

# Proponents of terror Australis at sea in a leaky moat

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Illustration: *Rocco Fazzari*

A week ago, we were debating whether we should be turning back tiny boats of desperate people seeking asylum on our shores. This week the Federal Government has assumed the power to put people suspected of having swine flu in mainland mandatory detention, a policy option it has abandoned for asylum seekers. Next week will we, like Peru and Argentina, be turning back planeloads of travellers, not because they don't have papers but because they might have the flu?

Just when we thought things could not get any worse, along comes swine influenza. For a government already buffeted by the economic tsunami, the prospect of a potentially deadly pandemic is a killer blow, not just to the people's health but also to the nation's economic well-being.

A week ago the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, described this year's budget as "acutely challenging" because, among other things, of the Government's need to balance its expensive defence requirements, to be outlined today in the defence white paper, "as we defend ourselves from the global economic storm". This week the Government had to factor in the inevitable fallout from the greater-than-expected contraction of the US economy (by 6.1 per cent on an annualised basis over the past three months). Next week will it be forced yet again to recast its budget to accommodate the double whammy of this decreased activity and having to fund public health measures to deal with the swine flu pandemic?

If the pandemic hits there could be grave economic consequences. Mexico has shut down its economy for five days, while the US narrowly avoided a potentially disastrous impact on public confidence (and the travel industry) when the Vice-President, Joe Biden, told people to stay off planes and subways. His staff had to go into instant damage control to bring their man's message into sync with President Barack Obama's "stay calm" mantra. The President must be wishing he could put Biden in quarantine for his foot-in-mouth disease.

Here in Australia the Government went into action, declaring swine influenza a "quarantinable disease in humans under the Quarantine Act 1908".

Such a declaration enables the Government, according to the website of the Department of Health and Ageing, to place under surveillance people who, in the opinion of the Chief Medical Officer, "are likely to have been exposed to swine flu". The purpose is to establish whether these people should be "ordered into quarantine" if they are affected by the disease. Without such a declaration, the Government has limited power "to control the entry of the disease".

Having made the declaration, the Government can - and is - requiring airline captains to report on the health of their passengers. People arriving must complete a health declaration card; it is ready to disinfect planes if necessary, and thermal scanners are being used at eight international airports to take the temperatures of passengers on arrival.

All this was done without a single case of flu being identified in Australia, let alone a death. But no one is complaining. In fact I think most of us probably felt reassured by the calming words of the Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, on television on Tuesday night as she explained why the Government had put itself in a state of extreme readiness for whatever might eventuate.

It was a sound public health response, one that echoed the similarly early, comprehensive *and effective* measures that a previous Labor health minister, Neal Blewett, put in place in the early 1990s to protect the Australian blood supply, and the population at large, against the spread of HIV-AIDS.

Roxon said this week that Australia was "ahead of the game" when it came to preparedness for a pandemic. We have, for instance, a greater per capita stockpile of the anti-viral treatments for the flu than any other country. And, she might have added, we are lucky to be an island continent, far more able to exercise border control than countries with contiguous borders (although that has not helped New Zealand).

The only murmur of opposition to the Government's measures has been a complaint from Peter Dutton, the Opposition spokesman on health, about a delay (of two days) in deploying the thermal scanners. The Opposition seems to have no problem with the overall approach the Government has adopted.

This is in contrast to its position on the other two great external challenges we - and the world - face at present: the global financial crisis and the concomitant increase in people fleeing economic and political distress.

So far this year just 10 boats, carrying some 450 people, have been intercepted as they tried to enter Australian territory, yet the Opposition has persisted in its alarmist response to this perceived threat to our northern borders.

As a result of the sudden threat of the swine influenza pandemic, the Government needs to deal with a far more serious border protection issue: the potential health threat posed by sick people among the 33,000-odd who fly into Australia every day.

The boat people have been sent to Christmas Island, where their claims to be treated as refugees will be assessed. It seems to be an orderly process, and a far more humane one than operated under the Howard government, where families were detained behind barbed wire in desert camps while their status was determined.

It is inevitable there will be an increase in the number of boats bringing people without papers to Australia. Whether the change in the Government's policy has any bearing on this is hard to ascertain, but it is probably immaterial given the forces driving up the numbers of refugees. Political chaos in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and now Sri Lanka is impelling people to seek safe haven elsewhere, while deteriorating economic conditions in such staging countries as Indonesia are prompting those already there in camps to strike out for countries where prospects seem better.

Every industrialised country is facing similar challenges, and most have to contend with far larger numbers of asylum seekers. For the Opposition to demand an inquiry into the arrival in Australia of 450 people in five months is a quite extraordinary over-reaction. And given the looming economic and health disasters, it shows how far from reality the Opposition has travelled.

Like the Republicans in the United States, with their "tea bag" parties (recalling the anti-British "no taxation without representation" Boston Tea Party of 1773) protesting against Obama's stimulus package, the Opposition has replaced political debate with gimmickry. The Liberal Party website has a digital debt clock called "National Rudd Debt Statement" that purports to show the accumulating federal debt due to Rudd's various stimulus packages. "Increasing by \$162 million a day", the website claims.

As gimmicks go it's pretty lame, and its execution is woefully old-fashioned.

There should, of course, be legitimate debate about the most effective ways to stimulate economic activity to mitigate the impact of the global recession, but both the Republicans and the Liberals seem to be suggesting that all spending (and debt) is bad.

Are they seriously advocating a return to the policies of the 1930s that led to unemployment rates of 30 per cent, hundreds of thousands of Australians living in shanty towns and a generation permanently scarred by the memory?

Perhaps the public senses this, and it is one reason why Rudd's popularity remains so high.

The PM is often criticised for his hyperactivity, and Obama, in the assessments of his first 100 days in office, has been subjected to similar commentary. But Madeleine Albright, a former US secretary of state, reflecting on whether Obama had tried to do too much, wrote: "The truth is that he has had little choice. A firefighter surrounded by flames cannot ignore the heat coming from any point on the compass."

Yet this week Rudd hinted that he is wearying of the frenetic pace. "If there is one great malady in our current political life," he said while presenting an award for young journalists in Canberra, "it is the absence of time, the absence of conversation and the absence therefore of the reflection which arises from considered conversation."

Rudd was describing how he used to drop in and talk to Wally Brown, the legendary Canberra correspondent for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*. "Whenever I sat down with Wal in that cubicle of his up there, in the parliamentary press gallery, whatever he was doing, whatever time of day it was, he always, even to the lowliest form of backbencher as I was, he'd always have the gift of time. Sit, talk, chat, reflect."

Not any more, not these days, not in these terrible times.

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