

Australian opposition leader demands military response to refugee “emergency”

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26 July 2013

The opposition Liberal-National coalition yesterday proposed to place the Australian military in charge of targeting asylum seekers trying to flee to the country by sea. The policy would involve the domestic mobilisation of the armed forces for what was previously regarded as a civil law enforcement issue.

The military has played a prominent role in successive Labor and Liberal governments’ anti-refugee programs. Under the former Howard government, so-called “border protection” to intercept refugee boats provided a cover for the expansion of Australian imperialism’s military and intelligence presence off the country’s northwest, adjacent to key strategic naval chokepoints in South East Asia.

This continued after 2007 under Labor. Last year, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard appointed former Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston to head an “expert panel” on refugees. Houston’s panel proposed a series of reactionary measures, including a “no advantage” test under which refugees are detained, potentially for several years, as a punitive “deterrent” to others considering travelling to Australia.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has since assigned the military a central role in his “Papua New Guinea solution,” involving the permanent deportation of asylum seekers to the impoverished Pacific state.

Emboldened by Rudd’s embrace of policies that blatantly defy international law, opposition leader Tony Abbott now proposes to go even further. Hysterically declaring a “national emergency,” Abbott promised to launch “Operation Sovereign Borders.” This would be led by a “senior military commander of 3 star ranking,” appointed not by the government but by the Defence Force chief. A new “Joint Agency Taskforce,” Abbott explained, would have a “unified command and control structure with the military in command.” Various other

agencies would be involved in the taskforce, including the Border Protection Command, Australian Federal Police and different branches of the intelligence apparatus.

Every aspect of the policy reeks of militarism—beginning with its name, “Operation Sovereign Borders.” Military operations have always been given codenames by the armed forces command, but Abbott is appropriating the same language to launch a proposed government policy.

The Liberal Party’s policy paper compares refugees arriving on “illegal boats” to vermin, declaring that the first step toward halting asylum seeker arrivals was to “demonstrate our resolve at home and on our borders by ‘taking the sugar off the table’.” Abbott declared that the military command was “about adding cohesion, consistency, direction, determination and a sufficient level of organisation and urgency.” He insisted: “This is a national emergency. We have got to treat it as such. That’s why a military-led taskforce is the way forward.”

Retired Major General Jim Molan yesterday appeared at a media conference alongside Abbott and opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison. His remarks underscored the deeply anti-democratic implications of the further militarisation of Australia’s “border protection” regime.

Molan described the proposed “military-led operation” as “constabulary work, it’s law and order.” He claimed that this would not be “an unusual circumstance,” pointing to the military’s involvement in the emergency response to the flooding of Brisbane in recent years. He also referred to the military’s predatory operations in the South Pacific, stating, “in the latter stages of East Timor and in various situations in the Solomon Islands we’ve been doing this [law and

order work] for years.”

The repressive methods used in these neo-colonial interventions are now to be applied at home. Abbott brushed aside questions raised about the legality of his proposals. For the first time, a senior Defence Force officer would answer to the immigration minister, bypassing the statutory chain of command through the Defence Force chief and the defence minister.

Rudd derided Abbott’s policy as another “three word slogan.” However, the prime minister remained silent on the implications for legal and democratic rights, reflecting the anti-refugee unanimity between the major parties.

No section of the ruling elite has any commitment to basic democratic rights, including the long standing constitutional principle barring the military from involvement in domestic law enforcement. This is an international phenomenon. Social polarisation is so extreme within every advanced capitalist economy that the ruling elites are preparing dictatorial forms of rule, including potential military rule, to suppress the next eruptions of social unrest and political opposition. Within the US, the Pentagon recently announced new rules of engagement, allowing the military to provide “support” to “civilian law enforcement authorities, including responses to civil disturbances.” (See “The militarization of America”)

Similar provisions have been introduced in Australia over the past decade. In a declared “emergency,” potentially involving some danger of undefined “domestic violence,” two government ministers or the armed forces chief can call out the military. Troops can then lock down buildings and entire areas, erect barriers, issue directives and detain and interrogate people.

The ruling class has elevated the issue of refugees and asylum seekers to the central issue, almost the only issue, of the unofficial election campaign currently underway. This is consciously aimed at inciting xenophobic and nationalist sentiments among the most backward elements of the population, while also creating a massive diversion from the austerity measures being prepared behind the scenes against the working class.

The *Australian Financial Review* today reported that the government has discovered a \$20 billion “budget hole,” generated by rapidly deteriorating economic

conditions. This represents only a fraction of the ruthless budget cuts that will be implemented by whichever party forms office after the election. A European-style social counter-revolution is being readied, with wages and working conditions to be slashed to levels “competitive” with Australian capitalism’s trading partners in Asia and other regions.

This offensive against the working class cannot proceed through the old parliamentary forms of rule. The ruling elite’s embrace of militarised “emergency” measures against the most vulnerable layers of society, beginning with asylum seekers, foreshadows the extension of such measures against the entire working class.



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