

Jack Garton
jgarton@student.unimelb.edu.au
Freie Universität Berlin
Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaften
2017 Sommersemester Hausarbeit
Topic: Neo-colonialism and Australian off-shore detention

Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 14:

In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but *the other* of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, barbarity the other of civilization, animal the other of the human, woman the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, 'them' the other of 'us', insanity the other of reason, foreigner the other of the state subject, lay public the other of the expert. Both sides depend on each other, but the dependence is not symmetrical. The second side depends on the first for its contrived and enforced isolation. The first depends on the second for its self-assertion.

The Australian government undertakes deliberate steps to dehumanise asylum seekers who come to Australia through a network of illegal concentration camps. The Australian federal government has consistently and knowingly disregarded legal norms and violated international law. Despite claims to the contrary, Australia wields profound and undue influence over Papua New Guinea and the Republic of Nauru, where these camps are located. Finally, the efforts of the Australian government in the years 2013-6 at 'othering' asylum seekers is an insidious form of dehumanisation. These policies, I shall argue, are not an aberration in European-Australian history, but rather a culmination of a profound and latent racism upon which the modern Australian state was founded upon.

Australia is a nation built on immigration. 60,000 years ago the first Aboriginal Australians arrived on the Australian continent. In 1788, the British First Fleet arrived on the eastern coast of this continent in a cove these Europeans came to name Botany Bay. After much violence between the aboriginal population and the European settlers, several British colonies were established. A Commonwealth of Australia was inaugurated on January 1st, 1901, one-hundred-thirteen years after the arrival of the First Fleet. Given the island status of this vast

continent, the movement of people by boat to and from its shores has been a defining characteristic of its history. This movement continues to this day. As of June 2016, 28 per cent of Australia's population, some 6.9 million people, were born overseas and more than one-fifth of Australians spoke a language other than English at home. Indeed Australia has the largest population percentage of residents born overseas in the world. Yet, in spite of this nominal cosmopolitan and multicultural status, Australia has a dark history of harsh immigration policies. The 2013 - 2016 period, which this essay will analyse, cannot be understood without an overview of the policies which preceded and informed this moment of extraordinary draconianism. Australia's immigration policies since federation in 1901 have been characterised by alternating periods of liberalism and tolerance, and discrimination and isolationism. The aftermath of the Second World War can be classified as a combination of these two types of policy. Under the so-called White Australia years, immigration into Australia boomed as Canberra responded to a growing need for cheap workers and to international movement from a war-torn Europe. But, despite the global nature of the Second World War, it was Australian government policy that only white migrants would be accepted. Though the White Australia policy came to an end in the 1970s, the introduction of mandatory detention of asylum seekers the Labor government in 1992 ushered in a new era of darkness. At the time the immigration minister said, "The Government is determined that a clear signal be sent that migration to Australia may not be achieved by simply arriving in this country and expecting to be allowed into the community ... this legislation is only intended to be an interim measure." This harsh policy was intensified under the Liberal-National government in 2001, which introduced mandatory off-shore detention. Then-prime minister, John Howard famously roared, "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come." Such official discrimination of arrivals goes back to the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia, when in 1901 the Immigration Restriction Act limited migration to Australia from only Europe and approved the deportation of 'undesirables'. In this way, the racist world view which the modern Australian state was built upon has reared its head again.

Currently, Australia's policy toward boat-borne asylum seekers operates on a two-pronged policy of deterrence. This involves the hardline notion that no boat borne asylum seekers will ever be settled in Australia. Boats arriving in Australian waters will be towed back into international waters or their port of departure, no matter their refugee status. This process is the first means of deterrence of those seeking to enter Australia irregularly. The second is through off-shore processing. That is taking those who do reach Australia to off-shore processing centres - Nauru and Manus Island. Since mid-2013, all people arriving in Australia would be barred from seeking asylum in Australia and never permitted to enter Australia. The ostensible justification for Australia's policy of deterrence is cynically based upon humanitarian principles of saving lives. That is because between 2008 and the end of 2013, approximately 1000-1200 asylum seekers drowned en route to Australia. (amnesty) This was highlighted most tragically by the shipwrecking of an asylum-seeking boat in the waters beneath Christmas Island in 2010. UNICEF and Save the Children conducted an audit into Australia's policy of turnbacks, off-shore detention and deportations and concluded that between 2013-16 the Australian government had

spent approximately AUD\$9.6 billion in its efforts to 'secure' its borders. More refugees on Manus have died than been resettled.

"However, since its inception, offshore processing has been designed to be punitive and has been widely promoted by a succession of Australian governments as a deterrent and as a demonstration of Australia securing its borders."

The neo-colonial dynamic also appears in the way in which the ministry of immigration, which oversees the camps on Nauru and Manus Island, is viewed within the Australian political world. Especially since the 2013 Liberal-National election victory, the post of immigration minister has been viewed as a stepping stone to loftier political power, a tool to be cynically utilised on the political ladder towards the prime ministership. After successfully 'stopping the boats', the 2013-15 immigration minister, Scott Morrison, was promoted to the heights of the treasury ministry, a powerful and influential post in the Australian government. Peter Dutton, Morrison's successor, too, has seen a significant rise in political clout since his rise to the immigration post. He has even been floated as a potential conservative successor to the current moderate prime minister should the prime minister lose the confidence of his parliamentary colleagues. Dutton has hinted this at critical junctures to the media. In this way, the post of immigration minister appears like latter-day administration of a far-flung colony, like the way in which the administration of India during its time as the British Raj was seen as a proven stepping stone in one's career. As Benjamin Disraeli, the British prime minister, stated in his 1847 novel, *Tancred*: "The East is a career." Certainly, for example, for Lord Curzon, to name but one British viceroy of the Raj, the viceroyship was a path upwards. Curzon became foreign secretary in 1919 after a 'successful' six-year stint as viceroy and governor-general of India. This system seems to be replicated over Nauru and Manus Island, albeit to a much more limited scale.

The concentration camps on Nauru and Manus Island, as well of the suite of laws which prop up this system, constitute a break with international law and a disregard of legal norms. It is clear that the Australian government is aware of its illegal course. This shift is represented in three ways: through an intentional disregard for international law and norms of the international community; through a militarisation of the Australian immigration apparatus; and through an expansion of ministerial powers over matters of immigration and asylum seeking. Firstly, it should be noted that seeking asylum is a human right, and that the unauthorised entry of asylum seekers into a state's territory is not illegal. On the other hand, the detention of asylum seekers on off-shore detention centres and the towing-back of asylum-seeking boats, the United Nations contends, is in violation of several articles and treaties of international law. Namely, under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Refugee Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights. Violations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child were brought against the Australian government by its very own Human Rights Commission (AHRC), an independent body charged with monitoring the human rights situation in Australia. The Human Rights Commission's 2014 *Forgotten Children* report recommended the following:

“It is recommended that all children and their families in immigration detention in Australia and detained on Nauru be released into the Australian community as soon as practicable and no longer than four weeks after the tabling of this report.”

It found that the detention of children on Nauru violated the Convention on the Rights of the Child in almost innumerable ways. For example, it found that mandatory and prolonged detention of asylum-seeking children on Nauru breached article 24 (1) of the convention; that the AHRC had fears the conditions on Nauru breached articles 19(1), 20(1), 24(1), 27(1), 27(3), 28, 31, which related to children’s welfare; that Australia was failing in its duty under article 34 to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation; and article 37, whose aim was to protect children from “torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. The AHRC has also argued that under the same article, 37, that “no child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily” and that arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child ... shall be only used as a measure of last resort.” The average length of detention in December 2015 was of 450 days; some 23% of refugees had been detained for longer than 750 days, remarkably, however. The AHRC has also pointed to Appendix F of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ Guidelines on Asylum Seekers, which declares “minors who are asylum seekers should not be detained” at all. The Commission extended its criticism to the detention of adults, too, citing article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty...” It should be noted that the Abbott-led Liberal Party promised to abolish the AHRC during the 2013 election campaign, and launched pernicious attacks on the integrity of the commission’s president following the publication of *The Forgotten Children* and its damning findings. A coalition of seventy-seven NGOs, including UNICEF and the Australian Human Rights Law Centre, in November 2014 contended that Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers was slipping. Similarly, in March 2015, in its annual review of human rights around the world, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture found that various components of Australia’s asylum seeker policies violated the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In particular the rapporteur noted that there existed a disturbing culture of violence and abuse on the islands of Manus and Nauru and that in failing to address this the Australian government was in breach of the aforementioned convention and thus exposing asylum seekers, including children, to torturous conditions. The UN urged government to thus end mandatory off-shore detention. The then Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, responded at the time with an indifference to international law typical of Australian politicians: “I really think Australians are sick of being lectured to by the United Nations...” Such public denunciations of Australia’s immigration policies in the years 2013-6 were virtually ceaseless from the United Nations. It has called the concentration camps “immensely harmful”, “contrary ... to common decency”, “do not meet international standards”, and “dire and untenable”. . Likewise, in 2016 Amnesty International released several reports into the detention of asylum seekers under the aegis of the Australian Border Force. It found in its October report, “Island of Despair”, that the Australian government undertook “a deliberate policy to inflict harm on refugees” which again violated the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It too said:

In furtherance of a policy to deter people arriving by boat, the Government of Australia has made a calculation in which the intolerable cruelty and the destruction of the physical and mental integrity of hundreds of children, men and women, has been chosen as a tool of government policy. (Amnesty International, 2016)

The UN's special rapporteur on torture agreed said Australia's policies constituted "cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment". Amnesty's report was released after the leaking of the aforementioned so-called 'Nauru Files', which documented the culture of sexual and physical abuse, violence, and self-harm within the Nauru concentration camp. The Australian immigration minister at the time dismissed the reports with the following: "Some people have even gone to the extent of self-harming and people have self-immolated in an effort to get to Australia. Certainly some have made false allegations." These callous responses to serious evidence of sexual and physical abuse of asylum seekers, many of whom are children, illustrates the extent to which the Australian government is indifferent to international law and intent on discouraging further asylum seekers from attempting to claim refuge in Australia. Given that this is a right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is doubly disturbing that the Australian government is deliberately acting to undermine and suppress legitimate exercise of vulnerable peoples' rights. Finally, the high court of Papua New Guinea ruled in March 2016 that Australia's detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island was illegal. This Australia was reminded of when 110 members of the United Nations, including key allies, lined up to criticise Australia's human rights record.

Another way in which the Australian government has taken extraordinary steps in its asylum seeking policies is the way in which it has militarised its border policies, both in name and in practice. These steps have been part of a paradigm shift in the official narrative of asylum seekers since 2013 in Australia: away from a group who require help to a faceless mass who need to be contained and halted. Tony Abbott's Liberal-National Coalition ran for government in 2013 on a policy of 'stopping the boats' - a reference to the relatively high number of boats which arrived in Australia seeking asylum under his Labor predecessors, Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd. The height of this was 2013 itself, when 300 boats arrived with 20,587 asylum-seeking passengers. This was a small number by world standards (Jordan, for instance, hosts four million Syrians), but as the Guardian newspaper noted as Mr Abbott took the premiership, "perception is king". To this end, in a manufactured atmosphere of crisis, the Abbott government undertook a military response, initiating Operation Sovereign Borders. Sovereign Borders was born out of an integration of the idea of 'border protection' into the Australian Immigration Department, which was accordingly renamed the Department of Immigration and Border Control. Sovereign Borders was established with the aim to 'combat people smuggling and protect [Australia's] borders'. This is not to mention the fact that the 'control' of Australia's borders is undertaken since Abbott's election victory by military vessels, with the military either towing back asylum-seeking boats to international waters or to their port of departure. Such turnbacks are controversial, arguably immoral, and are illegal under international law. The existential threat which asylum seekers supposedly pose is apparent not only through this operation's very naming and its military constitution, but also in its tactics. Not only is the

operation headed by a three-star general but the pseudo-military 'Border Force' officers who implement it have gone so far as to even try to patrol the streets of Melbourne looking for people without valid visa status. Such an effort was called off due to public outrage - officers would arbitrarily decide whose papers to check, thus producing allegations of racial profiling. While Mr Abbott and his successor have heaped praise on the success of Operation Border Force, it is highly disturbing that refugees exercising their right to reach safety attracts so much partisan political attention. Not only was the mantra of 'stopping the boats' one of Mr Abbott's four election promises, alongside scrapping a carbon emissions scheme, rebuilding the economy and refixing a budget 'mess', but the implication Mr Abbott made here was that not only were refugees a threat to Australia's economy but, given the military response, a threat to Australia's national security too. Indeed, by even denying asylum seekers a voice or the presumption of good intentions, Mr Abbott intentionally sowed deep mistrust among the Australian community against these foreign 'others'.

The Australian government has deliberately sought to dehumanise asylum seekers seeking refuge within its jurisdiction through wilful policies. These policies, whilst abhorrent and disturbing, however, do not represent a break with Australia's racist history; rather they are a modern manifestation of a dormant racism. The dehumanisation of asylum seekers by the Australian government is most clear in the manner in which asylum seekers are treated in the facilities on Manus Island and Nauru. Despite the heavy veil of secrecy draped over the operation of its camps, it is increasingly clear that there exists a culture of physical, sexual and mental abuse, self-harm, medical shortcomings, and a general atmosphere of despair. Reports undertaken by Amnesty International, UNICEF, the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and evidence provided by staff attendant at the camps illustrates this vividly. Yet, it is the leaking of incident reports to Guardian Australia of the conditions on Nauru which most clearly reveals the depth of mistreatment inside the camps. The very purpose of these camps is to break their occupants and to signal to the rest of the world's asylum seekers that they are not welcome, that Australia does not consider them human. The dehumanisation of asylum seekers occurs in many forms. Some refugees have reported being called by the staff at the facilities by the numbers of the boats which they arrived on, not their real names. Moreover, the Australian government has not only placed asylum seekers in concentration camps, but covers up and ignores the many instances of abuse, mistreatment, and inadequate medical services within these prisons. This is most evident in the Border Force Act of 2015, which placed a ban on staff working at the detention centres from discussing their operations or things they had witnessed whilst working as service providers in the camps. The legal penalty for speaking out was two years imprisonment. Despite this threat, some doctors and medical professionals, in particular, did speak out. Dr David Isaacs, a Sydney paediatrician, spoke to the ABC in 2013: "I saw a six-year-old girl who tried to hang herself with a fence tie and had marks around her neck. I've never seen a child self-harm of that age before...it's child abuse." He also said that, "The conditions we witnessed typified those in institutions such as asylums, prisons and concentration camps." Despite evidence such as Dr. Isaacs', the gag order remained in force from the Border Force Act's passage in June 2015 until October 2016, when it was quietly revoked. Other draconian measures remain in place. However, it is the

Nauru Files which presents the most comprehensive and disturbing picture of daily travails of refugees within Australia's concentration camps, and the widespread dehumanisation which pervades almost every facet of the inmates' lives. The two-thousand incident reports written between 2013 and 2015 by staff on Nauru revealed government knowledge of widespread child abuse, sexual assault, violence, self-harm, and medical inadequacies on Nauru. They were leaked in August 2016 by Guardian Australia. For example, children were recorded as writing in their schoolbooks, "I want death. I need death."; women expressed their desire to kill themselves and their unborn children to save them from a life in prison; and families recounted tales of being subjected to emotional trauma whereby camp staff came to their living quarters on their anniversary of arrival by boat in Australian waters, and event which ended in shipwreck and the family's infant drowning. Likewise, a profoundly distressing trend of mental illness was noticed by those who have been on Nauru and reported on the conditions there. The files revealed 335 cases of threatened self-harm, 229 reports of concern for a minor or assault on a minor, 61 cases of actual self-harm, and 22 cases of sexual assault. The medical situation on Nauru was likewise grim. Transfers to the Australian mainland are at the discretion of the Immigration Department, not medical professionals, even when the symptoms are severe; one patient waited months for a specialist despite having a symptoms of cancer. This is not confined to Nauru, either: on Manus Island, in 2015 a refugee became vegetative after failing to receive adequate treatment for a mere cut, which subsequently became septic. On Manus, four refugees have died – more than been resettled. One was murdered. Despite this, in callous indifference to the plight of those whom it continued to arbitrarily detain, the then-Immigration Minister of Australia, Peter Dutton, said that the Nauru files were mere "hype" and that refugees were self-harming to get to Australia. In May of the same year, an Iranian refugee had publically self-immolated on Nauru, saying, "this action will prove how exhausted we are. I cannot take it anymore." He died from his injuries. Dutton too spuriously asserted that, as the incidents took place on Nauru, Australia had no responsibility or interest, despite its neocolonial influence over Nauru and its paid detention of people there. The most frightening detail about the Nauru files pertains to their dating - many of the incident reports dealt with matters from before the passage of the Border Force Act, meaning the Australian government was aware of even child abuse before it made it illegal for staff to discuss such occurrences. Evidently, the Australian government did not feel that refugees and asylum seekers were human enough to warrant protection from abuse. Indeed, as Amnesty International has contended, the policy of Australia seems to be to deliberately subject its asylum-seeking detainees to maximum suffering, both to signal others the hopelessness of seeking asylum in Australia, and to drive already imprisoned asylum-seekers to 'accept' a return to their home country. I agree with Amnesty International in its assessment:

The conditions on Nauru – refugees' severe mental anguish, the intentional nature of the system, and the fact that the goal of offshore processing is to intimidate or coerce people to achieve a specific outcome – amounts to torture.

Furthermore, the use by Australian politicians of asylum-seekers as scapegoat or as political objects illustrates the deepening and daily trend of dehumanisation of those seeking refuge in

Australia. This dehumanisation takes an official guise in immigration nomenclature: in 2013, after the Abbott government won the federal election on the promise of “stopping the boats” and ‘re-securing’ Australia’s borders, the Immigration Department instructed its staff to refer to asylum seekers as “illegals” in its official communications and literature. This was a deliberate and pernicious act by the conservative Abbott government to perpetuate the lie that asylum-seekers were an unwelcome and illegal presence within in Australia. This vocabulary and narrative was eagerly adopted by many of Australia’s conservative (Rupert Murdoch-owned) newspapers. Such a narrative that refugees threatened Australia’s national security was long implicit in Abbott’s election campaign, despite his perfunctory claims to have humanitarian interest of stopping drownings at sea. The fact that he then subsequently detained asylum seekers in atrocious, soul-crushing conditions gives lie to any humanitarian rationale. Moreover, his ministers have continually engaged in language designed to belittle and dehumanise refugees. A government senator in 2017 referred to asylum seekers as “fleas”, a description which his colleague described as “nicely put”. The current Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, is renowned for his constant anti-refugee rhetoric. Mr Dutton, in 2016, blamed refugee activists for asylum seekers self-immolating; described the acceptance of Lebanese-Muslims refugees fleeing civil war into Australia in the 1970s as mistake; said that if Australia accepted refugees they would languish in unemployment queues and simultaneously steal Australian jobs; and he has contended that refugees are illiterate in both their mother tongues and also in English. When, in early 2017, Dutton was floated as a potential head of a new homeland security super-ministry, a fellow minister voiced their opposition by describing him as a “fascist.”

The prison camps on Nauru and Manus Island are latter-day Australian satellites, representing an unequal relationship reminiscent of the colonial dynamic. The Australian government exercises profound economic and political influence over Nauru. This relationship, or rather Australian hegemony over Nauru, goes back to Nauruan independence in 1968, when the tiny island state was governed as an Australian trust under the aegis of the United Nations. Though nominally today an independent state, it is effectively a client of Canberra. Its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013 was US\$153 million, compared to Australia’s USD\$1.205 trillion. In the 2016-17 financial year the Australian government will provide USD\$19 million in aid; Canberra is the largest aid donor. In other respects, Australia provides assistance through the provision of skilled personnel for the Nauruan government and civil service. For example, Australia judges often spend time on Nauru’s courts, and the Australian government has provided personnel for the the Deputy Secretaries for Treasury, Finance, Customs, Planning and Aid Management, a Senior Tax Adviser as well as a Senior Human Resource Management Adviser to the Chief Secretary of the Nauru Public Service. The Australian government’s Attorney-General’s office also helped Nauru’s government write its Crimes Act of 2016. Likewise, after a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade description of Nauru as a country on the “verge of state failure” in 2004, the Nauruan government let the Australian Federal Police take charge of running the Nauru Police Force. A stipulation saw Australian personnel there on rotation immune from civil and criminal prosecution. Australia has also stood by as Nauru edges towards authoritarianism. Nauru dissolved its judiciary in 2014 after expelling the Chief Justice, Police Commissioner and

Magistrate (all Australian citizens). A former chief justice, Geoffrey Eames, has accused Nauru's government of "flagrant breaches of the rule of law."

Manus Island is in a similar relationship vis-à-vis Australia as Nauru. A part of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Manus Island lays in the Admiralty Islands off the PNG north coast. Like Nauru, Australia previously exercised a formal colonial dominion over PNG, though today this relationship is replicated in Australia's position as PNG's largest aid donor: AUD\$507.2 million in 2013-14. Furthermore, Australia invested \$5.7 billion in trade in 2012-13 and \$18.6 billion in aid in the same period. Australia also acts as the effective security guarantor of Papua New Guinea, under the *2000 Defence White Paper*. PNG's GDP in 2014 was USD\$16.93 billion, miniscule compared to Australia's.

As I have shown, the Australian government has undertaken wilful and harmful policies aimed at dehumanising asylum seekers. This dark and sordid chapter is not an aberration in Australia's history, but rather a culmination of beliefs present throughout European settlement that the outsider, the black, the foreigner - the 'other' - is not human. The law does not apply to them, their human rights are irrelevant.

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