



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
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Offshoring refugees: lessons from Australia

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The UK Government is reported to be wanting to move refugees and asylum seekers offshore. Following the Australian model apparently. So, do you want to know what the Australian model of offshore detention looks like?

Let's start with the annual financial costs of the Australian model which are by any measure breathtaking in their extravagance: Almost \$3.4 million to hold a person offshore in Nauru or Papua New Guinea, and \$362, 000 to hold someone in detention in Australia

In total the Australian Government has spent over \$8.3 billion on offshore detention between 2014 and 2020. It's a bit difficult to be definite given the lack of transparency by the Government so it could well be higher. Those interested in a more information on the costs should consult the Kaldor Centre factsheet on costs.

The contracting process has been something else again. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) review of asylum seeker contracting processes has been scathing about the lack of conformity with contracting guidelines and accountability. Humanitarian NGOs contracting for provision of support services have laid down a record of conflict with the Government over whistleblowing by staff at the conditions and treatment of asylum seekers. Staff for agencies such as the Salvation Army and Save the Children working in offshore detention reported suffering from post -traumatic stress disorder as a result of that experience.

Madeline Gleeson has written a strongly researched, well documented account of the Australian model of offshore detention that is a must read for anyone who wants to understand what the Australian model is and what its impacts have been. *Offshore: Behind the wire on Manus and Nauru* (NewSouth, 2016) is a must read. In speaking to a committee of the UK House of Commons, on 11 November 2020 Gleeson explained what the human costs and inhuman logic of the policy entailed. She said: "You have to be willing to deport and detain children, pregnant women, the elderly, disabled, victims of trafficking; there can be no exceptions, because if vulnerable people are exempt from this policy then its core objective of deterrence will fall down. You will need to have no national or regional human rights framework whatsoever, no national or regional court that could adjudicate claims based on violations of human rights, as we do not have in Australia.

"You would need to introduce laws and policies that impose strict secrecy requirements. For example, in Australia, if somebody working in one of these offshore centres were to talk publicly about what was going on in that centre, they would be subject to two years' imprisonment for having spoken about that. That is not speaking about classified national security information; that is talking about the common comings and goings of the day. They could be subject to two years in

prison. It also originally covered doctors who might be raising concerns that they were seeing with patients there.

“You would need a place that could accommodate an unlimited number of arrivals, otherwise you are going to get the problem that we did 12 weeks in, that if people come in too large a number, they are going to outstrip your capacity.

“Finally, you would need to have a lot of money. A conservative estimate is that this costs Australia roughly \$1 billion per year... for 300 people. I guess the UK would need to calculate how many people this is going to be for and what the taxpayer cost will end up being for a policy that still might not work.”

The logic of the offshore policy is to dehumanise asylum seekers and make them invisible to the broader community. Any idea of duty of care goes out of the window and the practices of prison, even that of concentration camps becomes the norm.

If you doubt this is the case, let me urge you to listen to the voices of those who have been locked up on Manus and Nauru. No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison by Behrouz Boochani (Picador, Pan Macmillan, 2018) was written while he was in offshore detention on Manus Island. It was tapped out and transmitted on a mobile phone, translated from Farsi and published in Australia while he was still on Manus Island. It is a poetic, morally powerful, angry voice from the belly of the beast that is a testimony to the drive to maintain inner freedom while in unjust and apparently interminable imprisonment. Behrouz later escaped from Papua New Guinea to New Zealand and was granted asylum there.

More recently, Jaivet Ealom has written the story of his journey as a Rohingya escaping from Myanmar only to find himself imprisoned on Manus while seeking asylum in Australia. In his own way he resisted the dehumanisation of offshore detention and achieved an incredible escape to Canada where he was accepted as a refugee. In *Escape from Manus: The Untold True Story* (Penguin Viking, 2021) Ealom reminds us of the conditions which drive asylum seekers from their homelands and of the desperation, courage and resilience they exhibit. To read these stories is to be reminded of the humanity of refugees and the deep inhumanity and immorality of the Australian model of ‘offshore detention’

As someone who has been involved in advocacy against the ‘Australian model’ for the past decade as well as providing support for those who have been subject to its cruelty, I would plead with people in the UK resist this policy in any way you can. It is a policy which not only causes immense physical and mental harm to refugees, but is also morally destructive of those who become involved in implementing it.