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'Tampa affair'

Warning: This website includes images and names of deceased people that may cause sadness or distress to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Tampa affair

2001: Australian troops take control of *Tampa* carrying rescued asylum-seekers

NMA, n.d.

DEFINING MOMENTS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY



In August 2001, Australian troops boarded the Norwegian freighter MV *Tampa* off Christmas Island. The commander of the vessel, Captain Arne Rinnan, had rescued hundreds of asylum-seekers from a stranded Indonesian fishing boat in the Indian Ocean and was attempting to bring them to Australia.

The '*Tampa* Crisis' became the catalyst for Australia's new 'border protection' policy. It also became a pivotal issue in the 2001 federal election campaign.

More on the 'Tampa' affair

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2006:

No one knows how many boat people have died, but thousands have been rescued at sea. In the reality of dangerous journeys undertaken to gain access to reluctant coastal states, the time-honoured maritime traditions of rescue at sea collide with the growing determination of states to prevent illegal entry to their territory.



The MV *Tampa*. Photo: Remi Jouan, Wikimedia Commons.

Eight days of drama

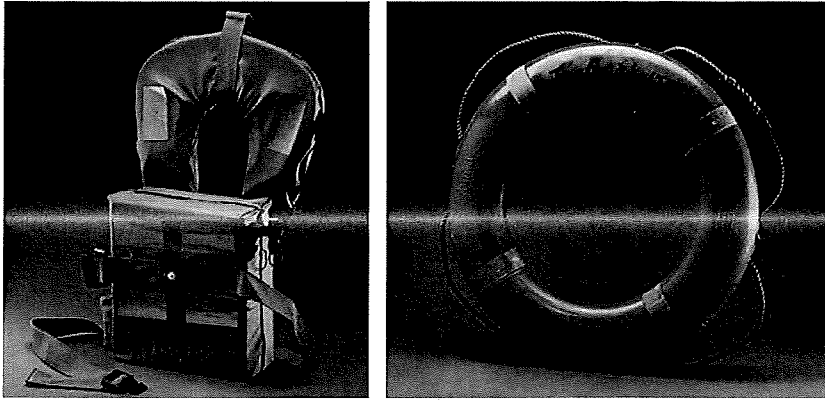
On 24 August 2001, the *Palapa*, a small Indonesian fishing boat overloaded with 433 mainly Hazara asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, became stranded in international waters about 140 kilometres north of Christmas Island. The asylum-seekers were rescued by the Norwegian container ship, the MV *Tampa*, under direction by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority.

The *Tampa*'s captain, Arne Rinnan, then set course for the Indonesian city of Merak, the closest port with facilities to dock such a large vessel. However, some of those rescued threatened to commit suicide if they were returned to Indonesia; others entered the ship's bridge, and told Rinnan to take them to Christmas Island.

However, the Australian Government refused to allow the *Tampa* to land any of the asylum-seekers. Prime Minister John Howard said, 'I believe it is in Australia's national interest that we draw a line on what is increasingly becoming an uncontrollable number of illegal arrivals in this country'.

Many of the asylum-seekers on board the ship were in poor health. Over 48 hours, Rinnan made repeated requests to Australian authorities for assistance. These requests were acknowledged but not acted on, so Rinnan decided to enter Australian waters.

The ship crossed the Australian maritime boundary on 29 August, shortly before midday. Australian authorities advised Rinnan that he was in 'flagrant breach' of the law, and the Government dispatched 45 Special Air Service (SAS) troops to board the ship and prevent it from sailing any closer to Christmas Island.



Lifejacket and lifebuoy from the MV *Tampa*. Wallenius Wilhelmsen MV *Tampa* collection, National Museum of Australia.

Government's response

On the same day, Prime Minister Howard tabled the Border Protection Bill 2001 in Parliament. If passed, the Bill would have provided the Government with the power to remove any foreign ship in Australian territorial waters. It was backdated to give retrospective authority for the boarding of the *Tampa*, and ensured that no Australian court could review the actions or directions of an Australian military officer.

The Bill was criticised for the breadth of powers it would confer and on 30 August it was voted down in the Opposition-dominated Senate.

By 2 September, the Government had hastily secured agreements with Nauru and New Zealand. The Royal Australian Navy then took the *Tampa*'s asylum-seekers to Nauru from where 131 of them were sent to New Zealand. The remaining 302 were processed on Nauru over coming months (though a handful remained there for three years).

In the aftermath of the '*Tampa* Crisis' the Government passed a series of laws that created a new legislative framework for handling asylum-seekers known as the 'Pacific Solution'. This included the excision of many of Australia's offshore islands, including Christmas Island, from Australia's migration zone. This meant that asylum-seekers had no automatic right to apply for refugee status if they arrived on these islands.

The Pacific Solution also meant that asylum-seekers could be processed offshore, in places like Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The Labor Opposition did not oppose these measures.

The Australian Government's handling of the *Tampa* affair and implementation of the Pacific Solution attracted international criticism. However, in the six years from 2002 only 23 boats arrived in Australia compared to 43 carrying more than 5000 asylum-seekers in 2001 alone. The Government stated that the implementation of its immigration policy was saving lives by discouraging people from setting sail for Australia in unseaworthy boats.

Political impact of the *Tampa* affair

Only eight days elapsed from the first sighting of the *Palapa* to finalisation of the Government's arrangement with neighbouring countries, yet the '*Tampa* Affair' had an enduring impact on Australian politics.

On 11 September 2001, terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center in New York City, killing 2996 people of whom 11 were Australian. Prime Minister Howard was in Washington DC at the time and immediately committed Australia to assisting America. This led to Australia's involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



US President George W. Bush and Prime Minister John Howard review marines at the Washington Navy Yard, 10 September 2001. Photo: Tina Hager, Wikimedia Commons.

The federal election campaign started less than a month later on 8 October and was dominated by questions of border protection and national security. It was during this campaign that Howard made the statement: '...we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'.

For most of 2001, the Howard government had lagged behind Labor in the opinion polls and few thought they could retain government in the upcoming election. However, because of his actions during and after the *Tampa* affair and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Howard came to be seen by many as a strong leader.

On 10 November, his Liberal/National coalition was returned to power with a three per cent increase in votes.

Further reading

[Interview with Arne Rinnan on the SBS website](#)

[Senate Select Committee Report](#)

[Article 'The Tampa children reflect on their rescue 12 years on' in the Herald Sun, 31 August 2013](#)

[Text of Prime Minister Howard's election speech](#)

Robert Manne, 'From *Tampa* to 9/11: Seventeen days that changed Australia', in Crotty, Martin and Roberts, David Andrew, *Turning Points in Australian History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009.

Tony Kevin, *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of SIEV X*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2004.

Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum-seekers*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001.

From our collection



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Lifejacket and lifebuoy from the MV *Tampa*. Wallenius Wilhelmsen MV *Tampa* collection.



Yvonne Kennedy collection

Personal objects belonging to an Australian woman who lost her life in the September 11 terrorist attacks.



September 11 Australian flag

An Australian flag retrieved from the ruins of the World Trade Center.

Related Defining Moments

[1951: Australia signs the ANZUS treaty with New Zealand and the United States](#)

[1991: Port Hedland immigration detention centre opens](#)

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