

Australian ex-military chief to advise parliament on new anti-refugee laws

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday appointed former chief of the Defence Force Angus Houston as head of an “expert panel” that will recommend new laws that impose further punitive sanctions on asylum seekers arriving in Australia by sea.

The Labor government announced the panel after the Senate defeated proposed legislation that would have enabled the government to deport refugees to Malaysia, Nauru, and other countries in South East Asia and the South Pacific. The draft laws passed the House of Representatives on Wednesday.

The vote took place amid a media frenzy over the deaths of more than 100 asylum seekers during the past few days in three boat disasters in waters between Indonesia and Australia. Both the government and the opposition, with the support of the media, cynically exploited the tragedies to justify harsh new anti-refugee measures. Dumping asylum seekers in detention camps in Malaysia and Nauru, where they will be stripped of their legal rights and potentially subjected to inhumane treatment, including corporal punishment, is being justified on the grounds of “saving lives” by deterring other refugees from travelling on boats to Australia.

The official debate underscores the absence of any constituency within the ruling elite for the defence of democratic rights. The basic legal principles governing the treatment of asylum seekers, which were developed in the aftermath of World War II and the Nazi holocaust, have been openly jettisoned. The fact that Gillard has tasked a former Defence Force commander to propose the new regime underscores the militarised and illegal character of the government’s “border protection” agenda.

Houston will issue a series of recommendations within the next six weeks, before parliament meets again, ensuring the issue will continue to dominate the airwaves and print media for the foreseeable future.

The media have been willing accomplices of the government. The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has played an especially foul role. Earlier this month, its flagship “Four Corners” program incited hysteria against so-called people smugglers in a broadcast that the *World Socialist Web Site* noted “was a filthy exercise in yellow journalism, aimed at fuelling anti-immigrant prejudice and creating a climate for the Labor government to enact further repressive laws targeting asylum seekers.” In recent days the ABC’s “7.30” program has weighed in, with hosts Leigh Sayles and Chris Uhlman deriding international laws on asylum seekers as “pieces of paper” and insinuating that anyone who opposes the deportation of refugees would be responsible for future deaths at sea.

In the Senate yesterday, members of Labor’s so-called “left” faction eagerly lined up to endorse the proposed legislation. Former immigration minister Chris Evans declared: “There is much about this bill that challenges some of my philosophical positions, my history—my baggage, if you like. I was the one who closed Nauru. I was the one who ended temporary protection visas on behalf of this government. I find a lot of this debate very difficult.”

Left faction leader and former trade union leader Senator Doug Cameron added his support. “I am troubled by the Nauru approach,” he declared. “I am troubled by the Malaysian approach. I have argued continually over many years my opposition to the Pacific solution. I have done that publicly and I have done that within the Labor

Party. I do not see, regardless of the arguments that the coalition senators have put forward here, how Nauru could ever be contemplated as some kind of success. But as Keynes and the Nobel Prize winning economist Samuelson said, when the circumstances change we change our minds. And they asked this question: what would you do? I have changed my mind.”

The basic premise of these arguments is a complete fraud. The “facts” underlying refugee and asylum seeker policy have not changed one iota.

It has always been the case that the only genuine way to prevent refugee deaths at sea is to remove the current barriers preventing them from claiming asylum through official channels and being safely escorted to Australia by plane. Everyone fleeing persecution has the legal and democratic right to claim asylum in any country of their choice. But not as far as the Labor government, and the entire political establishment, are concerned. They have, instead sought to exploit every death at sea as a means of inciting xenophobia and political backwardness.

The purpose is to find scapegoats who can be blamed for declining living standards, mounting job losses, and deteriorating public services, and thus divert attention away from those really responsible for the growing social and economic crisis—the state and federal governments, all of which are enforcing the pro-business diktats of the financial markets.

Gillard, herself of the Labor “left”, has a long record in this regard. She served as shadow immigration minister between 2001 and 2003, aligning the Labor Party with the Howard government’s draconian anti-refugee measures, including the notorious “Pacific Solution” and temporary protection visas. Immediately after becoming prime minister in June 2010 she declared she wanted an end to “political correctness” on asylum seekers—a call that was welcomed by former One Nation leader Pauline Hanson, a rightwing, anti-immigrant populist. In the subsequent federal election campaign in August, Gillard declared that immigration ought to be restrained. “I don’t want areas of Australia with 25 percent youth unemployment because there are no jobs,” she declared. “I support a population that our environment, our water, our soil, our roads and freeways, our busses, our trains and our services can sustain.”

Gillard and her minority Labor government have, however, been frustrated by their inability to reach agreement with the opposition coalition on new anti-refugee laws. Liberal leader Tony Abbott has rejected the “Malaysia Solution”, arguing with brazen hypocrisy that there are insufficient legal protections for asylum seekers who are deported to the South East Asian country. In reality, political calculations are at the very forefront of the opposition’s stand. The *Australian* reported last Tuesday that a “well-placed Liberal source” had remarked: “Abbott would rather see Labor continue to bleed politically with ongoing boat arrivals. If that means deaths at sea continue, he said, so be it.”

The Greens also voted in the Senate yesterday against the government’s proposed legislation, ensuring its defeat. They are trying to walk both sides of the road. At the same time as propping up the minority Labor government with their parliamentary votes, the Greens posture as opponents of the two major parties’ refugee policies. In reality, they are nothing but a political lightning rod for widespread disgust and hostility among ordinary people towards the entire parliamentary setup. The Greens strive at all costs to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class outside the framework of parliament, and continue to promote the illusion that the major parties can be pressured to implement a more “humane” refugee policy.

Greens Senators yesterday moved an alternative resolution calling for more refugees to be accepted from Malaysia and Indonesia and for an increase in the humanitarian visa intake to 20,000 people a year. They also proposed a “real regional solution”, involving closer cooperation with the Indonesian police and security agencies in blocking refugees seeking to reach Australia by boat. Like their Labor and Liberal counterparts, the Greens accept the fundamental, anti-democratic and illegal, premise of the current “border protection” regime—that the state has the right to police the country’s borders and forcibly prevent the entry of asylum seekers.



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