

Australian government claims refugee policy “best in the world”

By Max Newman
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Despite continued revelations of abuses inflicted on incarcerated asylum seekers who sought protection in Australia, the Liberal-National government has not only maintained its stance of refusing entry to all refugees, but proclaimed its “border protection” regime as model for governments to adopt worldwide.

Invited to address the United Nations summit on refugees in New York this week, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull claimed that only by “addressing irregular migration through secure borders” could governments “focus humanitarian assistance on those who need it most.”

Before his speech, Turnbull touted Australia’s refugee policy as the “best in the world.” He sought to justify the indefinite detention of nearly 2,000 asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island by declaring that “public opinion will not accept a generous humanitarian program... unless the government is seen to be in command of its borders.”

By generous, Turnbull evidently meant his government’s pledge to grant humanitarian visas to 18,750 carefully-selected people annually. This is a drop in the ocean compared to 65 million displaced people across the globe, most of them fleeing the horrific wars triggered by the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East.

Tacitly, Turnbull criticised the governments of Europe for not yet following Australia’s lead and totally shutting their borders to the desperate people trying to escape war and impoverishment—which would leave millions of people languishing in over-crowded refugee camps in some of the world’s poorest and most war-torn countries.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who was also invited to the UN summit, sought to defend the appalling conditions in the Australian-controlled

Pacific island camps by claiming they were better than those in countries such as Syria and Jordan. But the conditions in the Australian camps, which were re-established by the previous Labor government, are deliberately punitive, precisely to deter refugees from trying to leave such camps and seek protection in Australia.

In reality also, governments internationally are vilifying refugees in order to curb popular support for the displaced millions and to justify shutting borders, imposing police-state measure and continuing the wars and regime-change operations that have fuelled the worst refugee crisis since World War II.

The “Australian model” is one of cruelty and inhumanity. The recent leak of over 2,000 incident reports from Nauru, dubbed the Nauru Files, provided a picture of the violations of basic legal and democratic rights that occur daily in Australia’s “offshore processing centres.” Former staff members have spoken out bravely against the abuses, defying the threat of being jailed under the government’s secrecy provisions.

Speaking at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute recently, Dutton boasted of maintaining the camps in the face of “sustained activist opposition.” Dutton insisted that the government’s “relationship in this regard with Nauru will continue for decades.” In other words, despite the overwhelming evidence of violations, the camps while remain open indefinitely.

The Labor Party and the Greens attempted last week to distance themselves from their own role in imposing these policies by co-sponsoring a motion in the Senate for a committee inquiry into the leaked reports. It was the 2010–13 minority Labor government, kept in office by a formal agreement with the Greens, that re-opened the Nauru and Manus facilities, for the express purpose

of ensuring that detainees would have “no advantage” over the millions of refugees trapped in camps elsewhere.

Labor and the Greens are working together to try to head off the mounting disgust among broad layers of people and promote political illusions that some modification of the “border protection” regime can be made within the parliamentary framework.

The motion was tabled by Labor Senator Murray Watt without any Greens or Labor senator speaking. The only speaker was Liberal Senator James McGrath, who declared that the “government will not waver in our commitment to the strong and consistent border protection policies.” Despite the motion, the government’s policy would not change and “no-one in regional processing centres will be resettled in Australia.”

The truth is that the Senate inquiry will seek to whitewash the political responsibility for the crimes committed against refugees by successive Australian governments.

The Labor Party unequivocally supports the indefinite detention of asylum seekers. It was the Keating Labor government that instigated mandatory detention within Australia in 1992. And today, Labor’s leaders insist that the Gillard Labor government “stopped the boats” by reopening the offshore camps in 2012.

Initially, the Greens proposed a royal commission into the Nauru abuses, which would only serve as a more sophisticated form of cover up. Very quickly, however, the Greens complied with Labor’s call for yet another Senate inquiry, sending a wider signal of their readiness to collaborate with Labor.

Greens immigration spokesperson Senator Nick McKim said the Greens were “disappointed” by Labor’s lack of support for a royal commission, but “thank them for their constructive approach on this inquiry.”

McKim said: “We need to close the camps and bring the people there to Australia. But until that happens, we need to reveal the truth.” This only serves to cover up the fact that numerous reports, inquiries and investigations, including a previous Senate inquiry headed by the Greens, have failed to shift the government’s policy in the slightest. Nor has Labor’s support for “offshore” detention altered one bit.

In August last year, a Senate inquiry with Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young as deputy chair, produced evidence of systematic abuses of detainees, including sexual assault and torture, but did not demand closure of the camps. Instead, it called for more “transparency” and an “open centre” model, which still left detainees highly restricted.

Over the past year there has been a further escalation in suicides and protests, with two asylum seekers self-immolating. Despite this and Papua New Guinea’s highest court ruling the Manus camp illegal, both prison camps are still operating.

The working class must come to the aid of refugees and those displaced by war. They must have the basic democratic right to live and work where they choose, with full civil and political rights. The closing of borders to asylum seekers is a damning indictment of the entire nation-state system, which divides the international working class along national lines in the interests of corporate profit.

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