

XBORDER 1.0
s11, 2000

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Introduction

Xborder was established in late 1999 in Narrm (Melbourne, Australia). It began as a small affinity group opposed to the nationalism being promoted by many in the lead up to the S11 protests against the World Economic Forum conference in Melbourne.

In 2000, while much of the so-called Australian Left were protesting ‘globalisation,’ there were a series of intense protests and escapes from immigration detention facilities underway across the continent—see the articles “Profits and Racism,” and “Dismantling the Cages.” Whether people understood the latter as a movement, or as part of the movements, was an important question.

The goal xborder set for itself was to connect the anti-summit protests with the movements of undocumented who were detained in one of Australia’s concentration camps. Put simply, the aim was to cross the borders of the political. To that end, xborder organized s11 solidarity actions at detention centres.

At the s11 World Economic Forum protests in Melbourne, xborder was part of the Autonomous Web of Liberation, or AWOL. (See the AWOL graphic of the flyer appended after these texts.) Because AWOL was not implicitly organised as a party, xborder could work alongside groups and individuals that had different views in the detail and emphasise the efficacy of actions such as the blockade, making it possible to work toward solidarity. The decentralised aspects of AWOL were also important given that, in the view of xborder, it was impossible for those who were detained to be present at meetings of the anti-summit protests. Put simply, it kept a space open for those who were outside of citizenship. In contrast, xborder was unable to work within the S11 Alliance due to an emphasis by the S11 Alliance on political unity and, at the same time, the involvement of nationalists. Most s11 Alliance meetings prior to the blockade were taken up with majority votes on policies—though it was never clear whether they imagined they were forming an alternative government or lobbying the WEF to adopt those policies. More broadly, xborder was part of the global Noborder Network, and close to similar groups—such as Kein Mensch Ist Illegal and De Fabel van de Illegaal—which opposed the establishment of a Fortress Europe and were critical of the nationalism in the anti-summit protests.

At the end of the protests against the World Economic Forum and at AWOL’s closing night party, discussions began about organising another large-scale protest in the remote desert town of Woomera in 2002—the-then site of one of the largest immigration detention camps in Australia. Between the end of 2000 and mid-2002, xborder focused on developing the infrastructure for the Woomera protests.

Our struggles are as global as capital, our movements cross borders

July, 2000

The misery created by so-called 'globalisation' could not take effect if it were not for the system of enclosures that actively brings about the existence of undocumented and illegalised workers who are susceptible to hyper-exploitation. In other words, without this system of global enclosures which makes the flight from poverty and devastation illegal, there would be no meaning to the phrase 'foreigners who take our jobs.' In this way, corporations make use of richer states and the latter's dominance of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to create cheap labour reserves, the bottom rung of a world labour market which provides the precise measure to the conduct of the race to the bottom.

A state of exception

Today in Australia, there are thousands of people who are imprisoned, often for months, always for indefinite periods, without charge and without trial, who are not able to access the courts to review either the merit of their imprisonment or its duration, and whom the Federal Attorney-General, Daryl Williams, has said do not have a right to be informed of any of their remaining rights, including the right to seek legal advice upon their imprisonment. The Government and Opposition refer to these people as "illegal immigrants."

We are confined so that capital can move against us

As capital moves ever more freely around the world; we are locked up, confined, enclosed. In the last decade of the 20th century, as trade and financial movements were deregulated, as the rules governing the actions of bosses, merchants and bankers were eased or abolished altogether; it became almost impossible—more often than not illegal—to flee the impoverishment brought about by austerity programmes, to escape the wars, the economic and environmental devastation brought about by IMF and World Bank-sponsored 'development' and debt-induced conflicts.

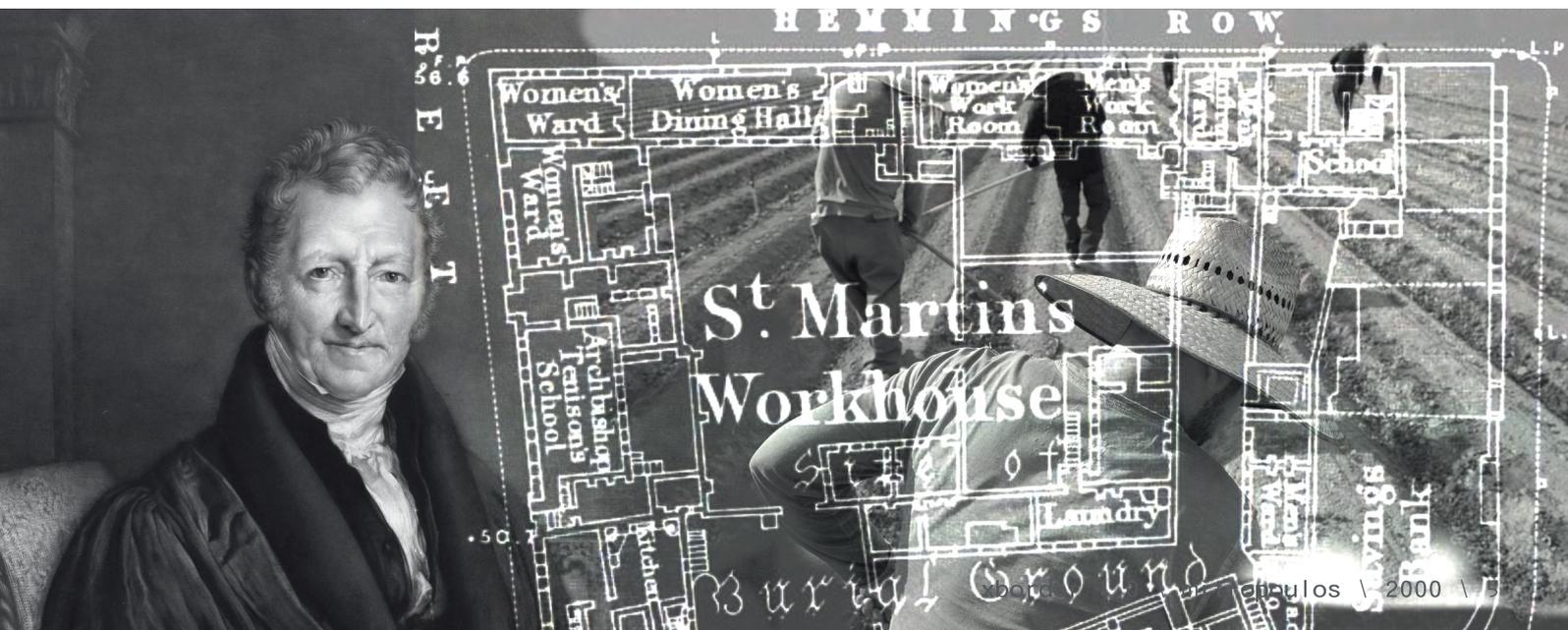
Borders

So that capital can incite the kind of competition that would compel us to work for as next to nothing as possible—the underbidding wars that go by the name of ‘the race to the bottom’—workers have to be territorially divided by region, city, and country, divided again by firm through ‘enterprise bargaining’, and divided in turn through individual contracts and the like. Borders between workers—including the border between documented and undocumented workers, the borders assembled by ethnicism, racism and nationalism—are the key ingredients in the power of global capital.

Pass laws, prisons and reserves

Much like centuries ago, as Australia was colonised by the British crown for use as a penal colony, so today incarceration and pass laws have become the favoured means for controlling and criminalising the attempts of those in the most wretched of circumstances to escape their impoverishment. The regimes of ‘mandatory sentencing’ that have targeted Indigenous peoples, the system of mandatory and non-reviewable detention of asylum seekers who arrive without papers, the criminalisation of strikes and industrial action, the privatisation of public spaces, the return of forced labour in the form of work-for-the-dole, and not least the new round of ‘development’ which has forced millions of lands in many third world countries.

These are the latest version of the procedures that accompanied the so-called free trade capitalism of previous times: the tossing off of Indigenous peoples from their lands so that they have no option other than to work for the profit of others or live by the charity of the missionaries, the pass laws that restricted their movements to reserves, these local systems of enclosure were the vicious corollary of the poorhouses, workhouses, and the enclosures of the commons that provoked the creation of this continent as the prisonhouse of those declared to be ‘surplus populations’ and ‘the dangerous classes’ ousted from the heart of the Empire.



Courage against the internment camps

August 26, 2000

Because we can let those who are interned know that they have our support.

Because those who are held behind barbed wire are incarcerated without charge, without trial, indefinitely, without the ability to access the courts to review the merit or length of their imprisonment.

Because racism and xenophobia have underwritten successive governments' neo-liberal agendas in Australia, through mandatory sentencing in WA and NT, and the mandatory and non-reviewable internment of those who arrive seeking asylum without papers—none of these laws were in place prior to 1992.

Because governments have tried hard to scapegoat immigrants and Indigenous peoples for the misery created by neoliberal policies—they wager that we will either enjoy the spectacle of their suffering or avert our eyes from their treatment because 'we' do not identify with 'them.'

Because the border control industries such as ACM (Wackenhut Corp)—which runs the Maribyrnong Detention Centre—have been the global beneficiaries of the rush to incarcerate, both here and in the US.

Because our struggles are as global as capital.

Because as the movements of money and goods were deregulated over the last decade, the movements of people were restricted, confined to the global poorhouses that are the 'third world,' denied the right to flee the impoverishment, environmental devastation and repression wrought by IMF/World Bank-sponsored 'development.'

Because the constant threat of capital flight, the relocation of industries offshore, and the demand that we accept lower wages and an erosion of working conditions, requires a system of border controls that makes it possible for capital to flee to the global poorhouses where wages are kept low by overt repression and impoverishment.

Because the disparities between the 'third world' and the 'first' are enforced at the border.

Because no one is illegal.

Because there comes a time when symbolic statements deploring racism and xenophobia might make us feel better but accomplish nothing.

Courage against the internment camps!

Global enclosures

It was not until the last decade that people began to move in some numbers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to Europe, North America and Australia. Even so, at least three-quarters of such movements occur between the poor countries, and are held in check by a vast system of co-operation between states-and between states and the UN High Commission for Refugees-to exclude asylum seekers from the wealthier countries which are the principal donors to UNHCR activities.

Over the last decade, all Western countries have drastically changed their laws relating to refugees and migration, most notably the European Union's Schengen Agreement and 1996 legislation in the US. Severe visa restrictions, as well as outright bans, have been placed on "refugee generating countries." Western governments have effectively transformed the character of the UNHCR into the body responsible for ensuring the so-called "right to remain"—i.e., into an administrator and overseer of refugee camps inside or close to the borders of countries people have taken flight from in order to stop them becoming refugees in Western countries. In addition, the proliferation of "safe third country" laws have worked to confine asylum seekers to border camps and poorer countries.

Profits and racism: prisoners of the global enclosures make a break for freedom

June, 2000

Within less than 48 hours, over 750 asylum-seekers had broken out of three remote refugee prisons in Australia, experiencing freedom for the first time in over 6 months. The vast majority of the asylum seekers are from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, told reporters that the escapees had the choice of returning to detention or face charges which could see them disqualified for visas under migration laws which require that applicants to be of "good character". Con Sciacca, from the Opposition Labor Party and Shadow Minister for Immigration, said that the escapees would not be getting any sympathy from the public.



All three refugee prisons are in remote, desert locations where nightly temperatures regularly reach freezing. At least 10 people have been taken to hospital having collapsed from exhaustion, cold and a lack of food. Since Thursday, many of the escapees have been returned to their respective prison camps, but many remain free, if without any support, including food and shelter. Each of the prison camps is located hundreds of kilometres from major cities.

The siting of the refugee prisons in remote locations has an economic and political basis. It has made access to legal aid, community support and media scrutiny almost impossible to sustain. Since 1994, a series of laws have also restricted access to legal information, including communications from the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Moreover, the convergence of a restructuring of rural economies and the explicit peddling of xenophobic explanations for rising unemployment and declining incomes by all major parties (Labor, National, Liberal, Green and Democrats) in the last decade—a tactic which prompted the subsequent rise of the openly racist One Nation in 1996 which targeted migrants and Indigenous ‘welfare bludgers’ as the cause of rural misery—has resulted in the political isolation of asylum seekers. No political party in Australia is prepared to defend the right of asylum seekers to justice, including freedom from arbitrary and lengthy imprisonment.

The refugee prisons highlight the racist exceptions to the rule of law in Australia, including the singular exception to the principle that someone be charged and tried before a court before being imprisoned. This 'external' exclusion from the rule of law adheres to the same racist logic as that of the 'internal' mandatory sentencing regime for petty property crimes, currently practiced in two Australian states, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, whose indisputable target is Indigenous peoples.

On Thursday, over a hundred people tore down the barbed wire fencing at the Woomera prison camp and headed for the middle of the nearby town to stage a protest against poor conditions, overcrowding, refusals to provide access to telephones and newspapers and the slow processing of visa applications.



During the rest of the day, another three escapes were mounted bringing the total numbers to around 600. They joined others in the centre of the town chanting “We want freedom!” They have been held in the Woomera prison camp for over 6 months.

On Friday morning, after having endured cold, without food since Wednesday, and with the only available water from a bore well, the group—made up of men, women and several children—approached the local church to ask for asylum and humanitarian aid. A church staffer told them to remain where they were and refused to allow them to sleep inside the church during the night or to give them any food.

After negotiations with a representative from the Department of Immigration, over half of the escapees from Woomera returned to the detention centre with assurances that applications for asylum would be processed faster and that the protesters would not be disadvantaged by having undertaken the action. Under half of the escapees have refused to return to the prison insisting that they did not trust the Department of Immigration to stick to any agreement. By Friday morning, approximately 120 people broke out of the Curtin detention centre and began walking toward the nearest town of Derby, which is 50 kilometres away. Police set up roadblocks in the path of escapees heading for Derby, and by nightfall had forced a return to the detention centre.

Late Friday, reports appeared that several more had escaped from another detention centre, Port Hedland in Western Australia, by scaling the barbed wire perimeter fencing.

Incarceration industries make money from xenophobia

Businesses in nearby towns tend to see the refugee prisons as a source of revenue, if not exactly jobs, since the collapse of mining and other local industries. Moreover, with rural towns providing some of the most significant support for racist organisations like One Nation, the building of refugee prisons near those remote towns has been welcomed both politically and economically. A number of shire councils and rural commerce bodies have lobbied the Federal Government to open a refugee prison near their towns. The head of the Christmas Island Chamber of Commerce has been lobbying the Federal and State Government to establish a permanent detention centre there citing dwindling revenues from the Christmas Island Casino. Kambalda, a town in the Western Australian goldfields, has made representations to the Federal Government to build a permanent detention centre there in the hope of creating a new industry after a series of mine closures.



The automatic imprisonment of all onshore asylum seekers since 1994 has seen the construction of a number of new refugee prisons around Australia in rural areas. It has also meant that whilst the refugee prisons are welcomed, local burghers remain unconcerned about the treatment and health of the asylum seekers. Derby Shire President, Mr McCumstie, shrugged off reporters' questions on the availability of water by saying that there was plenty of water still lying around from the recent wet season. He claimed that people were happy to have the refugee prison nearby because it boosted local businesses. It is widely believed that the town's 'economy' depends on the refugee prison for its viability after the rocket base—on the site of which the prison camps was recently built—was closed down. Mr McCumstie went on to add, "There's been no outward antagonism toward them at all, but that could change if they start to affect the day-to-day activities of people in the towns." Riot police from the Australian Protective Services cordoned off the town centre, thereby restricting access to local stores for residents, and have actively discouraged them from contact with the protesters. Local authorities also suggested to locals that they keep their children away from school whilst the protesters were in town.

The running of all refugee prisons in Australia have been contracted to Australian Correctional Management, a subsidiary of the US incarceration giant Wackenhut Corp, which is also contracted to deport. In addition, ACM manages 30 prisons worldwide, including a number of prisons in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

While the Government routinely draws attention to the monetary gains from 'people-smugglers—generally, poor Indonesian fishers who can receive up to 20 years imprisonment even if no money has changed hands—there is never any mention of the millions of taxpayers' money that is delivered over to the migration prohibition industries to keep out and incarcerate around 4,000 people per annum.

The illegalisation of asylum seekers is the basis for an industry in Australia upon which at least one megacorporation makes a lot of profits. The Prime Minister, John Howard, recently announced an additional \$240m for the detection, deterrence and interdiction of asylum seekers who arrive without papers.

Recent changes to the law and the creation of reserves of cheap labour

Under laws introduced in 1992, anyone who makes an onshore application for asylum and is without papers is subject to automatic imprisonment. No court is able to review the length or merit of that detention. The so-called mandatory and non-reviewable detention regime was first introduced by the Labor Government with the support of the Liberal and National parties. Australia's is the only western government that practices a system of automatic and non-reviewable incarceration. It also receives and grants fewer applications for asylum, both on and offshore, than any other western country.

This is the only instance in Australian law which dictates imprisonment without trial, where such imprisonment is automatic, where no Australian court can review the decision to imprison or the duration of such confinement, and where people who are imprisoned have committed no crime or been charged with any. In the words of the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration (JSC), "Immigration detention is an administrative sanction, that is, the deprivation of liberty other than as the result of a conviction for an offence."

According to Amnesty International, "The government's refusal to give asylum seekers a fair chance to challenge in court why they remain behind barbed wire for months or even years—a right granted to convicted felons—makes immigration detainees second class prisoners although they have committed no crime ... Making laws to declare automatic detention legal does not make the arbitrariness of it acceptable."

The imprisonment of asylum seekers is not confined to the purpose-built refugee prisons. The JSC noted, "If individual circumstances warrant, detention can be provided in prisons or, for short periods, pending transfer, police cells or remand centres." Such measures—as well as chemical and physical restraints and isolation—are routinely used in order to remove people defined as 'trouble-makers.' Sedation is common practice during deportation. The Australian Government recently froze all on- and offshore applications for asylum. This means that all applicants for asylum are treated and defined as illegal. It also decided, with the support of the Labor Party, that all successful onshore asylum applicants could only be granted a 3-year visa, would not be eligible for welfare or medicare, and could not bring family members to Australia. This extended the policy of the previous Labor Government which denied newly-arrived and legal migrants access to medicare and welfare services for 6 months—a policy that the current Liberal-National Government extended to the first 2 years of stay.

Through such policies, the Australian state actively creates the basis for a pool of workers prepared to do any work for as little pay as possible, liable to sweatshopping in manufacture, dangerous work in building, and below-subsistence work in agriculture.

Just as 'mandatory and non-reviewable' imprisonment mirrors 'mandatory sentencing,' so too this strategy of ensuring an impoverished and inescapable segment of the labour market is mirrored by the operation of the so-called Community Development Employment Programme in Indigenous communities. The CDEP [a work-for-the-dole scheme], introduced in 1974 by the Liberal-National Government after the near-total collapse of Indigenous employment with the introduction of Equal Pay laws, guarantees the continuing existence of racism as the principal instrument of labour market segmentation, informalisation and the obstacles to unionisation.

The misery created by so-called 'globalisation' could not take effect if it were not for the system of enclosures that maintain a supply of undocumented and illegalised workers who are susceptible to hyper-exploitation. In other words, without this system of global enclosures which makes the flight from poverty and devastation illegal, there would be no meaning to the phrase 'foreigners who take our jobs.' In this way, corporations make use of richer states and the latter's dominance of the UNHCR to create cheap labour reserves, the bottom rung of a world labour market which provides the precise measure to the conduct of the race to the bottom.



Dismantling the cages: The burning of Woomera

September, 2000

On the eve of the Sydney Olympics and the World Economic Forum's Asia-Pacific Session in Melbourne, as the Federal Parliament debated a bill that will give the army shoot to kill powers against dissent, it has become clear that the only movement that is not subject to repression is that of money—tourism, trade and meetings of corporate executives. Water-cannons, tear gas and pepper spray have been used against people in the refugee internment camp at Woomera in South Australia in an attempt to put down protests that began a week ago. An ABC presenter concluded Monday morning's report with the comment: "There you have it. Confirmation. Mobile water cannon being used for the first time on Australian soil against people. Ironically, this comes on the same day as debate is occurring in Parliament over a new bill to use the military in civilian conflicts."

What happened?

Over the weekend, there were protests inside all the refugee internment centres across Australia, with the possible exception of Curtin. The most determined protests occurred in the Woomera internment camp as those behind the wire began dismantling first the razor wire perimeter fence and, as the response of police and guards became more severe, the buildings themselves. On Saturday, thousands held protest actions outside the Maribyrnong (Melbourne), Perth and Villawood (Sydney) internment centres calling for the internment of asylum seekers to end and for those inside to be released. A number of churches had also held prayer meetings for refugees across Australia on Sunday.

After the mass escapes from three remote internment camps in mid-June this year, including Woomera, around 200 APS replete with riot gear and an undisclosed number of the STAR Force personnel (a tactical squad) had been brought in to supplement the 250 private guards from Australian Correctionals Management (Wackenhut).

24 hour surveillance was stepped up and a new razor wire perimeter fence was being erected. In addition, a mobile water cannon had been brought in ready for use, as well as a cache of tear gas, pepper spray, long batons.





According to locals, these recent protests have been brewing for some time. For almost a week, building workers complained to the local petrol station owner that as they were erecting the new perimeter fence, internees would dismantle it in the night.

On Saturday evening, tear gas was used against internees as they repeatedly attempted to get to and through the razor wire fence. The mobile water cannon was brought in that, according to one eyewitness, “washed the protesters away like rag dolls” every time they made an attempt to reach the fenceline. In the dawn hours of Monday, four buildings in the internment camp were set alight and trashed. The water cannon was used repeatedly as internees made more attempts to reach the fence. By Monday, police had set up a roadblock that kept journalists and media away from the camp. The footage that was shot from a distance however clearly made out riot police beating internees back from the fence, and the use of the water cannon. Protesters held banners scrawled with ‘SOS,’ defended themselves against riot police with fence posts, and a number of children can be made out throwing sand and stones.

A small group of people from Keepers of Lake Eyre travelled through Woomera on Monday, reporting that children who are internees were being tear-gassed as they ran toward the fence. A guard, sent to casualty for “facial abrasions and bruised wrist,” described those who repeatedly tried to break out of the Woomera refugee internment camp over the last few days as “acting like a pack of wild animals.” “They were screaming and came rushing at us, it was pretty scary. Lucky we had the numbers.” The numbers,’ and indeed the machinery mustered to put down the protesters, was certainly against the internees.

Arrests

By Tuesday, 25 of the internees were arrested and sent to the Adelaide Remand Centre on charges that could see them facing additional lengthy prison terms. Previously, a Department spokesperson had complained that those engaged in the protests were wearing towels around their faces, he claimed, so that they would not be identified. It is not clear to us whether this was a result of fear of reprisals or as a result of tear gas being used against the protesters. What is clear, is that charges have been brought against those whom the Minister believes are responsible because they have been refused the chance to make applications for asylum (“screened out”) and that it is doubtful whether there is evidence that would link these 25 with the actions they have been charged with. Nevertheless, most media have already found the 25 guilty, and it is doubtful whether they will receive anything like a fair trial.



"Illegals"

The Minister of Immigration, Philip Ruddock, has claimed that those protesting have been found to be "illegal immigrants."

But, according to a Department of Immigration spokesperson, "most of the people involved in this situation are people who have been screened out of the refugee process and our immigration laws state that these people be detained and removed from the country as early as practicable."

Under recent legislation, to be "screened out" means that one is not even allowed to make an application for asylum.

The Minister, however, simultaneously contradicted his claim that those who were protesting were facing deportation when he went on to say that "No amount of unrest, no amount of civil disobedience will lead to the release of people from security facilities until such time as all of the issues relating to character have been properly and fully handled and addressed."

"Issues relating to character" refers to the provisions under recent border legislation that visas will not be granted to anyone who is found to have been charged with offenses elsewhere or regarded as likely to create 'trouble' in Australia.

It is, nonetheless, probable that the Minister was attempting to quell protesters with the implicit threat unless the protests were called off, then they would lose the chance to apply for asylum—an empty promise given the screening process he and the Department spokesperson had already referred to.

With intent. Death and suffering as policy

December 3, 2000

Whenever there have been protests—including hunger-strikes—over intolerable conditions and harsh treatment in the concentration camps, the Australian Minister for Immigration has increasingly responded, as have other local politicians, by insisting that this should be seen as a necessary part of the deterrence of potential asylum seekers. That is, the suffering of one group of people is justified as a means of deterrence of others potentially seeking asylum in Australia. Far from constituting an embarrassment or prompting denials, the Government affirms such suffering and moves to transform it into a policy device, a distinctive mechanism for the restriction of asylum applications to Australia.

Australia's border policy this week claimed more lives. Reports have emerged that over 160 people are likely to have drowned as two ships sunk in cyclonic conditions off the northern coast of Australia. Only four people from one of the ships have been found, saved by the crew of a Japanese tanker. Speaking to reporters, the Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, rose to the occasion by declaring that these deaths were a consequence of attempts to enter Australia "illegally" despite the fact that the legal status of arrivals is only determined after they are released from one of Australia's internment camps whereupon they are deported or granted only a three-year stay.

The Minister went on to insist that this was a vindication of the media campaign his Department had instigated across Asia and the Middle East that, amongst other things, depicted death and extreme suffering as the result of entering Australia without the necessary papers.

What reporters refused to ask is why, if the Minister or sections of the Government had been told by Indonesian authorities a week ago that two boats were heading for Australia, and it was known that a cyclone was active off the north coast, did the Government not send out a vessel to pick them up. Why was it left to the crew of a tanker to find those who had managed to stay afloat?

Instead, these deaths are paraded as a central plank of Government border policy and the penal industry that it makes possible.

It is no longer implicit. The death penalty has been declared a useful and acceptable means of deterring undocumented migrants.



Unlike the deaths of citizens and non-citizens in tourist spots here and elsewhere—which is to say, those whose movements act as transports for sums of money—there will be no state-funded funeral attended by parliamentarians in a show of 'national unity'. The people who died this week will not be officially mourned here. They are sacrificed as a way of illustrating the inescapable power of the nation-state's borders.

In 1999, over 350 people died off Australia's coastline as they tried to make their way to asylum.

For the local audience, the announcement of these deaths was meant to serve as a vindication of the Government's "get tough" policy against asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, despite the fact that the Minister knows full well that the moderate increase in undocumented arrivals by boat from the Middle East in 1999 was a direct result of the closure of the UN office in Pakistan and the move to wholesale deportations from refugee camps in Jordan back to Iran and Iraq.

The Minister prefers to depict the impetus for arrivals in terms that serve to flatter the local audience and themselves, depicting the border as a necessary wall against what would otherwise be a 'flood.' It is proffered as axiomatic that 'everyone' would come here were it not for this wall of violence and internment. No doubt there is mileage for any Government in presenting life in Australia as attractive and 'the Australian way of life' as something which others, and in particular the otherly-complexioned, will naturally covet.

Fact is that recent documented migrants are leaving Australia within the first two years of their stay in unprecedented numbers and the numbers of undocumented arrivals, even at the 1999 peak, have always been remarkably insubstantial by comparison with almost all other countries in the world.