

3 types of denial that allow Australians to feel OK about how we treat refugees

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As one of its first acts in government, the newly elected Labor government [turned back a boat](#) of Sri Lankan asylum seekers trying to enter Australia.

Labor has [vowed to continue Operation Sovereign Borders](#), including boat turnbacks and offshore detention. This is concerning. Not only do [turnbacks violate international law](#), but offshore detention has resulted in [torture and cruel and inhuman treatment](#) of refugees.

Even more concerning is the lack of criticism Labor has received for continuing offshore detention and turnbacks. Apart from being condemned by [human rights groups](#) and [minor political parties](#), Labor's [refugee](#) policies appear to have gone without much comment from a large part of the Australian public.

As I found in [my new research paper](#), the Australian government has used three forms of denial, creating physical and psychological distance between itself and refugees.

This allows the [federal government](#) to promote illegal and harmful policies while proclaiming to still be upholding human rights.

Creating indifference

Human rights abuses in offshore detention have been [well documented](#).

On Manus Island (in Papua New Guinea) and Nauru, refugees have [faced torture](#), inhumane detention, overcrowding, violence from guards, sexual assault and rape, and mental harm. Children as young as nine have suffered [severe depression and attempted to commit suicide](#).

[According to the latest data by the Refugee Council](#), 112 people remain on Nauru and just over 100 people are on Manus Island. Although New Zealand will now resettle many of them in the coming years, Nauru detention centre will continue to [remain open indefinitely](#).

How can Australia continue to [promote itself as upholding human rights](#),

while at the same time maintain such policies?

One answer is that offshore detention has created indifference to the suffering of refugees. Australia's [policy framework](#) has produced what the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has called "[moral disengagement](#)". This involves "the self-deceptive denial of reality" by denying the wrongfulness of, responsibility for, or occurrence of, [human rights violations](#).

These "self-deceptive" strategies reduce moral dilemmas that come from violating human rights norms.

[My research](#) found Australian federal governments have used three forms of denial to push refugees out of sight and out of mind—denial of responsibility, denial of fact, and denial of wrongdoing.

3 types of denial

Denying responsibility

The government has denied responsibility over refugees in offshore detention by denying it has jurisdiction. The term "jurisdiction" [is different](#) from sovereign territory. A state can have jurisdiction outside of its sovereign territory when it [exercises effective control over others](#).

Showing that a country has jurisdiction over others is important. It can help hold states accountable for [human rights abuses](#) and establish responsibility for those in its care.

The Australian government has [argued](#) that PNG and Nauru—which aren't part of Australia—have jurisdiction over the detention facilities and the refugees in them. It claims all Australia does is provide financial and material support.

Such arguments make it difficult to hold Australia accountable. But they are also incorrect. [A Senate inquiry](#), the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), and [human rights groups](#), among others, have argued Australia exercises effective control and shares jurisdiction with Nauru and PNG.

Denying jurisdiction creates physical and psychological distance between itself and refugees, helping to create indifference. By denying responsibility, [human rights](#) abuses become someone else's problem.

Australia finally accepted NZ's offer to settle refugees from offshore processing, but as [@UNSW's @NatashaYacoub](#) writes, it bandages a "failed policy that has haemorrhaged cash, destroyed lives and eroded international refugee protection systems". <https://t.co/EaH5pHvfqu>

— The Conversation (@ConversationEDU) [April 8, 2022](#)

Denying fact

A second key strategy is denial of fact. The Australian government, along with the governments of Nauru and PNG, has [denied human rights abuses](#) and made it hard to find out what occurs in offshore detention.

[Human rights monitors](#) and [journalists](#) have been restricted or denied access to offshore detention.

Staff have been [threatened with prosecution](#) under confidentiality agreements if they speak publicly about detention treatment.

Operation Sovereign Borders has also been shrouded in [secrecy](#). For example, it was common for [Coalition ministers](#) and [border force officials](#) to refuse to answer questions in the media about "on water matters".

As Peter Young, the former mental health director of IHMS, the medical provider in immigration detention, [stated](#): "Secrecy is necessary because these places are designed to damage".

These policies have made it difficult to know what occurs in offshore detention. They also create doubt about whether such harm is even happening at all.

Denying wrongdoing

Along with "stopping the boats", the government has argued offshore detention has been necessary to save lives at sea.

When former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan Méndez criticised Australia for violating the UN Convention against Torture in 2015, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott [stated](#), "The most humanitarian, the most decent, the most compassionate thing you can do is stop these boats because hundreds, we think about 1200 in fact, drowned at sea during the flourishing of the people smuggling trade under the former government."

This is a key strategy of self-deception. By arguing the policy is saving lives, it focuses attention away from the harm refugees suffer, to the humanitarian goal of "saving lives".

Moral dilemmas about torture or ill treatment are pushed aside, and so are feelings of wrongdoing.

Challenging indifference

Key to ending this illegal and harmful policy is to challenge these self-deceptive strategies that have produced moral disengagement.

Other countries, such as the UK, are following in Australia's footsteps by [introducing offshore detention](#) for asylum seekers. This means challenging strategies that deny reality—and widening our circle of empathy—is more urgent than ever.

It's indifference that's helping to maintain offshore [detention](#). And it's this indifference that needs to be challenged to both respect international law and uphold the rights and dignity of refugees.

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