

# I'm a conservative, but this asylum seekers comic is disgusting

This must be the world's first propaganda campaign in which the country producing it is portrayed as the villain. What was the government thinking?



**Mark Fletcher** for AusOpinion  
[theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), Thursday 13 February 2014 05.03 GMT



Desperate people reaching out for help: the Operation Sovereign Borders graphic campaign. Photograph: customs.gov.au

There's something fascinating about the government's latest foray into deterrence propaganda, [produced by the Customs and Border Protection Service to deter asylum seekers from Afghanistan](#). The word "propaganda" is entwined with a sense of growth; "propagare" means "to spread" in the sense of a seed, or of a people, or of an idea. Its key usage was in the title of the congregation of the Roman curia responsible for missionary work: Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. This propaganda was about spreading the work of Rome, evangelising, and promoting the Catholic cause.

Now, we tend to understand the word in a political sense. Propaganda is the media spin used to make the government look good by demonising its enemies and deifying its heroes. It's rare to see propaganda which casts the propagating government as the villain [and yet here we are](#). Over the course of some 18 pages, we see the story of a young Afghan man whose parents want him to go to Australia. Alas, he is intercepted by the dark and sinister Australian navy, which makes him sick and forces him to get eaten by mosquitoes.



In the Operation Sovereign Borders graphic campaign, the refugees are intercepted by the navy. Photograph: customs.gov.au

In the top frame (above), we see genuinely desperate people reaching out for help while others are huddled over some illness and weariness. Instead of help, they're boarded by a menacing force. To paraphrase Pope Gregory I: "Non angeli, sed ADF" ("Not angels but ADF"). Anonymous and armed, the officers are clearly technologically superior with their flak jackets and speedboats. Asylum seekers might survive the rough ocean of the previous page, but they must abandon all hope in the face of Operation Sovereign Borders.

Although it's tempting to ponder whether Operation Sovereign Borders' next communication campaign will involve [a caravan driving around Ghazni province with a puppet giraffe telling young Hazara to brush their teeth, don't take drugs, and don't come to Australia](#), the comic book format for distributing messages about the importance of regular migration is not new. In West Java, for example, [a comic book, Zero Tolerance for Trafficking in Persons, is distributed as part of an information campaign to prevent and](#)

[detect people trafficking](#). Another comic, [Chimen Lakay, is distributed in Haiti to reduce irregular migration to the United States](#).

The problem with this campaign is less the format and more the message. The comic represents the asylum seeker as merely an economic migrant: sick of working as a mechanic, his parents encourage him to seek a better life in Australia. Absent from this scene is violence and persecution, or any understanding of why the family is so poor. The boy seems to be an only child and the primary breadwinner for the family. What has made these parents so desperate to send their kid overseas for a better life?

When the boy ventures out into the world at large, he is confronted with the unfamiliar. He is alone in busy cities and packed buses. Although we understand the complexity of push-pull factors that influence decision-making at each step of the journey, these are erased from the comic book narrative. The boy doesn't just want a life free of persecution; he wants the economic stability of Australia and this desire pulls him onward.

It's only when we encounter Australian authorities that this story of hope is dashed upon the rocks. The navy offers life jackets, but not a new life. Interestingly — even surprisingly — this boat appears [to have entered Australian waters](#) and, as such, isn't turned back to Indonesia. Instead, the boy and the people from his boat are frisked by officials and crammed into a bus.

The bus image appears four times in the comic. The first instance is a moment of sadness as the boy is separated from his father. The second is a moment of confusion as the boy is smuggled on a crowded bus. The third and fourth instances combine the sadness of the first bus with the confusion of the second. The vibrant colours of adventure are stripped away, leaving us with the dead grey of bureaucratic procedure. Conceptually, the official bus of the Australian government serves no real purpose, but links us uncomfortably with the activities of the smugglers earlier. Each bus has reduced the protagonist's control over his life, yet here is the final bus paid for by Australian taxpayers, moving the protagonist to crowded, unfamiliar spaces and planes.

There's very little human contact in the comic. When the boy leaves, he doesn't hug anybody goodbye. A smuggler puts a hand on the boy's back shortly before boarding a bus. The majority of human contact appears in one scene:



'The powerlessness of the boy in comparison to the powerful position of the Australian guards is emphasised'. Photograph: /customs.gov.au

From this point on, the powerlessness of the boy in comparison to the powerful position of the Australian guards is emphasised. Guards stand around with hands on hips or with folded arms while asylum seekers are herded along pathways. In one frame, asylum seekers are seated on the ground while a guard stands over them.

Having survived the entire ordeal, it's only after encountering Australians that the asylum seeker becomes miserable. Sitting in a tent on a tropical island, he buries his head in his hands. He is subsequently subjected to dental problems, mosquitoes, and dreams of Morris dancers.

There's nothing normal or acceptable about this level of sociopathy from the Government. I don't say this as a crybaby lefty, but as a conservative who is quite partial to [promoting regular migration pathways and offshore processing](#). This is disgusting. In the weeks following the government's criticism of the ABC for airing allegations of the navy abusing asylum seekers, the government releases a comic which depicts the navy as a shadowy harbinger of despair. When we're all chided for not being on Team Australia, the Abbott ministry produces this mendaciloquent garbage which portrays Australian public servants as worse human beings than "scum of the Earth" people smugglers.

For years, we heard the Coalition's rhetoric was that strong border protection policy was to prevent loss of life at sea. Hockey wept. Now the government tells potential asylum seekers that the reason not to come to Australia is that you might encounter Australian officials. This is nothing but shameful.

[This piece originally appeared on AusOpinion](#), part of the [Guardian Comment Network](#)