

It's the tiniest start. But the first offshore refugees leaving Papua New Guinea and Nauru for the US this week represented a new life for more than 50 people and a glimmer of hope for others.

So it was a nasty, jarring note when Immigration Minister Peter Dutton marked their departure with a derogatory spray.

Dutton, appearing in his regular spot with [2GB's Ray Hadley](#) was asked about a newspaper photo of departees from PNG, which the shockjock said "looked like a fashion show" with people wearing "designer sunglasses".

"It demonstrates what you and I have been discussing for a long time," Dutton said. "There are a lot of people that haven't come out of war ravaged areas, they're economic refugees.

"They've got on a boat, paid a people smuggler a lot of money. Somebody once said to me that the world's biggest collection of Armani jeans and handbags [was] up on Nauru waiting for people to collect when they depart.

"The reality is that these people had, at the generosity of the Australian taxpayer, received an enormous amount of support for a long period of time."

Dutton said advocates, Labor and Greens wanted the public to believe that "this is a terrible existence", but "people have seen photos in recent weeks of those up on Manus out, you know, enjoying themselves outside of the centre by the beach and all the rest of it.

"There is a very different scenario up on Nauru and Manus than what people want you to believe," he said.

In their new life those bound for the US "might have to work", which "comes as a bit of a shock

to some people because they've been receiving three square meals a day, accommodation, legal services all turned on.

"And the reality is that people wanted to come to Australia, some wanted to come for work, others were happy to come for welfare," Dutton said.

A key element of the government's border security policy has been to dehumanise asylum seekers, and cast them in the most negative light. It's an old technique. Dutton continues to use it even as the first refugees leave.

Reportedly Dutton, his department, and even the Prime Minister's Office are particularly hostile to the offshore males. They draw on some instances of earlier Iranian boat people, accepted as refugees, who returned for visits to their home country, prompting "fake refugees" [headlines](#) .

Apart from being offensive, what Dutton said is obviously flawed.

To start with, all those who departed this week had been found to be refugees, before they were considered by the US and subjected to its "extreme vetting" process. To be classed as a refugee, one must be deemed to have a well-founded fear of persecution – the criterion is not a desire for a better economic life.

Dutton was snide about the people's alleged wealth. He seems to be suggesting that real refugees must be impoverished, which is nonsense.

In the days when the people-smuggling trade was running boats to Australia, asylum seekers with money were clearly in a better position to obtain a passage than the very poor.

That didn't make them any less qualified to be refugees – just as wealthy Jews who bought their way out of Germany before the second world war were not any less "refugees" than those without resources.

Even if some or most of the minority who have not met the refugee criteria – and won't be going to the US – were motivated by economic aspirations, this does not automatically make them the villains Dutton would like to have Australians believe.

They made a very bad decision, as it turned out, in getting on boats when they did. Admittedly some may have destroyed papers and told lies. Others may have done neither. They should be pressed to return home, but not demonised.

Dutton's broad-brush claim that the detainees "had, at the generosity of the Australian taxpayer, received an enormous amount of support for a long period of time" almost defies comment.

In fact, they have been held in remote and harsh conditions for years, their lives in limbo. It's true this has cost the taxpayer a heap. But it's surreal to say they've had "an enormous amount of support". Would Dutton, a former policeman, make a similar comment about jail inmates?

Some of those settling in the US will find the adjustment a challenge, after the strange and stressful time they've been through; one hopes they receive the necessary help.

Then there was Dutton's crack about the shock of work, after receiving their meals, accommodation and the like. He tried to make it sound like they've been living the life of Riley. As for the Armani jeans, could some senator please factcheck this bizarre story when Senate estimate hearings come up?

A possible risk from Dutton's outburst is if his remarks carry any impact in the US. Talk of people being "economic refugees" might lead the Americans to wonder why they should be taking more.

It has just [been reported](#) that US President Donald Trump plans to cap the refugee intake at 45,000 over the next year, after what the New York Times described as "a fierce internal debate among senior members of his administration". He had set the 2017 limit at 50,000.

Dutton is a hard liner by disposition, and is obsessed with the possibility of the slightest weakening of the deterrent to boats. His ideal solution is to get people to return to their country of origin.

When pushed last week, after reports the government was offering Rohingyas A\$25,000 to return to Myanmar, on whether he thought it was safe for people to go back there, given the refugee crisis, he dodged.

“It depends on the in-country advice at the moment. It depends on the region where that person would want to return to. It depends on their family circumstances,” he [told the ABC](#) .

There is a wider context in which Dutton’s remarks should be cast – Queensland, where Pauline Hanson is a big presence.

Speculation has been growing that the Queensland state election is about to be called. That election will be a major test of the Hanson vote and, given the difficulties of the federal Coalition, its result will inevitably have implications, positive or negative, for the Turnbull government. It will give some indications of how the Feds are travelling in that key state.

Dutton holds the Brisbane electorate of Dickson by a narrow 1.6% margin.

With an aspiration to be Liberal leader, Dutton has first to survive in his seat. He is using a high profile and his uncompromising political persona as tools of trade in that effort.

UPDATE

Proposed new Queensland federal boundaries issued by the Australian Electoral Commission on Friday slightly improve Dutton’s margin. The ABC’s electoral analyst Antony Green estimates his new margin would be 2%.

Grattan on Friday: Careful, Mr Dutton, Donald Trump might hear you

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Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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