

Trump hails Australia's draconian immigration regime

Max Newman
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In his speech to a joint session of Congress last month, US president Donald Trump praised the “merit-based immigration system” utilised by “nations around the world, like Canada, Australia and many others.” Trump declared the basic principle to be “those seeking to enter a country ought to be able to support themselves financially.”

Trump reiterated his enthusiasm the following day. “The merit-based system is the way to go. Canada, Australia!” he tweeted. He lauded a recent book, *Green Card Warrior*, by Nick Adams, who insists that the US admits too many immigrants indiscriminately, instead of stocking the country with foreigners who offer skills American businesses need and who are willing to “assimilate.”

The “Australian model” praised by Trump combines cruelty and inhumanity toward refugees, with a “points-based” immigration program that deliberately discriminates in favour of wealthy applicants and those whose labour power can be most readily exploited by Australian-based employers.

Australia indefinitely imprisons all men, women and children who flee to Australia by boat. They are kept in “offshore detention” facilities in conditions so horrendous that medical professionals have said it amounts to torture.

At the same time, across the entire immigration system, “skills” tests are applied to select the most immediately “employable” applicants, at the expense of the “family reunion” stream, in which people wait for years, even decades, to sponsor close relatives, including parents.

Draconian health tests are also applied to bar entry to applicants, mostly working class or poor, who have any illness in their family or are otherwise deemed likely to be a “burden” on taxpayers. A “good character” test

bars those whose views are considered contrary to “Australian values”—essentially acceptance of the corporate profit system and its predatory foreign policy of heavy involvement in US-led wars.

On the other end of the social scale, wealthy people are highly favoured. In fact, “high net worth individuals” can literally buy visas by promising to invest large sums in Australian businesses or real estate projects. Since the last Labor government launched the Significant Investor Visa program in November 2012, more than 1,300 multi-millionaires have bought fast-track residential visas by agreeing to invest at least \$5 million each.

The overall political thrust of this falsely labelled “merit-based” system serves to vilify, as law-breakers, desperate or impoverished people fleeing from wars waged by the US and its allies, including Australia, or from countries long-oppressed by the major capitalist powers. This is underpinned by constant campaigns to scapegoat asylum seekers and whip up anti-chauvinism and racism to divide the working class.

Only a few hours after Trump’s speech, Australian media outlets erupted in a frenzy, with articles triumphantly declaring that Trump was adopting Australia as an immigration model. According to one report, a senior Trump policy advisor, Stephen Miller, held 12 months of private talks with Australian diplomats on the issue.

The overblown media response is partly bound up with concerns in the media and political establishment that the Trump administration will renege on the reactionary refugee-swap deal that Prime Minister Turnbull’s government struck with the Obama administration last year. Trump reportedly branded the agreement “the worst deal ever” in an infamous phone conversation with Turnbull, which Trump ended

abruptly.

Last month, the Trump administration said it would honour the deal, but emphasised that the agreement was based on “extreme vetting” of refugees, with the US under no obligation to take anyone at all.

The swap agreement would remove to the US some of the 2,200 refugees locked in Australia’s refugee prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. This aspect of the deal was announced last November, some weeks after Turnbull offered to take an undisclosed number of refugees similarly languishing in detention camps run by the US in Costa Rica.

On both sides of the Pacific, some of the world’s most vulnerable people would face permanent separation from their family members already living in either Australia or the US. The Turnbull government, backed by the Labor Party opposition, declared that those removed from Australia’s camps would never be permitted to enter Australia.

Last year, the Turnbull government denied that the agreement was a “swap” but Immigration and Border Protection Minister Dutton last month publicly linked the two deals for the first time. He said Australia would not take anyone from Costa Rica “until we had assurances that people are going off Nauru and Manus Island.” Asked whether the arrangements could be called a “people swap,” Dutton replied: “I don’t have any problem with that characterisation if people want to put that.”

The Obama administration set up the Costa Rica camps last July, ostensibly as a humanitarian response to the large numbers of asylum seekers fleeing Central America to escape gang-related violence. In reality, the camps are designed to halt the influx, and prevent access to the US, by herding refugees into camps to be “heavily vetted.” More than 100,000 Central American asylum seekers had arrived in the US during 2015, a fivefold increase from just a few years earlier.

Obama’s administration negotiated “protection transfer agreements,” limited to 200 individuals over six months, which require pre-screening by US State Department officials in their countries of origin. Refugees are then forced into the Costa Rica camps to await removal to the US or another country, such as Australia.

The Turnbull government last year attempted to

obfuscate the link between the two agreements struck with Australia, in order to present the swap deal as a humanitarian arrangement. In reality, the arrangement only serves to reinforce the inhuman detention regime, while assisting the US government to adopt similar measures.

Over the past two years, current and former Australian detention staff have courageously defied bipartisan secrecy laws to publicly reveal the abuses of basic rights and other horrors in the Nauru and Manus camps, contributing to public outcries and demands for the camps to be shut.

In response, the Labor Party and the Greens, who are directly responsible for reopening the camps by the Greens-backed Labor minority government in 2012, have feigned sympathy for the imprisoned victims. They have presented the US swap deal as a step toward closing down the camps. Regardless of how many detainees are ultimately shifted to the US, however, the facilities will remain in place, ready to imprison new refugees fleeing for their lives.



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