

Fixations of Propriety: The Refugee Convention and the Manus Closure Scandal

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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When confronted with the spectacle of the malnourished, the impoverished, the famine stricken, and the desperate, the Australian political instinct is simple: Why did these poor fools get themselves into this mix? With each wave of refugees arriving in the country's young history, the cold shoulder has mixed with the lukewarm welcome.

At no points have refugees been welcomed so much as grudgingly accepted. Australia, after all, has a humanitarian intake, and boasts about it like a vulnerable child who feels her grades the best in class.

Like a necessary pantomime, Australia's distant, estranging middle-class tediousness treats human rights as the necessary costume at the international human rights party. To be such an international citizen, conventions are signed, and modestly implemented. Some are even abused with a degree of legalised gusto.

In a country with no bill of rights, it can hardly be any other way. The rights culture, it can be said, is one of smugness and suspicion. Supremacy resides with Parliament, and a misplaced belief that the executive will somehow be compliant.

The sentiment towards refugees and asylum seekers taking the sea route hardened after the 1990s, when the means of arrival became an issue in Australian politics. (You cannot be punished or discriminated against on the manner of travel under the Refugee Convention, but the lawyers were obviously napping at stages.) Decent people, after all, took planes, and if they did arrive by boat, would surely do the appropriate thing and fly a decent class.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the issue of pressing concern was the arrival of Vietnamese boat people fleeing the Communist Republic. Then, as now, the issue of how these people were arriving bothered certain Australian figures, most notably John Howard. Aqueous borne arrivals, notably of the Asiatic sort, terrified him.

The currently broken, and easily refutable theme in the practiced inhumanity against those now defiantly assembled on the closed Manus processing facility at the Lombrum Naval Base, is that of the "market model". Refugees and asylum seekers should never partake in a system of exchange. Money for passage is a smutty exchange best stamped out.

To that end, refugee and asylum seeker policy in Australia resembles that of a tax meeting or Reserve Bank board gathering. The agenda never changes: what markets are appropriate, and which ones are not?

The market that encourages the pursuit of the Refugee Convention, its articles, its spirit, is discouraged by the denizens of propriety. To flee persecution, harm and mortal risk, forms

the quintessence of international refugee law, but best take a number and wait your turn.

The problem with this approach is simple: awaiting that vital turn in this artificially contrived queue can lead to interminable periods of processing, detention and waiting in camps of varying degrees of comfort. Often, these are located in impoverished states. Rarely are they found in wealthier ones.

Inevitably, this situation of crippling stagnation has produced, over the decades, individuals who facilitate the movement of peoples. Money, often life savings, exchange hands. Risky routes are traversed. Death can never be ruled out as a possible outcome.

Rather than providing solace and comfort to those who brave such routes, the propriety-driven market modellers in Australian Immigration and Border Protection prefer to discourage, and criminalise, the smuggler. But more to the point, the product – individuals availing themselves of the means to reach Australia – are also to be criminalised. Like drug producer like drugs; like pornographer, like porn. All, to be frowned upon, jailed, detained.

The reduction of the entire issue to a business model has similarities to another absurd and futile argument: the puritanical efforts to criminalise prostitution. Where there is demand, there will be supply.

As sex has been a commodity for sale since humans discovered the primeval delights, and desperate pitfalls, of copulation, supply has been forthcoming. The only way you abolish prostitution would be to abolish sex, and, perhaps, lobotomise the entire human race. (This is a proposition that would, no doubt, rest well with the Catherine McKinnon-Andrea Dworkin school of totalitarian, and essentially sexless human relations.)

In refugee politics, a similar type of totalitarian thinking on human relations has taken hold. The refugee must be proper, decent, and very well disposed to begin with. Fleeing poverty and bombs, one must do so with a stoic determination without mental strain, concern of debility. But importantly, in fleeing, one should wait one's turn. Shut up and put up – Australians are generous.

Those who have bucked this have ended up in such places of tragedy and travesty as Nauru and the Manus Island Centre. The Australian state, through its subsidised satraps, has effectively relocated and dehumanised individuals that could have been processed and resettled far more cheaply in Australia. But that would not be proper.

The language of propriety is neatly tied to the language of property, ownership, and liberal market values. It would be inappropriate to pay a smuggler to assist you in discharging obligations due under the Refugee Convention, but it would also be inappropriate to refuse to relocate to other processing centres where safety at the hands of the local population is questionable.

The 570 men who remain at the facility are therefore deemed, in the words of government minister Christopher Pyne, "squatters".[1] They supposedly have a choice, a distinctly bankrupt way of assessing the problem given that they never asked to be placed on Manus to begin with.

These obstinate souls are now told they have three centres to be relocated to in Lorengau, faux refugee Hiltons with running water, food and in some cases spending money, yet

refuse to heed the direction of authorities. They are, essentially, asserting rights that Australian and PNG authorities regard as non-existent. Forcible removal is deemed imminent.

The term “squatter” has a curious historical salience: Australia was essentially settled (read conquered, plundered, appropriated) by squatters. Indeed, the entire Australian psyche was shaped by squattocratic values. Fascinating, then, when confronted with such a spectacle, it should offend.

As the Manus Island brutality show persists, human rights advocates issue pleas, politicians in Canberra issue cant-filled rebukes, and officials in the Immigration ministry insist on the nonsensical notion that detaining individuals on land is a humanitarian response to preventing deaths at sea. The mendacity of refugee politics knows no end, but obscene propriety, at whatever cost, shall prevail.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Note

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/manus-island-detainees-remaining-squatters-christopher-pyne/9136760>

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