

# The Veiled Threat: Australia's Campaign Against New Zealand's Refugee Policy

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Region: [Oceania](#)

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*Another twist in the farce over the stained treatment of refugees on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island has surfaced. New Zealand has been insisting for some time that it is more than willing to welcome some 150 to its shores. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, much to the irritation of Australia's Turnbull government, has been particularly enthusiastic.*

Australia has remained resolutely cold to the offer, insisting that such an arrangement would undermine its own blunt approach of discouraging boat arrivals and the industry behind it. For the perplexed on this issue, Australia keeps funding alternative camps on Manus, hoping for the remaining refugees to shut up and slide quietly to other destinations. A number are being encouraged to go to the United States in a deal US President Donald Trump deems "dumb".

Now, New Zealand's angle has shifted, largely prompted by the crisis following the closure of the Manus Island facility at the Lombrom Naval Base. The PNG government is being asked directly as to whether some arrangement might be reached, thereby avoiding Australian intransigence.

The response from the Australian Immigration Minister was characteristically sinister and appropriate for a former police officer. With barely veiled menace, Peter Dutton suggested that New Zealand "would have to think about their relationship with Australia and what impact it would have". "They'd have to think that through, and we'd have to think that through." [1]

Dutton's playground remarks did not stop there. He also rebuked New Zealand's announcement that aid money would be offered to those on Manus Island and Nauru:

"Well, it's a waste of money in my judgment, I mean give that money to another environment somewhere, to Indonesia, for example."

Found wanting, Dutton has taken to lecturing a sovereign state.

Dutton then did what ever Australian politician glancing across the Tasman does: suggest that New Zealand was somehow benefiting from Canberra's punitive approach to boat arrivals. Not that New Zealand has been ever openly asked about this take of the unwanted sacrifice.

"We have stopped vessels on their way across the Torres Strait planning to track their way down the east coast of Australia to New Zealand... We have put many hundreds of millions of dollars into a defence effort to stop those

vessels... We do that frankly without any financial assistance from New Zealand... If new boats arrive tomorrow these people aren't going to Auckland, they're going to Nauru."

This is a repeated Australian gripe: its small neighbour benefits from having a natural shield to the north; it can afford to be more moral on issues and idealist in its aspirations. Hard, realistic Australian politicians and policy makers must underwrite this. They, goes this straw man reasoning, are the ones making the hard, unsavoury decisions.

To beef up Dutton's claims, Australian papers have been receiving classified material (or so it is claimed) that New Zealand has become a more attractive "target" for people smugglers in recent weeks. The Queensland based Courier Mail, hardly the high priest of journalistic integrity, has been the grateful recipient of claims that "chatter" on this subject is becoming effusive.

Australian border protection forces have, according to the classified sources, also been busy, intercepting four boats destined for New Zealand, with 164 people on board. This latter point is notable in flying in the face of the military grade secrecy such interceptions supposedly command. Operation Sovereign Borders, as it was termed by the previous Abbott government, was a means of stifling the disclosure, and discussion, of any "operational matters" at sea. Boat arrivals remain mysterious and enigmatic.

The assault on Prime Minister Ardern's position is assuming tangible form through Australian channels. A conscious and very public effort from Australian government sources is underway to diminish the humanity of refugees who have, for all intents and purposes, become subjects of mental disturbance.

Damaged and psychologically ruined, they have become the subjects of further demonisation, portrayed as opportunistic, rapacious and venal. Leaks have found their way to The Australian Financial Review, timed to ill-effect, suggesting that a group of Manus Island asylum seekers have been wooing underage girls with sexual intent.

The intelligence cable which was the subject of the leaks outlines advice from PNG from early October making a set of claims. "In addition to broader allegations of drug taking and dealing (Marijuana), there were overarching community concerns regarding allegations that some residents were engaged in sexual activities with underage girls." [2] Certain "residents were renting rooms throughout Lorengau and luring underage girls between 10 and 17 years of age, with money, goods, and food."

These claims, the report concedes, were never investigated. There were never any formal complaints, and no investigations ensued. No matter – the report goes on to advance the claims of the local provincial health authority concerned by "increased interaction between the residents and the young girls from a health perspective, saying they had seen an increase in sexually transmitted infections and HIV". In a world of innuendo, anything goes.

The report is clearly an effort to square the ledger, neutralising the concerns by asylum seekers and refugees at their general safety in being in the Manus Island community. Encounters with the local populace have been frowned upon; relations between the men and local females have also triggered the ire of community leaders. The inevitable thrust of such reports is simple: they deserve it, so why care?

The report avoids the obvious point that Australia's pseudo-colonisation policy – of relocating refugees of considerably diverse background to the homogenous Manus Island community rather than abiding by the Refugee Convention – is itself the problem.

Ardern is also facing local opposition to her refugee stance. Bill English of the Nationals insists that this is a “showpiece”, a dangerous moral binge.[3] The Australians need to be acknowledged. New Zealand, he suggests, ought to take the efforts made by its neighbour to stop boats heading to his country seriously. And so, the wheel turns, the old arguments on power, cynicism and brown nosing, entertain us once more as people suffer.

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## Notes

[1] [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11945119](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11945119)

[2] <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/98972615/australian-intelligence-leak-on-manus-island-details-allegations-of-underage-sex-crimes>

[3] <https://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/343910/national-party-questions-pm-on-manus-progress>

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