

Australian government intensifies anti-refugee policy

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The Labor government yesterday announced a raft of new measures to try to prevent asylum seekers reaching Australia, ratchetting up its already draconian anti-refugee policy. Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government is increasingly violating the fundamental democratic rights of refugees, and repudiating any adherence to basic precepts of international law.

The government's latest measures go far beyond the previous Howard Liberal government's refugee regime. They extend Labor's introduction, in August, of a version of Howard's "Pacific Solution" of consigning asylum seekers to detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Under Howard's scheme, detainees languished for up to five years in these centres, causing suicides and mental health breakdowns. Under Gillard's version, refugees, including women and children, are being incarcerated indefinitely, with the government refusing to set any time limit.

Yesterday, the government went further, declaring that asylum seekers who cannot be fitted into the 2,100 places on Nauru and Manus will be detained within Australia before being allocated temporary "bridging visas." These visas will permit them to live outside detention centres, but without any right to work or bring their families to Australia. In addition, they will be liable to be removed to Nauru or Manus at any time, even after they have been officially classified as refugees.

The government is seeking to compel refugees and their families to return to their home countries—regardless of the dangers they confront there—and to deter other asylum seekers from attempting to enter Australia.

Those on bridging visas will have to exist on welfare and rental assistance payments of up to \$270 a week,

set at 89 percent of unemployment benefits, which are already below the poverty line. This will leave refugees in an impossible situation. Denied basic civil and political rights, they will be unable to support themselves or reunite with their loved ones. Women and children will be forced to undertake dangerous boat trips to rejoin their husbands and fathers—contradicting the government's line that their policies are aimed at preventing further drownings.

Labor's scheme is harsher than the Howard government's "temporary protection visas", which also denied family reunion rights but allowed refugees to work. The Gillard government's policy more flagrantly breaches international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, which recognises a legal right to flee persecution and prohibits discrimination against those who do so.

To reinforce the government's determination to stop refugees coming to Australia, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced the transportation of the first group of asylum seekers, consisting of 19 people from seven families, including women and four children, to Manus Island. The Iranian and Sri Lankan families will be housed in aluminium-framed Australian army tents until accommodation blocks are built.

The conditions inside the Manus camp will be just as oppressive as those for single men in the Nauru camp, where nearly 400 detainees are housed in unbearably hot, leaking and wet tents. The appalling conditions there have triggered hunger strikes and other protests. Bowen revealed that construction of permanent huts had not yet commenced on Nauru, meaning that the tent city will continue for many months, at least.

Bowen also refused, once again, to put any time limit on detention, except to confirm that it could last five years. In reality, the government can lock detainees

away for 10 or 20 years. Under the government's so-called "no advantage test" regime, even officially recognised refugees are to be detained for as long as another asylum seeker would have supposedly waited to be processed from a refugee camp in Africa or the Middle East.

When the government unveiled its "Pacific solution", it cynically claimed to be motivated by "humanitarian" considerations—those of stopping people taking potentially fatal boat voyages to Australia. On this basis, erstwhile liberals like Robert Manne, who had condemned Howard's policies, embraced Gillard's regime.

At Bowen's media conference, an Al Jazeera reporter asked the immigration minister if he was "aware of the reputation for cruelty, frankly, that Australia is now developing overseas." The journalist cited Amnesty International inspectors, who this week described the conditions in the Nauru camp as "completely unacceptable," and the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, who called them "unbearable." Bowen rejected the assertion of cruelty and dismissed Amnesty's comments as biased, reiterating that the government was taking "difficult" and "hard" decisions to stop refugee boats.

Speaking to Fairfax Media, an unnamed senior government source was blunter, saying that the cruelty reported by Amnesty could help send a message to asylum seekers that it was not worth getting on a boat. "We're not losing much sleep over it," the source said.

After visiting the Nauru camp, Amnesty officials had expressed shock that up to 14 men were living in a single tent, with temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius, and their bedding soaked by rain. Amnesty warned of a "terrible spiral" of self-harm, hunger strikes and suicide attempts. Bowen's spokesman, however, rejected the criticism, contemptuously insisting that while conditions "may not be pleasant", food, water and medical care were available.

Nearly 8,000 people have arrived since August—despite the implementation of the "Pacific Solution"—reflecting the desperate plight of millions of people seeking to escape from the horrors of war and oppression in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Sri Lanka, and now Syria.

The numbers reaching to Australia remain low. The Labor government has promised to lift Australia's

official intake of refugees to 20,000 per year, but this is a drop in the ocean compared to the 42 million people that UN agencies now classify as displaced.

Facing electoral defeat next year, the Gillard government is seeking to use refugees as scapegoats to divert attention away from its own program of austerity at home, slashing social spending while enforcing the wholesale destruction of jobs and conditions, and militarism abroad.

Labor is locked in a battle to outdo the Liberal Party, with opposition leader Tony Abbott yesterday accusing the government of having "lost control of our borders" and being too soft on refugees. He declared asylum seekers were coming to Australia "illegally"—a bogus claim that effectively repudiated even nominal adherence to the Refugee Convention.

For their part, while the Greens have criticised the government for adopting Howard's policies, they continue to supply the minority Labor government with the crucial parliamentary numbers it needs to remain in office. The Greens, just as much as the rest of the political establishment, are committed to the reactionary nationalist framework of "border protection" and immigration restrictions that denies refugees, and all working people, the basic democratic right to live and work where they choose.



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