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Australia

Tampa crisis sparks furore

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The refusal of the Australian Prime Minister to allow 450 refugees to land on Christmas Island has sparked off a furor both here and around the world. The refugees, mostly from Afghanistan, had earlier been picked up from their sinking boat in the Indian Ocean by the Norwegian freighter, the Tampa. Inevitably, comparisons have been drawn between the Tampa affair and the case of the St. Louis in 1939.

The St Louis, which sailed from Hamburg in 1939, was refused permission to land its cargo of German Jewish refugees in Cuba or the United States and all other countries in the Americas. The refugees returned to Hamburg and many were subsequently deported to the Nazi death camps. The Tampa case has highlighted the lengths to which a xenophobic government is prepared to go to maintain racial "purity".

The Tampa was first alerted by the Australian Coast Guard. After rescuing the refugees just as their boat was breaking up, the Norwegian ship steamed directly to Christmas Island, an Australian dependency far out in the Indian Ocean off Java. The Government refused the refugees permission to land and ordered the Tampa out of Australian waters. The captain declined to leave: pointing out that his vessel was not equipped to carry so many passengers.

Prime Minister Howard responded by sending heavily armed SAS troops to occupy the ship. The standoff was resolved by an expensive deal stitched up with New Zealand and Nauru (the latter is a client state of Australian imperialism) in order to save Howard's face. The refugees are currently en route to Port Moresby aboard an Australian warship prior to being "processed".

Australian human rights groups, left wing political parties and trade unions responded angrily to the incident. The vast majority of Christmas Islanders made their support for the refugees clear. Paddy Crumlin, from the Maritime Union of Australia pointed out that Howard had made it likely that ships' captains might in future ignore the law of the sea and leave refugees to drown. Senator Bob Brown, from the Australian Greens, lambasted the government for its inhumanity. The Socialist Alliance, which will field candidates in the federal elections this year, also slammed Howard's racism and hypocrisy. After being called a "traitor" by Conservative MP Peter Slipper and radio talkback "shock jocks", Brown received death threats. However, Kim Beazley, the leader of the main opposition party, the Australian Labor Party rushed to support the Prime Minister's actions. As a result, the Government is riding high in opinion polls.

One reliable poll indicated that perhaps as many as 77 per cent of the population supported the Government's actions, with only 20 per cent opposed and three per cent undecided. The Prime Minister's personal standing has also been enhanced and it is even possible that his hard-line stance will win him the election. Howard is an astute politician and it is an open secret that he seized hold of the opportunity presented by the Tampa to wage a racist crusade to claw back support.

In doing so, he has let the racist genie out of the bottle. This year marks the centenary of Federation. In 1901, the six British colonies on the Australian continent voted to amalgamate into the Commonwealth of Australia. The first piece of legislation passed by the new federal government entrenched the White Australia Policy, which barred the immigration of "non-whites" into Australia. Ironically, while the Tampa was lying off Christmas Island, the Prime Minister attended a ceremony commemorating the invention of the Australian flag at the site of the first federal parliament in Melbourne. If anyone had any doubts that the White Australia Policy was still alive, the Tampa affair ought to have made them think again. The wave of public hysteria whipped up by Howard and his allies on talk-back radio is eerily reminiscent of the darkest days of the Policy.

For all Howard's bluster about Australia being "swamped" by hordes of "illegal" boat people, Australia is simply too far away from the regions of the world in which refugees are created to be a realistic choice for most. Four hundred and fifty traumatized people at Christmas Island are a tiny fraction of the estimated 2.6 million Afghan refugees, most of whom languish in squalid camps in Iran and Pakistan. Australia admits around 10,000 refugees per year, most via an overseas settlement program and very few are allowed asylum after arriving by boat or plane. Most of the burden of caring for refugees falls onto Third World countries.

Howard's racism also mirrors that of other western governments, many of which have cut their contributions to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. (Last year, UNHCR had a shortfall of US\$100 million for its existing projects.) Howard's racism is underlined by his silence on the presence in Australia of up to 55,000 Britons, Americans and others who have overstayed their visitors' visas. None of these is ever locked up in the country's immigration "detention centres" (read prisons) but then they have the advantage of being born with white skins.

Howard also rants about the nefarious activities of "people smugglers" who bring refugees to Australia by boat, implying that they are the root cause of the problem. In fact, there are perhaps forty million refugees and other "displaced persons" in the world and if the activities of the "smugglers" were curtailed, the problem would not be any smaller.

Howard also conveniently forgets that Australia is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. As such, the country is duty bound to accept as refugees any who arrive here fearing persecution in their home country, regardless of whether they arrive here without a passport or other documents. Howard claims that "illegal" arrivals are "jumping the queue" but there is not and never was any queue.

Australia is also the only developed country in the world with a policy of "mandatory detention" of asylum seekers who arrive without papers. Such people - including children - are locked up in medium security prisons, often in remote and inhospitable locations. Sometimes they spend years behind razor wire while their applications are processed. In recent times, inmates have staged strikes and hunger strikes to draw attention to their plight. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser has called the detention centres "hell holes" and the Anglican Bishop of Perth called them concentration camps. In one incident last year, a three-year-old child was put in irons and in another a leading official of the private company that runs the centres handcuffed a man to a bed frame and beat him with a truncheon. The centres are overcrowded and often unsanitary, yet Australian Corrections Management - a subsidiary of the American private prison operator Wackenhutt - makes a nice profit from this human misery. One estimate is that it costs the taxpayers AUS\$170 per night to house the detainees; enough to put them up in luxury at the Hilton Hotel.

Back in 1937, John Howard's political ancestor, Bob Menzies earned himself the soubriquet of "Pig Iron Bob" because of his attempt to force Port Kembla waterside workers to load the Dalfram with scrap steel for Japan. The "wharfies" [dock-workers-ed.] refused because they feared that the Japanese government would use the steel to make bombs and shells for use in its invasion of China. Howard has now deployed Australian warships in a "shield of steel" across the Indian Ocean. Like Menzies, he will be remembered as a reactionary racist armoured behind invincible ignorance.

Campaigners for refugee rights are more determined than ever to end this shameful blot on humanity and are confident that once the real facts are made known, that Howard's support will wane.