

Australian PM defends planned mass deportations to Nauru

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2 September 2025

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese took to national television on Monday to defend his Labor government's plan for mass deportations to the tiny remote Pacific island state of Nauru, while refusing to provide any details of the scheme.

Albanese told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Afternoon Briefing" TV program that the previously unannounced treaty his government signed with Nauru's president last Friday was "hardly a secret"—despite the intense secrecy surrounding it. He refused to disclose how long the deal would last or how many people would be subjected to it.

In effect, Albanese doubled down, defying condemnation of the plan by refugee and legal organisations. Lawyers from these organisations have pointed out that, under Labor's laws, the Nauru scheme could extend to removing more than 80,000 people currently living in Australia on temporary and insecure bridging visas.

There is no real difference between Labor's plan and the mass deportations being conducted by the Trump administration in the US. There thousands of working-class people have been seized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and thrown into detention prisons for deportation to grim locations without any due process.

An undeniable parallel exists. First, the Albanese government suddenly tabled a bill last week to strip the basic right of procedural fairness—the right to a hearing—from people being consigned to Nauru or any other designated "third country."

Then, also without any prior notice, the Labor government agreed last Friday to pay Nauru's government more than \$408 million upfront to become a neo-colonial dumping ground—initially for more than 350 former immigration detainees—and almost \$70

million per year to supposedly cover the costs of their as-yet unknown accommodation and living arrangements.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke signed a "memorandum of understanding" with Nauruan President David Adeang during a secretive trip to the island, news of which was only posted on the Home Affairs web site on Friday afternoon. It was not publicised or shared widely with journalists, as is common practice.

None of this was mentioned by the Labor government during the campaign for the May 3 federal election. In fact, Labor won the election, despite obtaining only about a third of the primary votes, primarily by depicting the Liberal-National Coalition opposition as Trump-like, exploiting the widespread popular hostility to such anti-immigrant and fascistic measures.

Albanese told "Afternoon Briefing" that details of the arrangements between the Australian and Nauruan governments would be "released appropriately at the same time together." But he refused to say when that would be, or provide any information.

Instead, Albanese reiterated the government's determination to remove anyone whose visa has expired or been denied. "These are people who do not have a legitimate reason to stay in Australia," he declared. "People who have no right to be here need to be found somewhere to go."

Nauru, with a population of around 12,000 people, is the third smallest statelet on earth, following the Vatican and Monaco. It has been impoverished by decades of phosphate mining under British, Australian and New Zealand colonial rule before nominal independence was granted in 1968.

The mining has left about 80 percent of the small island uninhabitable. Moreover, rising sea levels caused

by global climate change are forecast to force 90 percent of its residents to relocate.

Among the many condemnations of Labor's scheme, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) warned that the secret deal opened the door to mass deportations. "[T]he powers the government gave themselves in their brutal Bills passed in the last sitting week of 2024... have the potential to apply to over 80,000 people, tearing families apart and destroying lives forever."

ARSC deputy CEO Jana Favero said: "These secret deals send one clear message—in Australia, some people will be punished simply because of where they were born. This deal is discriminatory, disgraceful and dangerous."

The first targets of the deportation scheme are the 350 ex-immigration detainees. They face immediate re-detention, then deportation. The Labor government had been forced to release them from indefinite detention in November 2023 after the High Court, in a case known as NZYQ, ruled such detention unconstitutional.

Some had been imprisoned for years as the result of earlier High Court rulings, two decades ago, that sanctioned indefinite incarceration of people who could not be deported, often because they were stateless. Others were officially-recognised refugees who, because of international law, could not be sent back to countries where they could face death or persecution. That principle, enshrined in the international refugee convention, is known as "non-refoulement."

Throughout the Murdoch media and other corporate outlets these detainees, described as "the NZYQ cohort," are being demonised as "foreign-born criminals." As in the US under the Trump administration, they are being depicted as murderers, rapists and paedophiles in order to try to poison public opinion.

This media barrage, in which the Albanese government is complicit, is a vile distortion. Some of the ex-detainees are refugees, and others have never been convicted of an offence. Those with prior convictions have all served their prison sentences. If they were Australian citizens, they would be free to live in the community, instead of being sent to Nauru.

The Human Rights Law Centre's legal director, Sanmati Verma, noted the discriminatory character of further punishing people who had completed their

prison terms. She also pointed out that some of the ex-detainees "are elderly and sick, and might die on Nauru without proper care."

Little of the money to be paid to Nauru's government will go to provide any social support to the deported detainees. On Sunday, the Nauru government said the money would be placed in the nation's sovereign wealth fund, the Nauru Intergenerational Trust Fund.

The Albanese government is also continuing to forcibly remove to Nauru any refugees who try to reach Australia by boat. It is spending \$486 million this year alone to fund Nauru's detention facilities, according to the federal budget. In addition, the Labor government has an agreement with a for-profit prison company, MTC, to oversee the facilities on Nauru at a cost of \$422 million.

Even as it tries to distance itself from last weekend's right-wing anti-immigration marches in Australia, the Labor government is stoking such xenophobia and virulent nationalism by demonising refugees and immigrants, falsely blaming them for the housing affordability crisis.

Moreover, while the NZYQ detainees are being particularly vilified and victimised, every aspect of the government's plan, not least the axing of procedural fairness for anyone detained, creates the precedent for its wider use.



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