

Australian Labor leader insists on turning back refugee boats

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On the eve of the Australian Labor Party's three-day national conference, which starts in Melbourne tomorrow, party leader Bill Shorten deliberately pre-empted the event by abandoning the ALP's professed opposition to the Abbott government's regime of militarily repelling asylum seeker boats.

In doing so, Shorten also sent a wider signal of his determination to shift Labor further to the right across the board, in line with the demands placed on him by the corporate establishment, particularly via the Murdoch media.

While cynically dressing up his policy about-face as motivated by a desire to prevent refugees drowning at sea by trying to reach Australia, Shorten made it crystal clear that the open embrace of the government's brutal treatment of people fleeing persecution was a litmus test of his leadership.

Appearing on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" television program last night, Shorten declared: [O]ne of the options which we believe has to be on the table, if we're given the privilege of forming government, has to be the option to turn back boats." He added: "It's not easy, though, because it involves the admission, I think, that mistakes were made when Labor was last in government."

Murdoch media outlets today backed his stance, depicting it as a courageous bid to stamp his authority over the Labor Party. The *Australian's* political editor Dennis Shanahan wrote: "Bill Shorten has staked his leadership authority on a proposal that Labor agree to 'turn back the boats' if the ALP wins government."

Shorten was obviously responding to the drumbeat of calls by the business and media establishment for him to send a clear message of his intent to make the ALP an even more malleable instrument of the requirements of the financial elite. Those demands were reinforced

by yesterday's *Australian* editorial entitled: "Labor risks turning to left when veer right is needed."

The editorial backed Shorten's leadership against the newspaper's earlier promotion of the risk of a challenge by his deputy Tanya Plibersek, who hails from the "left" factions. At the same time, it declared that Shorten "has not done enough to revise Labor's policies."

Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles echoed Shorten's message in a column published today in a Murdoch tabloid, Melbourne's *Herald Sun*. Marles wrote of not repeating Labor's "mistakes" when last in office. "I believe, provided it can be done safely, a future Labor government must have the option to undertake turn-backs," he stated.

There is nothing "safe" about deploying naval vessels to repel refugees on the high seas. The Abbott government's "turn-back" operations have remained hidden behind military secrecy, preventing any public scrutiny of how many boats have been intercepted, let alone any resulting losses of life. It is known that 65 asylum seekers nearly perished off Indonesia's coast recently after being forcibly loaded into people smugglers' boats to be taken away from Australia.

Shorten and Marles will put a submission to the ALP conference that leaves the option open for a Labor government to turn back boats, rejecting calls by the party's nominally "left" factions to rule out such practices.

According to media reports, the "left" could have the numbers at this party conference to determine ALP policy. Nevertheless, Shorten has set course for a show of strength. For purely electoral reasons, there will almost certainly be a set-piece display of opposition on the conference floor when the policy is debated on Saturday. To reject Shorten's stand, however, would

amount to overturning his leadership.

“Left” Labor parliamentarian Anna Burke gave an indication of her faction’s likely response today, saying she was “disappointed” by Shorten’s announcement. “I don’t think there’s a need to be trumpeting turn-backs,” she said. “I do think that there will be a lot of people this morning trying to weigh up whether they’ll be able to vote for Labor at the next election,” she said.

This concern to shore up Labor’s vote among working-class, student and middle-class voters who strongly oppose the inhuman treatment of asylum seekers reeks of duplicity and hypocrisy.

Successive Labor governments, dating back to that of Prime Minister Bob Hawke in the 1980s, have implemented increasingly draconian measures to seek to demonise, outlaw and block the arrival of refugees.

The most recent Labor governments, those of Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard from 2007 to 2013, attempted to turn back boats to Indonesia, but ran afoul of objections in ruling circles in Jakarta. After then unlawfully trying to dump refugees in East Timor and/or Malaysia, Labor resorted to a ramped-up version of the previous Howard Coalition government’s “Pacific Solution” of incarcerating asylum seekers in detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Indeed, in his *Herald Sun* column, Marles repeated his previous boasts that Labor’s “offshore processing” regime was equally responsible as the Coalition’s “turnbacks” for “actually stopping the boats.”

In reality, despite the bipartisan assault on refugees, the boats have not stopped, either globally or in the waters to Australia’s north. Internationally, an estimated 60 million people are currently seeking asylum—more than ever before—overwhelmingly as a result of the military interventions in the Middle East by the US and its partners, including Australia.

Just two days before Shorten and Marles made their pronouncements, a boat thought to be carrying Vietnamese asylum seekers was spotted by oil tanker crew members off the coast of Dampier in Western Australia. A navy vessel is believed to have now intercepted the boat, with the government again refusing to provide any details. Prime Minister Tony Abbott reiterated that it was an “iron law” of his government not to comment on “operational matters.”

As pioneered by the last Labor government, Shorten

and Marles adopted a humanitarian charade, depicting the ALP policy shift as an effort to avert another “human tragedy” like the ones in which more than 1,200 refugees are known to have died trying to land in Australia between 2010 and 2013. Shorten also spoke of doubling Australia’s annual intake of legally registered refugees to 27,000, which is a drop in the ocean compared to the global asylum seeker crisis.

The truth is that the deaths at sea arose directly from the underlying “border protection” regime of barring entry to all but a relative handful of refugees a year, giving the vast majority no alternative but to flee via perilous voyages. Despite criticising aspects of this regime, this nationalist framework is shared by the Greens, who provided the parliamentary numbers to prop up the last Labor government.

As at previous ALP conferences, various pseudo-left groups plan to demonstrate outside the event on Saturday, some under the colours of the “Refugee Action Collective” and “Labor for Refugees.” According to representatives, they will urge delegates not to “capitulate” to “Abbott’s scapegoating of asylum seekers” and to stand up for “compassion, justice and fairness.”

Like the show of opposition likely to be staged inside the conference, these protests are a desperate attempt to revive illusions that the ALP represents a “lesser evil” than the Coalition. Above all, their aim is to head off the fight for a genuine socialist and internationalist alternative, based on recognising the fundamental right of all working people to live and work where they choose, with full civil and political rights.



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