

Tweets of Praise: Donald Trump, Australia and Refugees

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Praise from US President Donald Trump has a tendency of tarnishing gold and ungilding matters, and there was something of the muck in his tweet praising Australia for its sadistic approach to refugee arrivals. Operation Sovereign Borders, which commenced in 2013, was the high water mark in an experiment of glacial cruelty: to treat refugee arrivals – those specifically taking the sea route to Australia – as a security, if not military threat. That these people were merely availing themselves of human rights acknowledged in international humanitarian law was given the thickest of glossing overs.

A veil of impenetrable secrecy was imposed on the number of boat arrivals, the number of operations, and the entire operational nature of the exercise. To enforce the effort, Prime Minister Tony Abbott created a force outfitted with the sort of dark kit that would have made the goose-steppers swoon and old military orders sigh. The Australian Border Protection Force would be given a separate, higher standing than other agencies, with the slightest fascist lite appeal of uniforms, badges and insignia. (Those cheeky disorderly refugees need only the best the business of repelling can buy.)

By 2016, the *Sydney Morning Herald* [noted](#) that some “20 per cent of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s senior executive ranks are now uniformed, with the majority working within the Australian Border Force.” And such thuggish authority will come with its host of ironies: those figures of sound authoritarian reassurance had donned uniforms made “almost entirely in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and China.”

While the likes of former prime ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott might have been brimming with excitement and pride at the creation of one of the world’s most ruthless gulag-enforced systems to counter “illegals” (this concept is, as with much in the refugee world, anathema and arbitrary), the model remains hard to export. For one, it involves exorbitant, costly measures – the Australian program costs billions, an imposition of cruelty at cost. In another sense, it also furnishes the public with an illusion that borders are secure. The problem is merely deferred and deflected to other states (very neighbourly is Australia on that score). Nor does this halt those seeking aerial routes.

Trump, as he tends to, mines vaults of images for effect. He wanted a particular quarry after the discovery of the bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, found drowned in the Rio Grande on Monday. “The image,” the *New York Times* [suggested](#), “represents a poignant distillation of the perilous journey migrants face on their passage north to the United States, and the tragic consequences that often go unseen in the loud and caustic debate over border policy.”

An appreciation for poignancy and good grace are not the standout features of the US

President. Since being in office, he has conflated the immigration issue with the search for asylum. “The United States will not be a migrant camp,” [he promised](#) in June 2018, “and it will not be a refugee holding facility”. Criminalisation has been a strong theme. Parents have been separated from their children. The process for seeking asylum has become one of crawling rather than pacing.

According to Senator Bernie Sanders, “Trump’s policy of making it harder to seek asylum – and separating families who do – is cruel, inhumane and leads to tragedies like this.” Trump’s [retort](#) was uncomplicated: the Democrats were preventing him from plugging holes in Fortress USA. “If they fixed the laws you wouldn’t have that. People are coming up, they’re running through the Rio Grande.”

Having scoured a few examples of Australian border force material, [he tweeted how](#), “These flyers depict Australia’s policy on Illegal Immigration. Much can be learned!”

The flyers were of the standard, blaring variety, with the border authorities condemning anybody daring to make the journey of danger. “No way you will make Australia home,” screams a headline, followed by the boastful assertion that, “The Australian Government has introduced the toughest border protection measures ever.” Another promises that any attempt to journey to Australia by boat will not result in settlement in the country itself.

Much of the gathered material [was drawn](#) from a 2014 campaign rich in agitprop, a vulgar compilation of images and text topped by a graphic novel depicting asylum seekers mouldering in despair in an offshore detention centre. The then immigration minister Scott Morrison gave it a certain advertising coarseness, a point he replicated during his election campaign last month for the Australian prime ministership.

Trump’s tweet serves as a statement of endorsement to add to a now vast compendium of admiration from Budapest to Washington; the Australians, we are told, got it right. The Refugee Council of Australia offers a different interpretation. In the [assessment](#) of its communications director Kelly Nicholls, “Australia’s harsh policies have come at a terrible cost: 12 people have died; women, men, and children have endured enormous mental and physical harm; Australia’s reputation has been tarnished and all this has cost us more than \$5 billion.”

Another assessment, however, is in order. The displaced person enrages rather than encourages empathy. They are, to use that expression Hannah Arendt made famous, the *heimatlosen*, stateless, deracinated souls plunged into legal purgatory. It was Arendt [who urged](#), in response to the post-Nazi era peppered by death factories and human displacement, the need for “a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity at this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.”

Such entities of control and compassion have yet to be established. We are left with traditional ones dedicated to brute force cemented by a distinct disregard for the dignity of the human subject. The rootless remain objects of disdain and, for politicians, a golden currency for re-election.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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