

Paying the People Smugglers: Australia's Abbott Government Joins the Industry

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The language of rights in Australia tends to resemble that of a transaction. People are protected the way a customer is. There is little sense in importing a human value into it – that would simply be too abstract. Nothing illustrates this more than the debate around refugees and asylum seekers. Those seeking asylum in the antipodes must go through a series of appropriate “queues”, a concept of unfathomable vagueness.

Despite refugee law and the Refugee Convention being based around the idea of protecting those without documents and appropriate approvals, officials in Canberra have insisted in imposing a fiction on the world of warring chaos and impoverished desperation: everyone should form an orderly line and wait to get to paradise.

It should be axiomatic to anybody familiar with human desperation that flesh shall find its way. Payment is central, whether for sex, or whether for trafficking. Desires shall be fulfilled, needs satisfied, even if they be done in cruel fashion. When it comes to moving people across the globe, the trafficking model has fascinated Australian puritans and the morally righteous since the 1990s.

To that end, it is deemed a vicious “business model”. Much as the temperance movement deemed the sale of liquor a wicked trade, such a model requires abolition to sooth the conscience.

Terming it a business model is a fundamental way of evasion and negation. It indicates that you can reduce human relations to business transactions; human rights to an annex of money and finance. A family pays for passage across dangerous seas, transiting through a few countries on route. Their entire savings are expended. Their lives assume one of bondage. They are, for that reason, feeding a dangerous “business model”.

The idea of a business model has gotten much of the policy making and academic fraternity fascinated. There are titles such as how “we can break the people smugglers’ business model”. Take the remarks by Andrew Jakubowicz of the University of Technology in Sydney: “The monetisation of cross-border people movement is now significantly institutionalised through links between organised crime, international money transfers and worried states criminalising cross-border people movement” (*The Conversation*, Jul 3, 2013).[1]

The rhetorical tactic of Australian governments has been to denigrate both smuggler and the smuggled. It is the language of double condemnation – you condemn the facilitator and the individual who colludes with it.

That, we are told, is not the way things should be done. If you to pay somebody, it should be the Australian government. Not the smugglers. And if you dare succumb to that fanciful

notion that paying the smuggler will somehow get you passage to Australia to be processed as a refugee, you are mistaken. Like bad goods, trafficked individuals are locked up and detained in poor countries, policed by private security firms. Even if found to be refugees, settlement in Australia will not happen.

With this in mind, the latest revelations that the Australian government has, effectively, fed the very business model it condemns is striking. It is the logic of the emancipist who wishes to liberate the enslaved by paying the slave traders. Good for the slave trade, but bad for the cause of liberation.

The policy affirms that the refugee argument in Australia has nothing to do with human rights or the dignity of the individual being trafficked. It has everything to do with making sure no one arrives in Australia via such channels. Turning back the boats is central to this policy, even if it relocates the trade - and the drowning - elsewhere.

During the week, the UN refugee agency revealed that a boat captain and two crew members arrested on suspicions of human trafficking were happy to tell Indonesian authorities that they have received somewhere in the order of \$US5,000 to turn back their vessel laden with human cargo.[2] The boat, carrying 65 individuals from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, was intercepted by the Indonesian navy on May 31 after it was turned back by the Australian navy.

Indonesian foreign ministry spokesman Armanatha Nasir's observation in that regard was to suggest that this was the logical consequence of the "slipper slope" Canberra was pursuing.[3] Indonesia has sought answers from the Australian ambassador.

In what is even more sinister, the transaction itself constitutes an act of "people smuggling" under the 2000 protocol designed to disrupt the activity. The fact that the individuals in question did not make it to Australian shores is irrelevant. Monies were paid, and movement facilitated - in this case back to Indonesia. Canberra has effectively been found wanting, feeding the very industry it decries, the very system it officially detests in fits of puritan awe.

The Abbott government, caught off guard, has responded in a variety of ways. Two ministers have denied the claims. Former immigration minister Philip Ruddock has suggested the allegations "haven't been tested." As the claims were "made essentially by people smugglers" they ought to be dealt with by the Indonesian authorities.

A more reliable barometer is Prime Minister Tony Abbott himself. When asked to comment on the allegations, Abbott refused to deny them. Instead, he went into a Machiavellian spin, suggesting that "We have used a whole range of measures to stop the boats, because that's what the Australian people elected us to do." Anything goes. Defenders such as Finance Minister Matthias Cormann could only insist in the face of such brutal opportunism that Abbott was sticking "to his very long standing practice not to provide a running commentary on operational matters" (ABC, Jun 13).[4]

Much is made of the Abbott government's success in stopping boats laden with human cargo; nothing is made about the fact that the drowning dangers are simply moved elsewhere. People continue coming by sea because wars, famine and disastrously governed states have not miraculously ceased to exist. Nor have the smugglers, who can now rest assured that they have another source of revenue: the Australian government.

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Notes:

[1] <https://theconversation.com/can-we-break-the-people-smugglers-business-model-15681>

[2] <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/12/asia/australia-smuggling-payment-claims/index.html>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/jun/13/pressure-on-abbott-over--claims-people-smugglers-were-paid-to-turn-back-boats>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-13/australia-could-be-accused-of-people-smuggling--lawyer-says/6543446>

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