

Australian government flags forcing new immigrants to live in designated zones

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The government of recently-installed Prime Minister Scott Morrison this week launched a concerted bid to blame immigrants, including refugees, for the soaring living costs and deteriorating basic infrastructure that confront millions of working class people.

The Liberal-National Coalition government is seeking to whip up a xenophobic and anti-immigrant social base. It is accusing migrants of causing “congestion” in Australia’s biggest metropolitan areas—Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane-Gold Coast.

The turn to scapegoating immigrants is another indication of the wholesale lurch to the right within the political establishment signalled by the late August backroom removal of Morrison’s predecessor Malcolm Turnbull.

Within weeks of taking office, Morrison told Fairfax Media last month that he wanted a “fair dinkum” conversation about population and tougher rules to slow the entry of migrants into “congested” cities. His comments echoed the calls issued by far-right and anti-immigrant outfits, such as Senator Pauline Hanson’s One Nation.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who triggered Turnbull’s ouster, is already boasting of having slashed the annual immigration intake from about 190,000 to 160,000.

On Tuesday, Population Minister Alan Tudge foreshadowed plans to force newly-arrived immigrants to live in designated parts of the country. “We are working on measures to have more new arrivals go the smaller states and regions and require them to be there for at least a few years,” he declared in a speech at the Menzies Research Centre, a Coalition thinktank.

Fearing widespread opposition in Australia’s increasingly internationalised working class, which is comprised of workers from all over the world, Tudge provided no information on how such a regime would be monitored, policed and enforced. The mooted scheme would resemble an apartheid-style system in which immigrants would be compelled to carry identification, and be under constant surveillance by the Australian Border Force.

Nor did Tudge refer to the penalties—most likely detention

or deportation—for families who breached the zoning system. Scenes like those in the United States, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers swoop on homes and workplaces of alleged “undocumented” migrants, would be certain to follow.

The type of measures being drawn up behind closed doors was indicated by *Australian* opinion columnist Niki Savva. She asked if immigrants would be treated like prisoners released on parole. “Would it be like home detention with ankle bracelets or subcutaneous devices to alert authorities to their whereabouts?” she suggested. “What happens if people are found residing outside the borders of their designated living areas? ... Would they be rounded up, detained, returned to the country towns they are meant to be in—along with their partners or children—or sent back to their place of origin for breaching their visa conditions?”

There is a dark history of such measures in Australia. Many indigenous people were confined to missions and reservations until the 1970s and thousands of “enemy aliens” from Italy, Germany and Japan were rounded up and interned during World Wars I and II.

Tudge’s speech specifically targeted people of Chinese descent. He warned that the “multicultural composition of our population is also changing rapidly,” noting: “Today, over a million Australians have Chinese heritage.”

These divisive remarks were made in a definite context. The Trump administration has embarked on an escalating tariff and economic war to prevent China from challenging the US as the global military and corporate hegemon, accompanied by provocations that could trigger armed conflicts in the South China Sea and elsewhere, leading to another world war.

Tudge alleged that immigration was producing unprecedented “integration challenges.” There were people who “struggle to speak the national language,” a “higher than ever concentration of the overseas born in particular areas” and “a small minority” that was “challenging our values and sometimes using violence to do so.” Tudge has previously proposed stronger English language tests to block

unwanted migrants.

One aim of compelling immigrants to live in specified zones is to make them available to employers as a cheap labour force, driving down wages for all workers. This already occurs in regional areas where refugees, international backpackers and Pacific Island temporary visa holders are ruthlessly exploited, often as fruit pickers or meatworkers.

Above all, the parliamentary establishment is seeking to channel the growing popular discontent over inequality and falling living standards in reactionary nationalist directions. Tudge essentially accused incoming migrants of clogging the roads and trains in the urban centres, saying average peak time commuting now took almost twice as long as it did a decade ago.

In reality, working class people face worsening traffic and public transport logjams and delays because of the profit-driven character of urban development under capitalism. Billionaire property magnates dominate residential construction, build with little or no regard for the transport, education, health and social needs of residents. Banks, investors and speculators have driven up housing prices, forcing workers to live on far-flung city outskirts. Basic services, including water, power, public transport, roads and airports, have been privatised or franchised, adding to the chaos and costs inflicted on working people.

Tudge claimed the government was undertaking a “massive boost in infrastructure expenditure” to build road and rail networks. In fact, the level of spending has fallen per head of population. Moreover, the projects he listed are mostly expensive toll roads and other developments that will proceed only if they generate huge profits for their corporate operators.

Even if the Morrison government’s supposed “record \$75 billion in forward 10-year plans” materialises, it stands in stark contrast to the \$200 billion allocated for military weaponry—that is war preparations—over the same period.

Morrison and his ministers know they have backing throughout the parliamentary elite for their immigrant-bashing. On the eve of Tudge’s speech, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten wrote to Morrison proposing a bipartisan “population task force,” indicating support for “a new settlement policy” to redistribute people away from Sydney and Melbourne.

From their “White Australia” origins onward, Labor and the trade unions have long records of trying to isolate and divide workers in Australia from their fellow workers in Asia and globally. Spearheaded by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the last Labor government began to cut immigration numbers and advanced a similar plan for regional settlement zones.

The underlying Labor-Coalition unity was displayed again this week when New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian followed Tudge’s speech by saying immigration had been allowed to “balloon out of control” in Sydney and her state. State Labor leader Luke Foley objected that Berejiklian had “panned” him in March for issuing a similar call. In March, Foley sought to fuel racist sentiment, claiming that immigrants were causing a “white flight” from Sydney suburbs.

As in the US and Britain, the Murdoch media is fanning the anti-immigrant scare-mongering. Recent editorials in the *Australian* have urged politicians not to be “afraid of a frank and sensible debate about the pros and cons of immigration,” claiming it was the “barbecue-stopping” concern of voters.

Exactly the opposite is true. The ruling class, exemplified by Murdoch, and its political servants are seeking to cultivate a right-wing constituency and use it against the growing opposition in the working class to social inequality and deteriorating conditions.

Workers should reject the poisonous drive to pit them against each other along national, ethnic and communal lines. Immigrant workers and their families have the basic democratic right to live and work where they choose. The only way to reverse the corporate offensive on living standards and halt the lurch toward war is to unify the struggles of the working class on a global basis to overturn capitalism and reorganise economic and social life to satisfy human need, including by pouring trillions of dollars into the advanced infrastructure necessary for modern life.



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