

Australian prime minister defends Trump's anti-immigrant bans

By Mike Head
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On Sunday morning, Australian time, as outrage erupted across the United States and around the world over the Trump administration's refugee bans and anti-immigrant measures, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull held a 25-minute phone call with the American president, reiterating his government's commitment to a close alliance with Washington.

At a media conference yesterday, Turnbull refused to differ from the US president and his blatantly discriminatory actions one iota. "It is not my job as prime minister of Australia to run a commentary on the domestic policies of other countries," he said. Instead, he claimed credit for the similar policies adopted by his government and its predecessors, saying they were "the envy of the world."

In fact, Turnbull vowed to ramp-up Australia's "border protection" regime, which features the indefinite incarceration, without trial, of asylum seekers in primitive camps on remote islands in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru, and the military interception and repulsion of all refugee boats. "We've got very strong systems—that is a fact. We're proud of those and we'll maintain them and where we can, we will enhance them."

Likewise, Treasurer Scott Morrison boasted of Australia's repressive policies. He compared Trump's executive orders to his actions as immigration minister shortly after the 2013 federal election, when the fully-militarised "Operation Sovereign Borders" was launched to force refugee boats back into open seas. "The rest of the world is catching up to us and how the US wants to handle that is a matter for them," he told Sydney radio station 2GB.

No details were released of exactly what support and undertakings Turnbull offered Trump during their phone call. Nevertheless, Trump reportedly gave

Turnbull an assurance that a refugee-swap deal that Turnbull's government struck late last year with the Obama administration would be honoured.

While the corporate media generally hailed Trump's purported promise as a political boost for Turnbull's unstable Liberal-National Coalition government, the agreement is in line with the reactionary border-closure measures unveiled by Trump. It is also a bid to shore up the underlying Australian policy of permanently barring all refugees arriving by boat.

Under the "resettlement" deal with the Obama administration, an unstated number of the remainder of the 2,200 refugees who have rotted since 2013 in offshore detention camps would be offloaded to the US, and banned from ever entering Australia. Similarly, the US would deport to Australia some Central American refugees languishing in camps in Costa Rica, having been denied entry to the US. On both sides of the Pacific, hundreds of families would be split up, with many detainees unable to reunite with their spouses, children and other relatives already living in Australia or the US.

The Obama swap agreement was subject to draconian "security" screening of refugees by both governments. This process was expected to involve several interviews, and take between six and 12 months. Many of Australia's detainees fled from Iran and Iraq, two of the countries from which Trump has now blocked entry, and they could well remain barred from the US under Trump's measures.

Trump's executive order suspended the US refugee program for 120 days, and banned for 90 days entry by citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The order included dual citizens and green card holders who held valid visas to live and work in the US.

These measures could affect thousands of Australian citizens and permanent residents. Dual nationals of the targeted countries, and Australians who have visited the listed countries in the past five years, will no longer have an automatic visa waiver. Instead, they will have to apply for a visa from the US embassy, and be subjected to the same vetting regime.

Already, a 15-year-old Melbourne teenager has become one of the first victims of this policy, being denied a visa to take part in a long-planned school visit to the US. Pouya Ghadirian was born in Australia but his parents are from Iran, giving him dual citizenship. Many more such cases are certain, despite Turnbull's latest claim that Australian dual citizens will be exempted from the travel bans. Australia's Iraqi-born citizens are thought to number around 80,000, and there are about 65,000 Iranian-born citizens.

Some of Trump's measures, such as incarcerating asylum applicants in internment camps before they are given a court hearing, emulate the policies of mandatory detention of all refugees pioneered by the Keating Labor government in 1992 and then extended by successive Australian governments, both Labor and Coalition.

In a cynical display, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten used Facebook today to declare that Trump's "ban on refugees based upon their religion or country is appalling" and Turnbull's "silence would be interpreted as agreement." Yet, the last Labor government, in which Shorten was a key minister, suspended without notice the processing of all new refugee claims by Sri Lankans and Afghans for up to six months in 2010 and then reopened the detention camps on Manus and Nauru in a bid to block all asylum seekers from Australia.

Clearly, Turnbull's phone call to Trump involved commitments that go beyond anti-immigrant measures. Shortly after the conversation, the White House tweeted a photo of the call and released a statement. "Both leaders emphasised the enduring strength and closeness of the US-Australia relationship that is critical for peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and globally," it said.

Speaking from Los Angeles yesterday morning, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said Turnbull "was very pleased with the call. It was very warm, it was very engaging. They discussed a whole range of

bilateral, regional and global issues."

Turnbull's pledge to strengthen the relations between the two nations followed Trump's confirmation of an aggressive confrontation with China. In his first week in office, Trump underlined his administration's threats to block China's access to the islets it controls in the South China Sea, to repudiate the three-decade-old "One China" policy and to impose crippling tariffs on Chinese imports.

Significantly, while Trump has thrown question marks over the NATO coalition and the US-Japan alliance, he has not called into doubt the ANZUS Treaty, which formalises the military alliance between the US, Australia and New Zealand. His "warm" and "engaging" conversation with Turnbull is another warning that the Pentagon regards Australia as a key base of operations as it prepares for war against China.

The escalating repulsion of refugees—tens of millions of whom are fleeing the US-instigated predatory wars to assert its hegemony in the Middle East—goes hand-in-hand with the drive to war. The promotion of xenophobia and anti-foreigner witch hunting pits workers against each other along national and ethnic lines, and ideologically paves the way for workers being sent off to fight each other.

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