

Australia: Ongoing conspiracy of silence over SIEV X tragedy

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A decade ago, on October 19, 2001, a seriously overcrowded 19-metre vessel, later known as SIEV X and carrying 400 refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, broke up and sank in international waters between Indonesia and Australia's Christmas Island. Three hundred and fifty-three people, including 146 children and 142 women, drowned. Most were attempting to rejoin their husbands and fathers on Temporary Protection Visas in Australia but legally denied family reunion rights.

The tenth anniversary of this terrible tragedy, the worst in local maritime history, has been met with a deafening silence from Australia's political elite. Apart from two moving articles in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* by writer Arnold Zable and former psychologist Steve Biddulph, and an essay by *SIEVX.com* administrator Marg Hutton buried on the ABC's "Drum Opinion" pages, the event has been officially snubbed. The government-owned ABC radio and television services failed to report the anniversary, as did the commercial networks and the Murdoch-owned press.

For the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Liberal-National opposition and the media, the deaths of hundreds of innocent SIEV X passengers and the ongoing trauma still haunting the 45 survivors are of no particular consequence. Far more significant is keeping the issue out of the public eye, lest any serious public discussion provokes more demands for a full investigation into the disaster. That is because powerful evidence implicates not only Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National coalition government, but the Labor opposition and the corporate media as well. All were responsible for creating the poisonous political climate in which the event occurred, and all have worked to maintain the ongoing cover-up.

When the first news reports emerged—three days after the event—that the SIEV X had sunk and that there had been no Australian rescue operation, Howard and his ministers insisted they knew nothing about the boat. This was a lie. The government, through its specially-established "People Smuggling Taskforce" (PST) knew precisely what had

happened, having mobilised unprecedented military, intelligence and surveillance resources to "protect the borders" and prevent refugee boats from reaching Australian soil.

The SIEV X tragedy, moreover, followed two highly publicised refugee boat incidents. The first involved the MV Tampa, a Norwegian merchant ship, which had rescued refugees from a boat near Australia's Christmas Island. The second, in early October, centred on false allegations by the Howard government that asylum seekers had thrown their children from a sinking boat in order gain entry to Australia.

The last incident occurred in the middle of the 2001 federal election and not long after the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. The election was dominated by a hysterical anti-asylum seeker bidding war between Howard's Liberal-National coalition and the opposition Labor Party. Lurid claims that Australia would be overrun by hordes of asylum seekers arriving by boat, some of whom, the government claimed, might be terrorists, dominated the media. 'The boats must be stopped,' became the catch-cry of all the major parliamentary parties.

Howard, moreover, had established not only the PST, which reported directly to the prime minister, but Operation Relex, which had placed ocean waters between Australia and Indonesia under constant air and naval surveillance. The navy had begun intercepting refugee boats on the basis of intelligence from the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and other government agencies. The government boasted: "We will determine who comes to Australia and how they come here."

But the boats kept arriving. The government needed a major disincentive to stop them—an event so catastrophic that it would dissuade desperate refugees from making the perilous journey. A comment made by Howard's notorious immigration minister, Philip Ruddock, to SBS TV soon after the SIEV X sinking became public, outlined the government's thinking: This "may have an upside," he declared, "in the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it."

Yesterday's articles by Arnold Zable and Steve Biddulph, who both came to know some of the SIEV X survivors, provided human faces to the terrible event. Biddulph wrote that Amal Basry from Iraq was "the first person rescued after 20 hours in the water, and begged the fishermen to search for her young son. They saved another 40 people, before finally finding the boy, still alive. All around them though, across miles of ocean, the bodies bobbed 'like birds on the water'." Basry survived by clinging to a floating body.

Zable's piece, entitled "Zahra's Lullaby", revealed that Kurdish survivor Faris had spent hours attempting to find his daughter Zahra, when she drifted away from him in heavy seas. He told Zable that he followed her "like a fish", while she was being "tossed by waves. Appearing. Disappearing. Finally, vanishing."

Zable became close friends with Basry. She died in Melbourne last year, aged 53, after a three-year battle with cancer. But she fought to the end of her life for an official investigation into the SIEV X disaster. The Howard government only granted refugee status to 7 of the 45 survivors. The rest were granted immediate entry to Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Canada. All remain traumatised.

AFP sabotage

In September 2002, almost 12 months after the tragedy, major evidence came to light that under orders from the Howard government, the AFP had been paying operatives in Indonesia to deliberately sabotage refugee boats before they set sail for Australia. The evidence raised the distinct likelihood that the SIEV X sinking was a result of deliberate damage by the AFP (see: "Australian police agents involved in sabotage of refugee boats").

The revelation, like other deeply incriminating evidence, however, has never been explored. Labor Senator John Faulkner used a 2002 Senate inquiry into the so-called "children overboard incident" to lift the lid on some of the operations of Howard's shadowy PST and to expose some of the lies told by the government and military about what they knew of the movements of the SIEV X and its passengers, and when. Nevertheless, the Labor opposition, with Faulkner as its key representative, voted with the government to shut down the investigation after Howard blocked senior military and other officials from giving testimony to it.

Faulkner predictably declared he would continue his fight to reveal the truth about the disaster, while the Labor Party

pledged it would hold a full investigation once it came to office. Equally predictably, as soon as Labor came to power in November 2007, these promises were dropped.

The reasons became rapidly clear. First under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, then under Julia Gillard, the Labor government has carried out a seamless continuation of all the essential features of the Liberal-National coalition's anti-refugee policies.

On both occasions that Greens senators have moved motions of "regret" at the 353 SIEV X deaths in the parliament, and called for a judicial inquiry—the first in 2008, and the most recent just last week, Labor's senators have joined with the Liberal-National coalition to vote them down. For his part, Faulkner has arranged to be absent.

Under Gillard Labor, almost 5,000 asylum seekers—including 512 women and 848 children—are currently incarcerated in immigration detention centres, with record numbers suffering severe depression. There is an increasing rate of self-harm incidents and suicide attempts. In December last year, Labor had its own "SIEV X", when 50 refugees were killed after their boat crashed against the rocky cliffs of Christmas Island. Warnings about the approaching vessel to Australian authorities were ignored.

Ten years on, the unanswered questions about the sinking of the SIEV X and the terrible fate of its passengers will not go away. As the government ramps up its assault on the democratic rights of asylum seekers, along with the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of the working class as a whole, demands for a thorough-going investigation, and the laying of charges against those responsible for the 353 SIEV X deaths, will only grow louder.

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