

Route 501 - Australia's Deportation Shame

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Australia's migration policy is abysmal on so many levels. While Green Left has focused on the abhorrent treatment of [asylum seekers and refugees](#), another element is now coming to the fore.

The Coalition government under former Prime Minister Scott Morrison tightened Section 501 of the *Migration Act* that allows the cancellation of visas on “character grounds”. The 2014 change enables the minister to revoke a person's visa if they have been sentenced to 12 months or more in prison. New Coalition leader **Peter Dutton**, not known for his compassion, famously referred to this policy as “taking the trash out” to make Australia a safer place.

The number of visa cancellations has [risen nearly tenfold](#) since then. The greatest impact has been on New Zealand nationals: about 2300 Kiwis have been deported since 2014.

In response, the advocacy group Route 501 was established in New Zealand in 2016. It seeks “to hold the Australian government accountable for human rights injustices concerning the treatment of Deportees & Detainees (and their children where applicable) who have fallen victim to Australia's hard-line approach”. Indeed, Route 501 launched a class action in April last year.

Many of those deported have spent most of their lives in Australia, arriving with family when they were children. They have made the country their home, including attending school, gaining employment and establishing relationships and families.

It is worth looking at the stories of a couple of individuals to understand just how wrong this policy is.

Larice Rainnie moved to Australia in 1964 and spent the next 55 years here. She worked as a public servant and had never considered that she wasn't a citizen. When Rainnie returned to Australia following a drug-related sentence in Finland, she was held in immigration detention for more than a year, without access to legal aid before being deported in 2019.

Rainnie was 70 at the time: she had no family in NZ and arrived with just a bag of clothes and \$200 in her bank account. She described herself as "just existing".

Tuala, 42, moved to Australia with his family as a 17-year-old. He was charged with attempted murder after he shot at a group of Hells Angels gang members. Despite being convicted of a lesser charge of excessive self-defence — his first offence — he was deported. Tuala left behind a wife and four children. The deportation meant he spent almost nine years in prison, including at Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation in Broadmeadows.

He arrived in NZ and spent the first 48 hours in custody. After that he was handed \$120 and sent to a backpackers' hostel where his first three nights in a dormitory were paid. After that, he was on his own. He had no phone, no bank account and no family in the city; he ended up sleeping in train carriages at the railway station.

Tuala's wife and children moved from Melbourne to join him some time after. "They are the ones who paid the full price," Tuala said. "I understand that I made the mistake and I went to prison, but my family went to prison and detention with me."

Rachael Ngatai of the Prisoner's Aid and Rehabilitation Society, which supports deportees arriving in NZ, said they see people who are "really anxious, really angry or really depressed". Unsurprisingly, about one third of the 1865 people deported between January 2015 and August 2019 have been convicted of at least one offence since arriving in NZ.

How is setting people up to fail to anyone's advantage?

In a majority of cases, those deported have lived in Australia for most of their lives. Surely their "character" is a product of their lives and experience here?

Why are people being punished not once but for eternity? It is not about rehabilitation. It is about continuing the punitive bipartisan migration policy. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has told the NZ government that he continues to support Section 501, but would take NZ's concerns into consideration.

The real test of character is going to be whether the Labor government will review this cruel policy that sentences people to a life of isolation, poverty and, in some cases, almost guarantees reoffending.

Route 501 poses the foundational question: *He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata* or What is the most important thing in this world? It is people, it is people, it is people.

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