Coalition and Labor asylum policies – how do they compare?

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In response to a rise in the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australia, both Coalition and Labor governments have been under increasing pressure for many years to develop policies that are seen to address border security concerns and combat people smuggling.

While there are some policy differences, both Labor and the Coalition are in general agreement on many of the key measures in place to deal with these issues, including mandatory detention for unauthorised boat arrivals introduced in the 1990s by the Keating (Labor) Government; and offshore processing arrangements in the Pacific first introduced by the Howard (Coalition) Government in 2001.

However, many of the measures in place have attracted a great deal of public attention and criticism over the years. In particular, serious concerns over the welfare of asylum seekers—due to high levels of unrest, violence and self-harm either in onshore detention centres (often in remote locations) or in offshore processing centres in the Pacific—have continued to plague successive governments.

Many experts in the field have suggested that investment in deterrence measures is ‘doomed to failure’ in the long-term. Instead, many urge the Australian Government to work towards creating better protection opportunities for refugees in the region. Such an approach, it is argued, could be negotiated within a regional cooperative framework and would aim to address ‘the conditions that cause people to take boat journeys to Australia, rather than simply seeking to ‘stop the boats’.

For further detail on some of these issues see the following Parliamentary Library research papers:

- C Barker, The people smuggler’s business model, 2013
- H Spinks, Destination anywhere? Factors affecting asylum seekers’ choice of destination country, 2013
- R de Boer, Health care for asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island, 2013
- H Spinks, C Barker and D Watts, Australian Government spending on irregular maritime arrivals and counter-people smuggling activity, updated 2013
- J Phillips and H Spinks, Boat arrivals in Australia since 1976, updated 2013
- J Phillips, Asylum seekers and refugees: what are the facts?, updated 2013
- J Phillips and H Spinks, Immigration detention in Australia, updated 2013