Australia: Prime Minister Gillard unveils harsh new measures against refugees

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Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, installed in a political coup against Kevin Rudd late last month, has announced a series of harsh new measures aimed at further undermining the right of refugees to claim asylum in Australia.

In a speech delivered on Tuesday to the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Gillard declared that her government would seek to prevent refugees travelling in boats from reaching Australia by interning them in East Timor. The policy has effectively revived the former Howard government's notorious "Pacific solution", which saw men, women, and children from war-torn countries imprisoned for years, in blatant violation of international law, in detention centres on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and Nauru.

Gillard's speech, announcing what the media has predictably dubbed the "Timor solution", recycled all the most filthy traditions of the notorious "White Australia" policy. She declared: "Hardworking Australians who themselves are doing it tough want to know that refugees allowed to settle here are not singled out for special treatment ... people like my own parents who have worked hard all their lives can't abide the idea that others might get an inside track to special privileges."

She added: "Australians are prepared to welcome those who are genuine refugees, but they also expect them to learn the rules under which we live and abide by those rules. That means that when newcomers settle in our community, they accept their responsibilities as members of the community—to learn English, enter the workforce, and send their kids to school like everyone else... Rules are the rules. We will ensure refugees shoulder the same obligations as Australians generally."

Gillard's clear insinuation is that refugees do not "obey the rules" or accept their responsibilities, and instead receive "special treatment" and "special privileges". The reality is that asylum seekers comprise one of the most vulnerable layers of society. Even if they manage to successfully move through the official processing procedures, which are designed to find pretexts for deportation, they are given grossly inadequate help in adjusting to life in a new environment, including finding accommodation, employment, access to education and other services, and assistance with many of their complex psychological and other trauma-related health problems.

The purpose of Gillard's policy, and her Lowy speech, is to incite xenophobia and national chauvinism by scapegoating refugees and immigrants for the crisis in social infrastructure and services, including housing, roads and public transport. In this manner, she seeks to divert the entirely legitimate anger and frustration of working people over rapidly declining living standards away from the real source of the problem—the profit system itself and the policies of the federal government and its Liberal and Labor predecessors.

Gillard is proceeding in a highly conscious and calculated manner. She has already admitted that international financial markets have put the government "on notice" amid "fragilities and uncertainties in the international economy". This can only mean that the Labor government is gearing up to implement savage new cuts to public spending on welfare, health, education, and jobs and wages in the public sector, once the upcoming federal election is over.

The prime minister's pronouncements have been generally welcomed by the most right-wing commentators. Extreme right-wing ex-parliamentarian Pauline Hanson, for example, expressed her "total agreement" with Gillard's declaration that she hoped to "sweep away ... any sense of self-censorship or political correctness" on refugee policy.

Refugee advocacy and human rights organisations have condemned the proposed measures. Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre executive director David Manne

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told the *Australian*: "This could well be worse than the Pacific Solution—this could well constitute the excision of all of Australia. On its face, this appears to propose that all asylum seekers … will be exiled to another nation, to Timor, where there will be a huge human warehouse where people are left in indefinite limbo completely uncertain as to their fate, with no guarantees of being resettled to safety within a reasonable period."

Gillard has proposed to strengthen existing penalties for so-called people smugglers, which currently stand at 10-years imprisonment and/or a $110,000 fine. Those subject to these measures tend to be poor Indonesian fishermen, who agree to sail asylum seekers into Australian waters out of economic desperation. Gillard has also announced an additional $25 million for police agencies in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to target refugees before they reach Australia. At the same time, the government is threatening to oversee the mass deportation of Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers.

The centrepiece of the Labor government's new measures, however, the "Timor solution", already appears highly dubious. Gillard announced the plan after only cursory discussions with the New Zealand government and the UN—both of which would be involved in the process in order to provide the punitive regime with a multilateral gloss—and East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta. While the president agreed to "consider" the proposal, he has no constitutional authority to enact it.

In line with the neo-colonial character of the Australian government's relations with Dili, no-one bothered to consult anyone in Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao's government before the announcement was made. Having militarily intervened in 1999 and again in 2006 to protect Australia's substantial economic and strategic interests, Canberra regards the "independent" state as little more than its regional satrap—and now a dumping ground for unwanted refugees.

Opposition party Fretilin, which hopes to return to power after the next Timorese national election in mid-2012, is opposed to the proposed regional processing centre, noting that the country's immigration act would have to be amended in order to comply with Australia's demands. The *Australian* cited unnamed government officials who were also hostile. One said: "To be blindsided like this? Nobody was happy." A senior government staffer added that they "absolutely didn't agree" with Gillard's proposal.

Gusmao has so far remained silent. He has a long record of manoeuvring with the Australian government and will no doubt seek to satisfy Canberra's latest diktat—though the requested quid pro quo may involve a deal on the location of a planned liquid natural gas refining plant for the multi-billion dollar Greater Sunrise energy reserves. The Timorese leader has recently denounced the Australian government and Woodside Petroleum for refusing to allow the plant to be located in East Timor. (See "Australia-East Timor conflict intensifies over Greater Sunrise gas project")

Opposition leader Tony Abbott pre-empted Gillard's address by announcing, earlier this week, even more vindictive anti-refugee measures. He committed the Liberal-National coalition to deporting asylum seekers suspected of destroying their identity documents, forcing those who arrive on boats to apply for permanent residency in another country before being allowed to apply for asylum in Australia, and giving the federal immigration minister the right to personally veto any successful claim for asylum, without the refugee involved having any right of appeal.

Neither Labor nor Liberal has even tried to argue that their policies are compatible with international law. In its editorial on the issue published yesterday, tacitly acknowledging this, the *Australian,* after noting that "there is little practical difference between the remedies suggested by Labor and the Coalition [with] virtually bipartisan agreement on the issue", declared that the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was "increasingly outdated" and "no longer offers a viable framework for addressing the issue".

The official "debate" on refugee policy underscores the fact that there is no section of the Australian political establishment that has any commitment whatsoever to either international law or democratic rights.

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