

Australian government lies exposed over latest refugee vessel arrival

By Patrick O'Connor
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At the same time as the Labor government cleared its new anti-refugee legislation through the parliament yesterday, it sought to poison the public debate with false accusations against asylum seekers who were rescued at sea on Tuesday.

The merchant vessel *Parsifal* rescued 67 people, apparently mostly Palestinians displaced from Iraq. Their vessel had issued a mayday call from international waters, reportedly 70 nautical miles southwest of the Indonesian island of Bali. The ship's captain initially intended to continue toward his destination, Singapore, but subsequently headed for Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean.

Home Affairs Minister Jason Clare yesterday declared that the refugees had become "very aggressive" when told they would be taken to Singapore. He claimed that the ship's captain had been "concerned for his crew's safety" and that the incident "tells you how dangerous potentially towing a boat back to Indonesia can be, when people behave like this."

This account was contradicted by Wallenius Marine, the shipping company that owns the *Parsifal*. It insisted that "there was no physical aggression" by the asylum seekers. After being told they were going to Singapore, "the survivors became agitated and threatened self-harm." The captain then considered that the situation posed a potential security risk to the vessel and decided to change course for Australia. After this decision, the company explained, "the survivors calmed down immediately."

It has since emerged that one of the stricken asylum vessel's passengers fell overboard while trying to board the *Parsifal*. He is presumed drowned. The death would no doubt have heightened the fears of the

already traumatised asylum seekers who had just been rescued, and further explains why they made desperate threats of self-harm to prevent being taken to Singapore, where they would potentially face indefinite detention.

Late last night the Senate approved the new laws, authorising the indefinite detention of refugees in squalid facilities in Nauru, Papua New Guinea and anywhere else the government sees fit, in blatant violation of international law. Australia now has the most draconian anti-refugee policies of any advanced capitalist country. Openly repudiating the basic right of those suffering persecution to claim asylum in the country, the Labor government has enacted measures that far surpass anything implemented by the previous Howard Liberal government.

The response to the *Parsifal* rescue points to the right-wing ideological offensive that will accompany the government's imposition of a brutal refugee regime. On the one hand, the political and media establishment is appealing to ordinary people's horror over the increasing numbers of refugee deaths at sea, arguing that "offshore processing" of asylum claims will halt the drownings. On the other hand, there is a deliberate incitement of the most backward and xenophobic sentiments.

The media desperately buried certain aspects of the *Parsifal* incident in its coverage—especially the drowning of one of the asylum seekers as they boarded the rescue ship.

At the same time, the opposition Liberal Party was given ample air time for its vicious campaign on the issue. Opposition leader Tony Abbott harked back to the Howard government's deployment of elite SAS troops onto the Norwegian Tampa freighter to prevent 460 refugees landing in Australia in 2001. "John

Howard met the Tampa with the SAS,” Abbott declared. “This government has met the Parsifal with a welcoming committee... If you want John Howard’s results, you’ve got to have John Howard’s resolve and my fear with this government is that its heart is just not in it.”

Opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison declared the refugees’ actions were “outrageous.” He continued: “I think they should be locked up and there should be a charge sheet... They should be investigated for potential crimes of piracy that carry a life sentence under our Crimes Act.”

In response to these hysterical statements, Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared that any unlawful conduct would be “acted upon.” Defence Minister Stephen Smith said it was “fanciful” to suggest the SAS could have been mobilised at such short notice and so far out to sea—clearly implying that the government was open to the option if it proved feasible in the future.

The passage of the new laws through the Senate last night highlighted some of their draconian features. Multicultural Affairs Minister Kate Lundy declared that unaccompanied children could be detained indefinitely in Nauru and PNG. The government could prevent this happening in individual cases, she explained, but “an expansive use of exemptions would defeat the purpose of the bill.”

Lundy added that all references to “natural justice” were now removed from the refugee laws, in order to prevent asylum seekers challenging their treatment in the courts. This only underscores the extent to which the Labor government’s refugee regime breaches basic democratic rights and legal norms.

The pretence that this is all motivated by a humanitarian concern to protect the lives and well-being of asylum seekers has been further exposed by the government’s response to reports of another missing refugee boat.

A vessel that is believed to have left Indonesia in late June has never been found. The *Age* reported yesterday: “The federal government has known for weeks that another asylum seeker boat, this one with dozens of Palestinians on board, had disappeared yet it kept silent about the details.”

The Palestinian Authority’s representative in Australia, Izzat Abdulhadi, said he raised the alarm

three weeks ago after being contacted by several relatives of the missing. When his office contacted Maritime Safety officials, however, it was “transferred” to the Department of Immigration. Abdulhadi then heard nothing more “until after media reports that the boat was missing and feared sunk.”

The incident is one of several recent cases in which refugee boats have somehow disappeared at sea without being detected by Australian intelligence and radar. In every instance, the government, navy, and maritime authorities have washed their hands of any responsibility to investigate the fate of the missing asylum seekers.

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