New Zealand government complicit in Australia's persecution of refugees

Tom Peters
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There is now substantial evidence that last month Australian officials paid six "people smugglers" about $US30,000 to take 65 asylum seekers, who were attempting to reach New Zealand by boat, back to Indonesia. The passengers and crew were intercepted by the Australian navy, which confiscated their boat, stripped them of their supplies and loaded them into two unseaworthy wooden boats without adequate fuel and supplies.

The entire episode illustrates the utter criminality and brutality of the Australian government's "border protection" regime. The 71 people, mostly from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, reached the remote island of Latu only by an extraordinary stroke of luck after one boat ran out of fuel and the other crashed into a reef, forcing those on board to swim ashore. One Indonesian official accused Australia of sending the asylum seekers "on a suicide mission."

The New Zealand government's response underscores its integration into Australia's operations against some of the most vulnerable and desperate people on the planet. Prime Minister John Key defended Canberra's illegal decision to bribe the boat's crew to turn around, telling the media on Tuesday: "In the end they are entitled to make their own call and to do their own thing. They are the Australian government and they are responsible for their own actions."

The previous day he told Radio NZ that "I can sort of see the argument" for paying the crew members. While Key denied having "any knowledge or information" of the payment, New Zealand officials were clearly involved in the operation to send the asylum seekers back to Indonesia. Key revealed that New Zealand authorities were aware of the boat's movements "early on" and were "talking to the Australians" about it.

According to the asylum seekers, the Australian navy initially intercepted their boat on May 17, but did not detain them after learning they were bound for New Zealand. Four or five days later, however, the vessel was re-intercepted, possibly in response to a request from Wellington.

The New Zealand government flatly refused the asylum seekers' pleas to be resettled in New Zealand. Key instead seized on the incident to drum up hysteria about a potential flood of refugees. On June 2 he told reporters that "people smugglers ... certainly could have made it to New Zealand" and that the boat's arrival "would open up a pretty easy pathway to replicate." He described this as a "credible risk and threat" to the nation.

Even though not one refugee boat has reached New Zealand in the country's modern history, the government, like its Australian counterpart, is using the so-called threat of a "mass arrival" to divert rising social tensions caused by its austerity policies into reactionary xenophobic channels.

In 2013, Key's government signed an agreement with Australia's Greens-backed Labor government, under which asylum seekers intercepted while trying to reach New Zealand would be taken to Australia's detention centres. These prison camps include facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, where refugees are detained indefinitely in squalid conditions and face numerous human rights abuses.

The 2013 deal included an arrangement for Australia to share intelligence with New Zealand about asylum seeker movements. Key has refused to confirm or deny whether the Government Communications Security Bureau and the Security Intelligence Service were involved in tracking the boat involved in the bribery incident.

The government also legislated for six months' detention for asylum seekers who arrive by boat, in defiance of the international Refugee Convention, which prohibits locking people up or punishing them for an irregular mode of entry.

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On Tuesday, the opposition Labour Party leader Andrew Little said it was an “outrage” that Australia had apparently paid “criminal people smugglers and we say nothing and do nothing.” He called on the government to “register the strongest possible opposition to that sort of conduct.” Little declared that the government should consider resettling the stranded refugees.

Notwithstanding this feigned outrage, however, Labour has no real differences with National’s anti-refugee agenda and has made no pledge to reverse the 2013 agreement with Australia. The 1999–2008 Labour government used the US-led “war on terror” to impose draconian restrictions on asylum seekers. This included imprisoning Algerian refugee Ahmed Zaoui for almost two years on unsubstantiated terrorism charges.

According to *The Quiet War on Asylum* by journalist Tracey Barnett, between 2000 and 2013 “New Zealand’s airport asylum seeker arrivals plummeted by 77 percent.” Overall arrivals falling from 1,393 to just 306 per year. Only 42 percent of asylum seekers are allowed to stay.

A recent Amnesty International report condemned New Zealand for accepting only 750 refugees per year, placing the country 87th in the world for per-capita intake of refugees. The figure has remained unchanged for nearly 30 years. Labour, the Greens and New Zealand First Parties are now calling for a token increase of up to 250.

The opposition parties are all complicit in promoting anti-immigrant xenophobia. Labour and the Greens contested last year’s general election in a de facto alliance with the right-wing New Zealand First Party, which scapegoats Asian migrants, in particular, for unemployment, the high cost of housing and other social problems. NZ First has declared that its support for increasing the refugee quota is contingent on a major cut to immigration numbers. Labour has also campaigned for restricting immigration.

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