the liberal intelligentsia and the so-called radical “left” claimed that Labor would adopt a more humane approach than the Howard regime. Events of the past year have shown that there is no difference between the Howard and Rudd governments on the treatment of refugees.

Unable to advance any progressive solution to the deepening economic crisis confronting Australian and world capitalism, the Rudd government and the corporate media are intensifying their attacks on asylum seekers as a political diversion. Whatever the immediate outcome of the current standoff between Jakarta and Canberra, the result for the refugees will be a tragedy.



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