

School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Here to Stay: The Politics of Australia's Asylum Policy Equilibrium



Guest Speaker: Rhonda Evans

BIOGRAPHY: Rhonda Evans is the Director of the Edward A. Clark Center for Australian and New Zealand Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where she is also a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government. Holding both a J.D. and Ph.D., her research focuses on the politics of law and courts, with special emphasis on Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. She is especially interested in the role of courts in policymaking processes, especially with respect to issues concerning human rights, discrimination, and asylum seekers.

ABSTRACT: In 2016, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull attended at a UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants and proclaimed that Australia's "policy on border protection is the best in the world." Ironically, the UN is more often a place where Australian officials go to defend rather than laud their asylum policies; but, with 65 million displaced people in the world and tens of thousands seeking refuge in Europe, Australia is now the envy of many Western countries. The Australian model, as it is known internationally, focuses on border control and consists of boat turn-backs, offshore detention and processing of asylum claims, and a refusal to ever settle in Australia maritime arrivals found to be refugees. Although even some of its harshest critics concede that the model has proven effective at "stopping the boats," they nevertheless maintain that it should not be considered a global template because it is "fiscally irresponsible, morally bankrupt, and increasingly unsustainable politically." They are certainly right about the policy's financial and human tolls, but are the Australian model "politically unsustainable?"

This paper argues that the Australian model is, in fact, politically self-sustaining. First, having lost the political battle over problem definition in 2001, the policy's opponents face the daunting challenge of recasting the issue in terms other than border control. This task would prove challenging under any circumstances, but a second factor has compounded the difficulty. Since 2001, Australia has conducted something of a real-world policy experiment by establishing, dismantling, and re-establishing key elements of the Australian model. This series of events has been taken to show that this suite of deterrence-oriented policies solves the problem—namely, it stops the boats. And third, the populist politics that have driven the Australian model continue to deliver political dividends for the Liberal-National Coalition that currently governs Australia; and it is difficult to see how Labor could repeal the policy. Australia has thus reached policy equilibrium that barring some extraordinary development is likely continue into the foreseeable future. The paper concludes by recommending a course of action for human rights advocates in light of these conditions.

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Location: Parramatta South Campus - EE.G.36

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