

Australian broadcaster promotes anti-refugee hysteria

By Patrick O'Connor
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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship current affairs television program "Four Corners" on Monday featured what it billed as an exposé of refugee "people smugglers" operating in Australia. The broadcast was a filthy exercise in yellow journalism, aimed at fuelling anti-immigrant prejudice and creating a climate for the Labor government to enact further repressive laws targeting asylum seekers.

The program, titled "Smugglers' Paradise", began with host Kerry O'Brien gravely declaring: "Don't be in any doubt about what's driving the smugglers. They're clever, they're ruthless, and they have blood on their hands." He continued, "The real shock of tonight's story is that they have now established a flourishing nucleus in Australia, to cash in on those who have been accepted as refugees here, and are now prepared to pay to have other family members smuggled in from their home countries."

The next 45 minutes featured elaborately staged reconstructions of so-called people smugglers and asylum seekers travelling to Australia, all framed around breathless commentary from reporter Sarah Ferguson. The broadcast culminated in the exposure of an Iraqi individual, "Captain Emad", who arrived in Australia in January 2010 on a refugee boat and has since allegedly helped organise and take payments for other asylum seekers to sail from Indonesia to Australia.

The ABC promoted this as a major exclusive, when in fact there have been multiple "people smuggling" prosecutions in the last decade of people in Australia who were previously accepted as refugees.

The current regressive "border protection" regime allows only a small trickle of refugees to reach Australia through official channels. Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government, like its predecessors, openly flouts international law and does everything it can to prevent asylum seekers from ever reaching Australia. Those who are accepted are desperate to have their family also

escape persecution and rejoin them in Australia. They have no choice but to deal with so-called people smugglers.

The government has sought to whip up antagonisms against all those who assist with the refugees' travel arrangements—former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd called so-called smugglers "the vilest form of people on the planet". It has poured considerable resources into prosecuting and imprisoning poor Indonesian fishermen whose boats are used to enter Australian waters.

The government and the entire Australian political establishment bear primary responsibility for the hundreds of refugee deaths in the seas between Indonesia and Australia.

"Four Corners" only criticised government policy for not being sufficiently harsh. The current mandatory detention of refugees results in asylum seekers, including children, being imprisoned for years in many cases, triggering mental health breakdowns and severe trauma. Yet Sarah Ferguson declared that once "Captain Emad" arrived on Christmas Island with his family, his "plan to become an Australian resident continued without a hitch" and that after "only three months" in detention he was issued a protection visa and Australian residence.

Opposition spokesman on immigration, Scott Morrison, later declared that the man had been given a "Rolls-Royce ride" through the system. The *Australian* similarly weighed in, claiming in an editorial yesterday that "the welcome mat rolled out to 'Captain Emad' in 2010 has heightened doubts about whether officials are competent at assessing newcomers' applications."

Not accidentally, these "doubts" are being fuelled throughout the media just as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has come under pressure, including via a High Court case, over its issuing of negative security reviews of Sri Lankan and other refugees. A negative ASIO assessment cannot be

challenged in court and plunges refugees into a legal black-hole that keeps them in detention indefinitely.

The “Four Corners” program spared no effort in attempting to portray “Captain Emad” as a criminal mastermind. One person interviewed described him as “the head of the smugglers, he’s the head of the snake.” Reporter Sarah Ferguson talked about his “cunning”; she later wrote an article on the “Four Corners” investigation for the *Australian* under the headline, “Hunting a Kingpin.”

The so-called kingpin was found by the ABC working at a suburban shopping centre collecting trolleys. Undeterred, Sarah Ferguson managed to put a sinister spin on this low-paid occupation, describing him as “giving every appearance of leading a modest life.”

Even more absurdly, “Four Corners” sought to portray the city that “Captain Emad” chose to live in an ominous light. “Smart he may be,” Sarah Ferguson declared, “but none of us could have imagined he would have had the audacity to base himself in the nation’s capital. But that is exactly where we found him and his family, in Canberra.”

Like a tacky tabloid current affairs presenter seeking a confrontation with a “welfare cheat” or some other targeted victim, Ferguson and the “Four Corners” television crew accosted “Emad” at the shopping centre while he was working. The day after the broadcast, the shopping centre announced that it had fired the man, who has not been charged with any crimes, let alone convicted .

The ABC also promoted the xenophobic myth of asylum seekers receiving enormous government “handouts.” Ferguson reported that “in the final affront to the Australian system”, “Emad’s” children were provided with public housing.

This pointed to the underlying purpose of the “Four Corners” program—and the promotion of anti-immigrant prejudice more generally: to find convenient scapegoats to divert attention from the responsibility of governments and the corporate elite for growing social inequality and economic hardship.

It is no coincidence that the refugee issue again emerges to the forefront of Australian politics at the same time as the trade unions are whipping up a reactionary nationalist campaign against overseas workers in the mining industry. The Australian ruling class has always resorted to anti-immigrant xenophobia when social tensions are raised, seeking to channel the anger of working people against “foreigners” and refugees.

Despite there being no evidence whatsoever that the children of the alleged people smuggler improperly accessed public housing facilities, the media seized on this part of the “Four Corners” story.

The *Australian* declared that “pensioners and others struggling financially have good reason to look askance at a system that provides housing in Canberra for an alleged criminal and several of his adult children.” The *Daily Telegraph* tabloid in Sydney added: “For those who seek to downplay the exploitation of Australian welfare by some in the asylum seeker community, Monday night’s broadcast should come as a long-overdue wake-up call. It should also prompt a rapid and comprehensive change of government policy.”

The Gillard government responded to the “Four Corners” program by blaming opposition leader Tony Abbott for the situation. It again demanded that Abbott agree to its plan to deport asylum seekers to Malaysia as soon as they arrive in Australia. This blatantly contravenes international legal protections governing the treatment of refugees and has also been ruled unconstitutional by the High Court.

The widespread media coverage of the “Four Corners” story sharply contrasted with the virtual silence that met a *Sun Herald* article published the day before the television broadcast. The *Herald* revealed that in October 2009 the Australian Federal Police (AFP) were alerted that a refugee vessel that had left Indonesia was in distress and taking on water. The federal police waited for four hours before informing maritime safety authorities, supposedly because they did not want to “reveal it was a federal police spy who had tipped them off.” More than 100 Afghan refugees subsequently drowned.

The episode further underscores the criminal character of the Australian government’s treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The media, as Monday’s “Four Corners” program again demonstrated, is an accomplice to its crimes.

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