

Irish migrant's view of asylum debate in Australia

By a WSM comrade presently living in Australia.

Workers Solidarity Movement

August 20, 2013

If there is one thing our barbaric corrupt political class have in common from Ireland to Australia is the need when to keep us divided through the carrot and the stick. Their weapon of choice is often whipping up of division, scapegoating of minorities and fear of the 'other'. In the case of Australia, which I have learnt to well since arriving on these shores, it is the spectre of 'boat people' or asylum seekers which dominates the mainstream political discourse in terms of the forthcoming elections. Basically two shades of the same political establishment seek to outgun each other to see who can offer the cruelest form of treatment for men, women and children fleeing persecution, hunger and oppression.

You don't need to dig deep beneath the surface to expose this racist and state sponsored terrorism which has tragically resulted in at least 1376 refugees drowning while trying to reach Australia since 1998. Behind every statistic lies an individual story and a family tragedy. Behind the hysteria of 'queue jumpers' and 'crime influx', the reality is Australia takes less than 1% of the world's refugees, people often fleeing conflicts and military occupations created by western imperialism such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the vast majority of refugees there is no queue to join, especially when you are offered the choice of life and death.

In effort to 'stop the boats', both the Labour and coalition party policy believes asylum seekers should be 'processed' – illegally detained – in detention camps being built in Papua New Guinea who have been bribed and bullied by the Australian government. Until now people have been detained in some of the most isolated islands in the world at Christmas Island, the small island of Nauru and Manus Island. They are detained in crowded and shocking conditions where rape, torture and suicide are rife, conditions that have been condemned by international human rights groups and the UN. A former security officer on Manus Island said; 'I've never seen human beings so destitute, so helpless and hopeless. In Australia, the facility couldn't even serve as a dog kennel...I felt ashamed to be Australian.'¹

In an attempt to outgun the Labour Party and its 'PNG Solution', Tony Abbot, Catholic fundamentalist educated at Oxford and leader of the opposition claims he will completely stop perma-

¹ www.independent.co.uk

nent residency and use the Navy to stop the boats. In this he is following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Thatcherite John Howard.

Drawing parallels between the past and present and use of the race card investigative journalist John Pilger correctly points out 'In Australia race is all but genetically inscribed, as in apartheid South Africa. The federation of the Australia states in 1901 was founded on racial exclusion, white Australia policy and a dread of non-existent 'hordes' from as far away as Russia. A 1940s policy of 'populate or perish' produced vibrant multiculturalism- yet a crude, often unconscious racism remains extraordinary current in Australian society and is exploited by a political elite with an enduring colonial mentality and obsequiousness to western 'interests.'²

This casual racism is something I have particularly noticed on the job and among family in terms of hostility to 'asylum seekers' and general fear of the other. While like any 'community', the Irish- Australian community is not one monolithic identity, I was struck, but to some extent not surprised, that many first and second generation have quietly assimilated into the colonial context of Australia. All too eager to fly the flag on Invasion Day on the 26 January while forgetting the similar circumstances which forced hundreds of people to flee Ireland due to oppression and poverty which continues to this very day in the form of economic migrants.

The irony of 'boat people' and how the tables have been turned has not been lost by some Aboriginal groups who welcome refugees. "As people who know what it's like to be invaded by boat people, we are in a better position to judge how the current boat people should be treated. Where the original boat people who took our country were armed to the teeth and bent on conquest, asylum seekers in 2012 are unarmed and seeking sanctuary". Michael Mansell from the Aboriginal Provisional Government goes on "The ancestors of Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbot most likely came by boat. It is certain they never sought Aboriginal permission to enter our shores."³

The other side of the story is an active refugee support movement that has gained some traction in recent months in terms of organising and mobilising, as well the eruption of riots and burning down of some camps.

Without forging real solidarity and having these discussions with your workmates and neighbours empathy and compassion can only sustain a movement for so long. In the face of largely indifference from the wider population and a colonial mentality from the political class, a class based movement must come to the forefront placing the needs and interests of people escaping persecution. While billions continue to spend on military conquests, border security and detention centres that could be better spent of alleviating poverty, job cuts and healthcare we see the interests of the profit come before people. Until we remove this cancer, refuge will always be one option and for many their only hope. In this regard Irish workers should clearly know what side of the fence they stand on.

² johnpilger.com

³ www.greenleft.org.au

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Retrieved on March 11, 2021 from web.archive.org
Published by Collective Action.

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