

# Australia: Thousands rally in defense of refugees at nationwide vigils

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Tens of thousands of people rallied in cities and regional centres across Australia last night, in opposition to the persecution of asylum-seekers, and the declaration by the Coalition government on Sunday that it would not lift the country's small refugee intake, in response to the international refugee crisis.

Entitled "Light the Dark" and called by dozens of charity and non-government organisations, the vigil in Sydney was attended by over 10,000 people, while over 8,000 rallied at the event in Melbourne. Thousands more gathered in Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and regional centres including Darwin and Newcastle. Vigils are also scheduled for tonight in Canberra, and Friday evening in Brisbane.

The attendance at the vigils highlights the widespread sympathy for refugees among workers, young people, students and others. It gives the lie to the frequently repeated claim that the brutal "border protection" regime of successive Labor and Liberal governments, involving the mandatory detention of refugees, and the denial of their right to seek asylum, reflects the sentiments of ordinary people.

The vigils are part of a groundswell of opposition to the persecution of refugees with protests and rallies throughout Europe and the United Kingdom, in Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere.

Significantly, the vigils received considerably less media coverage in the lead-up to last night than recent xenophobic and anti-Muslim rallies called by far-right organisations such as "Reclaim Australia" and the "United Patriots Front", which have had attendance figures in the low hundreds.

The "Light the Dark" events were largely advertised through social media. Some 60,000 Facebook invitations were sent for the vigil in Sydney, and another 50,000 for the Melbourne event, while the

"Light the Dark" hashtag "trended," i.e., was among the most discussed topics, on Twitter.

Many social media posts demanded that refugees fleeing Syria be allowed to settle in Australia. Others expressed opposition to the Abbott government's preparations to begin bombing Syria and noted that the refugee crisis was a product of decades of US-led wars, including the campaign to oust the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad, through the backing of Islamist militias.

One comment on the Sydney Facebook event referred to the 2003 protests against the invasion of Iraq, stating, "My 20 year old was a babe in a backpack when we attended a monster rally against Howard's decision to send troops into Iraq...We were ignored. Today I'm on the train with his little brother heading to Hyde Park. Abbott will probably ignore the thousands of us, like Howard did....We will grieve the heartless stupidity of our 'government', and teach our children to keep at it, because to turn away is worse."

Another comment stated, "I'm going to this, not only because I have a three year old boy who is lucky enough to be born in a country where we aren't persecuted, bombed and forced to flee before he's found washed up dead on a foreign beach, but also because he was born in a country that is currently doing next to absolutely squat [nothing] to help kids such as that one poor boy washed up dead."

Many who were unable to attend posted pictures of themselves and their children holding candles in solidarity.

At the vigils, children and others carried home-made signs declaring "There's room in my house" (i.e., for refugees). Others held placards stating "We are sorry, welcome refugees," "How about compassion?" and "Welcome refugees, people just like us."

Promotional material for the vigils highlighted the tragic death of Aylan Kurdi, the three year-old Syrian boy whose body was washed ashore on a Turkish beach. It stated, “The sad reality is that Aylan was one among millions of desperate people forced to flee from war and persecution. The world is facing a global refugee crisis on a scale we’ve not seen since WWII, but Australia—our lucky country of a fair go for all—is not doing enough. We can do better to help these people.”

Mohammad Ali Baqiri, a law student and refugee from Afghanistan, who was held in the Nauru detention centre for three years, gave voice to many, telling the Melbourne rally, “in life-and-death situations a parent will do anything they can to provide comfort and protection for their child.” He stated, “due to war and persecution, thousands of people have no choice but to flee their homes. Becoming a refugee is not a choice.”

While the attendance at the vigils expressed humane and progressive sentiments, the perspective of the organisers, including Christian groups, non-government lobbies and charities, was largely limited to issuing impotent appeals for the government, the Labor opposition, and the political establishment as a whole to adopt “kinder” policies, and boost refugee intake quotas.

Pamela Curr, of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, for instance, told the Melbourne rally, “We will keep coming out to fight, to light the dark until our government opens its heart and opens the door.” Amnesty International Australia, another of the organisers, has called for the government to allow 20,000 Syrian refugees to settle in Australia this year.

Such appeals dovetail with the utterly cynical attempts by politicians from all of the major parties, including Labor, the Liberals, and the Greens, to posture as defenders of the rights of refugees. Figures from across the political establishment, who have fully backed the persecution of refugees arriving by boat, have shed crocodile tears in recent days over the global refugee crisis, with many making mealy-mouthed calls for adjustments to Australia’s asylum seeker intake.

Such posturing is aimed at heading off and politically neutering the widespread hostility to the persecution of asylum seekers by successive Australian governments, Liberal and Labor alike. In reality, the demonisation, and vilification of refugees, among the most vulnerable

of the world’s population, has been the stock-in-trade of the Australian political establishment for decades, aimed at diverting attention from social issues, legitimising attacks on fundamental democratic rights, and whipping up xenophobia and nationalism.

Australia’s “border protection” regime, including the mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seekers in prison-like centres, in which abuse is rampant, the forcing back of refugee boats on the high seas, and the systematic violation of international law, has served as a “model” for the measures being imposed against refugees fleeing to Europe.

At the same time, all of the major parties, including the Greens, have supported the US-led regime-change operations in Syria and Libya, spearheaded by Islamist forces, which have plunged the region into sectarian bloodbath. The Abbott government, with the fulsome support of the Labor Party opposition, has played a key role in the US-led air war in Iraq and is now preparing to extend its bombing campaign to Syria.



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