

# Pacific Solution

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AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
PACIFIC SOLUTION  
IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Democrats oppose the so-called “Pacific Solution” as breaching the rule of law and basic human rights, undermining attempts to implement a sustainable global system for helping refugees and wasting massive amounts of taxpayers’ money.

*“The Pacific Solution represents a gross violation of fundamental human rights”*

**Senator Andrew Bartlett**  
**Spokesperson on Immigration**

The Pacific Solution was only possible because the ALP joined with the Coalition to pass laws through the Senate allowing Australia to intercept vessels at sea, ignore requests for asylum from those on board and either tow unseaworthy vessels out to international waters or/and transport those on board them to other countries.

The Pacific Solution involves the processing of asylum seekers in Australian-funded camps in the Pacific. The Government promotes these camps as a solution to a ‘problem’ - the legal right of persecuted people to seek asylum in a country that is signatory to the UN Refugees convention.

The Pacific Solution was created when the Tampa, a Norwegian freighter rescued 400 mostly Afghan asylum seekers from a sinking boat in the Indian Ocean in August 2001. The vessel and its human cargo were refused permission by the Howard government to land anywhere in Australia, including Christmas Island.

On orders from the Government, Australian military boarded and took control of the vessel, then transported the majority of the asylum seekers, without their consent, to detention camps in Papua New Guinea and on Nauru.

These actions not only breached international law, they broke Australian law. This prompted the Government to rush new legislation through the Federal Parliament in September 2001 to retrospectively legalise its actions and those of its officers and establish its ‘Pacific Solution.’

This legislation was opposed in the Senate at every stage by the Democrats, but passed with the support of the ALP on the eve of the federal election.

## How Many Asylum Seekers Were Involved?

The offshore camps in Nauru and Manus Island have held approximately 1,547 people since its inception.<sup>1</sup> After six years, the majority of these people have been recognised as refugees and settled in Australia and New Zealand a small number have returned to Afghanistan after significant pressure from Australian authorities to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> DIAC fact sheet no.76, Offshore Processing Arrangements, updated 30 January 2007.

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## How Many Asylum Seekers are there remaining?

There are currently no asylum seekers on Manus Island. There are currently 8 Burmese Rohingyas on Nauru.<sup>2</sup>

## Real Issues

The majority of detainees suffered significantly from mental illness which was exacerbated by geographic isolation and the lack of support networks available on the Australian mainland. The psychological pressure on all of them grows daily. Their ill health - the mental illness and consequential physical ailments - is a direct consequence of the situation which the Australian government has put these people in, many for significant periods of time.

## Cost of the Pacific Solution

It is estimated that the Pacific solution has cost close to a billion dollars since its inception. The annual maintenance costs alone for Nauru and Manus are \$27 million; the detention centre on Manus has been mothballed and kept in a state of readiness.<sup>3</sup>

Further costs of processing asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island since 2001 to 31 May 2006 are approximately \$253.5 million.

These costs have not even included the millions in aid we give to Nauru every year, nor the cost of building the detention centres.

Democrat Leader and Immigration spokesperson, Senator Andrew Bartlett has visited Nauru three times. After his first visit in July 2003, Senator Bartlett said that he had encountered "an ocean of despair and depression".

After second and third visits in 2004 and 2005, he warned that there would be a tragedy unless the "untenable situation" in the detention centres was addressed.

The Democrats will continue to keep pushing for every last asylum seeker to be freed from the camps on Nauru and for a permanent end to the Pacific Solution.

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<sup>2</sup> Additional Senate Estimates, February 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Additional Senate Estimates, February 2007.