



## Closing Manus Island's Detention Centre: Australia's Search for « Alternative Cruelties »

Par [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Mondialisation.ca, 19 août 2016

*It all goes back to April, when the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court found the Manus Island detention facility, ostensibly directed and run by the Australian government, in breach of the PNG Constitution.*

By the order of the court, “Both the Australian and Papua New Guinea governments shall forthwith take all steps necessary to cease and prevent the continued unconstitutional and illegal detention of the asylum seekers or transferees at the relocation centre on Manus Island and the continued breach of the asylum seekers or transferees constitutional and human rights.”

PNG's Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, did not wait long before announcing that the machinery would be put in place to close the centre. He had already been making utterances in March that “we cannot hold the refugees here forever.”[1]

The Australian response to this grim affair had always been crude yet consistent: the asylum seekers housed at the detention centre were not the responsibility of Canberra, despite being there precisely because of its draconian non-settlement policy. Dark, and deeply unsuccessful outcomes, have greeted those few who have resettled in PNG itself.

It all constituted the grand deflection of state obligation, an outsourcing of duties characteristic in its approach to the UN Convention on Refugees. The persistent, gruesome alibi in this awful mess has been the good Samaritan nonsense of preventing asylum seekers and refugees from drowning on route to Australia.

Even as the offshore detention system crumbles, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton insists rather mechanically on that broken theme. “The Labor legacy of the failed border protection policy, not only did it result in 1,200 people drowning at sea, but it resulted in billions of dollars being spent on this program.”[2] Keep them in indefinite detention, in other words, for their own, deeply misunderstood good.

Within Australia, unprecedented moves are being suggested. The West Australian Premier, Colin Barnett, has broken ranks with the Fortress Australia mentality, expressing his willingness to accommodate asylum seekers from Australia's other place of detention pain, Nauru. With regards “families, as long as they don't present a security risk or safety risk, I do welcome them being in Australia.”[3]

Of particular concern to Barnett has been the persistent problem of child detention, something which remains in clear violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

“The one thing I find unacceptable is children in detention.”

Unfortunately, Australian officials and law enforcement authorities across various states have shown a certain enthusiasm, even hunger, for youth detention. In the Northern Territory and Queensland, instances of brutality against juveniles in detention centres have been common and publicised of late. The zeitgeist is very much against the child in such instances.

In the puzzle of outsourced responsibilities, the Australian approach is bound to entail finding a third country for resettlement. In Dutton’s words, “We’re talking to third countries at the moment, to look at settlement options.”

The dogma of never accepting asylum seekers accept via the official humanitarian channels means identifying a state with the appropriate developing status. Poor countries, in other words, are always going to be more attractive in the game of passing the refugee than wealthier ones, despite the standing invitation by New Zealand to accept more of Australia’s forsaken cargo. Suffering, in short, must be emphasised.

For all that, Dutton is not brimming with ideas. True to form in his portfolio, he has refused to clarify when the closure of the detention centre in PNG will take place. There are no schedules, not time tables in the offing. “I’m hoping it can happen as soon as possible but it’s an issue for the PNG Government to work through and we’ll support them in that decision.”

The Labor opposition has decided to monetise the issue, hoping that figures, rather than compassion, will win the day. Instead of focusing on the central premise of international refugee law, the government in waiting has found a different, noble alibi: the Australian tax payer.

“We’d like the minister,” stated Shadow Immigration Minister Shayne Neumann, “to tell us how much is a substantial amount of money. We need to know and the Australian public need to know because these are tax payers’ dollars.”

Neumann, taking the low pragmatic ground, has also sought to speed up negotiations on finding another country willing to accept Australia’s refugee and asylum seeker cargo while working more closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

On costing matters, he would be on even better ground suggesting something unthinkable to policy hacks within his party: closing the centres would achieve staggering savings for the commonwealth government, somewhere in the order of \$3 billion. The figure comes straight from the Parliamentary Budget Office, though critics prefer to regard them as contingent at best.

Neither the Turnbull government, nor Labor opposition, accept that the offshore detention system is beginning to implode. The central premise to its existence is not one of facilitating, but detaining. The operating rationale is one of punishment, not processing.

Closing such centres would save billions and achieve something remarkable in Australian foreign policy: upholding international conventions it has long flouted with a sneer. It will also allow individuals kept in detention for over three years to taste something absent in their emotional diet for some time: the prospect of freedom.

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## Notes

[1]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-03/png-pm-calls-for-manus-island-centre-eventual-closure/7217774>

[2]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-17/manus-island-to-close-png-prime-minister-confirms/7759810>

[3]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-18/wa-govt-opens-door-to-nauru-refugees-ahead-of-manus-closure/7760854>

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