

Australian Labor Party accuses government of “losing control” of borders

Mike Head
28 August 2019

Australia’s Labor Party last week stepped up its attacks on the Liberal-National Coalition government, from the right, condemning it for allegedly allowing a flood of asylum seekers to enter the country by plane over the past four years. Labor’s shadow home affairs minister Kristina Keneally accused the government of “losing control” of the country’s borders because more than 80,000 people had arrived at airports to claim asylum since 2014.

Like its social democratic counterparts in Germany, France, Britain, New Zealand and internationally, Labor is feeding into the anti-refugee poison being promoted by the far-right and fascist groups. The entire political establishment has joined the drive to blame immigrants for the worsening social crisis created by capitalism, and to divert rising working class struggles and discontent in reactionary nationalist directions.

Keneally’s comments directly aligned Labor with the war on refugees being spearheaded by the Trump administration in the US and governments across Europe. Around the world, millions of asylum seekers fleeing wars, destitution, climate destruction and persecution caused directly or indirectly by the major powers are being denounced as “illegals” and herded into concentration camps or left to perish in the Mediterranean Sea.

Keneally accused Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, one of the government’s most right-wing and vociferous anti-refugee representatives, of opening the door to supposedly fake asylum seekers. “[O]ver 90 percent of these people are found not to be genuine refugees,” she claimed. Keneally offered no statistics to back that assertion. Even if true, it would reflect the extremely restrictive official definition of refugee status and the manner in which the Home Affairs Department

arbitrarily denies refugee claims.

“This, along with the number of people in Australia on bridging visas soaring past 200,000 for the first time, should be an alarm bell,” Keneally declared. “Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton’s mismanagement and failures have seen Australia’s asylum application process and migration system being used by criminal syndicates and labour hire companies to traffic exploited workers into Australia.”

This marks a ramping up of Labor’s attempts, backed by the trade unions, to blame overseas workers for driving down wage levels, the destruction of working conditions, and casualisation of workforces by the corporate elite and its governments. This has been a constant theme of Labor and the unions since their founding on the program of “White Australia” that barred entry to “non-white” workers.

Keneally said Labor would convene a “roundtable” of migration and “border security” experts, trade union officials, and industry and employer executives to discuss the personal, societal, economic and security impacts of the so-called “gap” in Australia’s migration system.

Keneally’s stance is part of a further rightward lurch by the Labor Party and the unions since Labor’s debacle in the May 18 federal election. Labor’s vote fell to the lowest level for a century, despite the widespread hostility to Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government.

Anthony Albanese, who was installed unopposed as Labor leader after the devastating defeat, has spearheaded the shift, declaring that Labor’s new policies will pursue “wealth creation” and be business-friendly. He orchestrated Keneally’s elevation as Labor’s deputy leader in the Senate and handed her the key home affairs portfolio, which covers the police and

intelligence apparatus as well as the para-military Australian Border Force.

As soon as she was appointed, Keneally signalled Labor's xenophobic line of attack. On June 3 she vowed to apply a "blow torch" to the government's supposedly weak border security regime. She accused the government of letting in nearly twice as many asylum seekers as the last Labor government.

"In the past four years the number of 'airplane people' seeking protection visas has soared to over 81,000—far exceeding the 44,581 protection visa applications for boat arrivals over the previous five years," Keneally told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "Peter Dutton has in fact allowed people smugglers to evolve their business model from using boats to using planes."

When Dutton travelled to Sri Lanka to discuss the ongoing military operations to stop Sri Lankan refugees reaching Australia, Keneally demanded to know why the government had temporarily halted aerial patrols to hunt down refugee boats. "Mr Dutton needs to explain why he stopped these crucial border patrols," she wrote on Twitter.

Keneally, who previously feigned sympathy for refugees incarcerated indefinitely in Australia's prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, reiterated that Labor "fully supports" the "offshore processing" regime on these remote Pacific islands, plus the military Operation Sovereign Borders to repel refugee boats.

Labor's home affairs spokeswoman went further, opening the door to her party abandoning its opposition to temporary protection visas (TPVs), which it once criticised for leaving refugees and their families in legal limbo. Keneally said Labor's policy on abolishing TPVs would be among a wholesale suite of policies that Albanese and the shadow cabinet would review before the next federal election, due in 2022.

Aware of the widespread public support for refugees, Labor has in the past tried to distance itself from the suffering, suicides and other deaths among detained refugees even though the last Labor government reopened the "offshore" camps and decreed that none of the detainees would ever be permitted to enter Australia.

Under Albanese and Keneally, those pretences have been cast aside. Labor has lined up unequivocally with

anti-refugee scapegoating and the bolstering of the militarised "border protection" regime, vying to outdo the Coalition.

This is not simply an electoral tactic. Labor's open embrace of the repressive measures adopted against refugees, flouting their fundamental democratic rights, is another warning of the police-state methods being prepared against the working class as a whole.

It is also part of attempts by the ruling class and the political establishment to cultivate a nationalist and fascist layer that can be mobilised against rising working class resistance to the deteriorating conditions of life under global capitalism.



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