


“The Papua-New Guinea Solution”: Competitive Cruelty and Strategic Folly

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by Richard Tanter

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I. Introduction

Richard Tanter writes that policy competition between the Labor government and conservative opposition to “stop the boats” bringing asylum seekers to Australia by ship is producing strategically dangerous outcomes. Both government and opposition are now committed to isolating all asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat in Papua-New Guinea, including successful applicants for asylum. It is hard, Tanter concludes, “to think of anything else an Australian government could do in a single policy move more likely to undermine the already limited chances of sustainable peace in Papua-New Guinea.”

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II. Policy Forum by Richard Tanter

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Days away from the announcement of an election date, the toxic bipartisan campaign to “Stop the boats” bringing asylum seekers via Indonesia and Sri Lanka to Australia has touched off dangerous competing policy responses in a continuing toxic political environment. The first step was, newly restored Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reaching for an ultimate deterrent when he abruptly [announced](#) that no asylum seekers arriving by sea will ever be settled in Australia, regardless of whether their refugee claims are found to be genuine. As of now they are to be detained on remote Manus Island off the northern coast of Papua New Guinea for assessment. If successful in their applications for refugee status (as most have been to date), they will be settled in Papua-New Guinea with no right of entry to Australia. Days later, opposition leader Tony Abbot sought to trump Rudd by agreeing with Rudd’s policy, but [declaring](#) the government incapable of implementing it, promising “[Operation Sovereign Borders](#)” instead, a military task force headed by a three-star general reporting to the Minister for Immigration.

Competitive cruelty is the name of the game on asylum-seeker policy in Canberra, aimed at surfing (and stimulating) moral panic as a route to electoral success, and curbing demand for “people smugglers” who provide boats from Java and Sri Lanka through “deterrence” measures. Probably as the government hoped, there have been loud, [continuous and well-founded criticisms](#) of the government’s “PNG solution” from the usual suspects – lawyers, refugee advocates, human rights groups, UN refugee agencies, and international relations analysts. For a Labor government in a tight election race wanting to outflank its conservative opponents to the right, this is all to the good.

More worrying for the government has been the predictable (but apparently not anticipated) logistical problems on the ground in Papua-New Guinea, where facilities for thousands cannot be constructed overnight. However whistleblowers (including the Salvation Army) confirming UN refugee agency reports that conditions at Australia's existing [Manus Island](#) and [Nauru](#) detention centres are appalling is less concerning to a government using the prospects of a "PNG hell-hole" to build an election narrative of "deterrence" and breaking the people smugglers' business model". (Canberra has been looking to London for inspiration following British PM David Cameron's establishment of a get-tough-on-immigrants "[Hostile Environment Working Group](#)".)

Legal challenges are likely, following the High Court ruling in 2011 that the Gillard government's "Malaysia solution" failed to provide adequate human rights protections for refugees that were to be transferred to Malaysia, a country that had not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. While Papua-New Guinea has signed the Convention, as [ANU lawyer Susan Harris Rimmer](#) put it,

"Nine out of 10 international lawyers will tell you this is a big fat [mess](#) (that's the technical legal term) outside the imagined boundaries of the 1951 Convention. (The other lawyer must be working for the Attorney-General.) The European Court of Human Rights has ruled in the past that de facto control over refugees is enough to invoke Refugee Convention protections. Does Australia therefore exercise effective control over transferred people on PNG? We pay for everything and make all the decisions regarding these people. The age-old legal principle "if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck" (I'll forfend from citing the Latin) may be applied - in short, anything that happens to these people in PNG or beyond is our legal responsibility."

Leaving aside questions of efficacy, legality, and morality, this contest of competitive cruelties in the name of deterrence has become strategically dangerous. Papua-New Guinea has always been Australia's largest recipient of both civil and military aid in order to inhibit social tensions and political turmoil in a poor and inherently fragile nation. Three-quarters of the population of 7 million live a subsistence economy organised around customary land tenure. Government budgets overwhelmingly depend on revenue from the exports of the foreign-controlled commodity export sector, topped up by foreign - mainly Australian aid. Health, education, income per capita, and corruption rival those of Afghanistan, the poorest countries in Africa, and Myanmar.

The American alliance apart, the principal strategic constant for every Australian government since Papua-New Guinea's independence in 1975 has been preventing social tension and conflict in Australia's nearest neighbour. Military and police aid in training, weapons, and joint exercises are one part of this. Another has been Australian determination to prevent the fifty year ongoing struggle for self-determination in the Indonesian half of the island of New Guinea leading to a flood of refugees crossing into Papua-New Guinea. In the 2006 Lombok Treaty Australia pledged to preserve Indonesian territorial integrity - aka the sealing of the PNG-Indonesia border forever.

Every recent major conflict in Melanesia - Bougainville, the Solomon Islands, Fiji - has involved disputes over land tenure, or its broader equivalents, denial of self-determination and the legacies of colonialism. The issue of land tenure is fraught throughout Melanesia, and especially in Papua-New Guinea - a country already close to breaking. Former PM [Michael Somare](#), as well as Australian [specialists](#), has pointed to the first obvious consequence of the Rudd policy: not only does this involve treating the country as a "dumping ground" for Australian policy failure, but it also is likely to lead to demands for land for refugee settlers. And with that, a new and malign cycle of pressures in Papua-New Guinea social and political dynamics.

To boot, PNG's constitution [emphasizes Christian faith](#). The fact that most refugees arriving in Australia are Muslims has already started Christian conflict entrepreneurs in Papua-New Guinea reaching for their megaphones. Add to the current half billion dollars a year in aid a new flood of

Australian money to feed the Papua-New Guinea [deeply corrupt political patronage machine](#) and Australian folly will guarantee serious trouble for Papua-New Guinea. All this in a region with an extraordinarily high rate of small arms ownership (one for every ten people in the Pacific islands as whole) and in a country where, according to the authoritative [Small Arms Survey](#), large numbers of high-powered assault rifles have flooded some regions – including from the PNG Defence Force, [where](#) of “the 7,664 M-16 and SLR assault rifles delivered to the PNG Defence Force since 1971, only 2,013 (26 per cent) remain in stock.” [Small Arms Survey](#) continues:

“Gun-running from other parts of PNG to the Southern Highlands is financed and facilitated by politicians and civil servants up to the highest levels of the educated elite. Many, and perhaps most, illicit high-powered firearms in the Southern Highlands were deployed by political candidates, sitting MPs, and their supporters to impress and intimidate both rivals and voters.”

The new frontline of Australian border control will not be Christmas Island, Cocos Islands, or Ashmore Reef, but the Torres Strait, where Australian territory in the form of Queensland’s Saibai Island comes within 8 kilometres of the Papua-New Guinea mainland. With large numbers of boats already crossing the straits every day the policing of the “open border” between Papua-New Guinea and Australia is about to get much more militarised. The substantial [Australian Defence Signals Directorate listening station at Bamaga](#) on the tip of Cape York, which was highly active during the Bougainville crisis, is likely to be back in serious business again some time soon.

It is hard to think of anything else an Australian government could do in a single policy move more likely to undermine the already limited chances of sustainable peace in Papua-New Guinea. The problem about neo-colonialism is not just that it is vile in its methods, but that it inevitably sets up long-lasting complex and deeply damaging results. Couple this with the knee-jerk competitive formulation of policy in Canberra in election mode, and the result is not just cruelty in the name of deterrence but long term strategic disaster.

In line with the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, Australian troops are back from Iraq and Afghanistan, and US Marines are now based in Darwin – aka “permanent rotation”. Amidst US concerns about growing Chinese diplomatic and aid influence in the Pacific islands, Australia’s “PNG solution” will bring problems for the United States, as well as for Papua-New Guinea and Australia. Resentment of the Australian habit of neo-colonial bullying in the South Pacific and diversion of Australian military and policing resources to the Torres Strait and Papua-New Guinea is not what the US had in mind when it proposed Australia as the [southern hinge of the Pacific pivot](#).

III. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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