

Morrison may reopen the Christmas Island detention centre

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison has foreshadowed the re-opening of the Christmas Island detention facility, announcing his government would be stepping up border security after the medical transfer bill passed the Senate on Wednesday.

The legislation was carried 36-34, with the support of Labor, Greens, Centre Alliance, Tim Storer, and Derryn Hinch - who delayed revealing his position until after he was briefed on security issues.

Morrison told a news conference cabinet's national security committee had met early Wednesday to discuss the contingency planning already in train in anticipation of the bill's passage.

"A range of strengthenings" had been put in place in the border operations.

He hinted at an advertising campaign in Indonesia and elsewhere.

"I'll be engaging in direct messaging as part of Operation Sovereign Borders with people smugglers and with those who might be thinking of getting on boats," he said.

"I'm going to be engaged in very clear and direct messaging to anyone who thinks they should get on a boat, I'm here. And I will stop you."

He would be sending the very clear message "that my government is in control of the borders. As long as my government is here you can expect strong border protection and resolve to be in place.

"Under a Labor government you can expect them to see fold like a pack of cards, like Bill Shorten did yesterday".

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Morrison stressed all the government's actions and decisions were implementing the recommendations of the security agencies and officials presented to the cabinet committee on Wednesday morning.

Declining to go into detail about the measures he said: "This parliament has already tipped its hand enough to the people smugglers".

He said the government had approved "putting in place the reopening of the Christmas Island detention facilities, both to deal with the prospect of arrivals as well as dealing with the prospect of transfers".

The government at the weekend released a costing of reopening Christmas Island at more than \$1 billion over several years.

People transferred from Nauru and Manus for medical care can be kept in detention or released into the community.

Labor Senate leader Penny Wong told the Senate the government was telling lies about the bill.

"They are doing it because they are desperate. They are desperate. They are led by a desperate prime minister, who is leading a bitterly divided government. He is clearly only concerned about one thing: clinging on to his job, she said.

"Rather than running these lies, why don't you just call an election?"

Hinch said he had been swayed by the amendment specifying the legislation would apply only to the present cohort on Manus and Nauru.

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“It is not an encouragement, I believe, to people smugglers who are despicable and should be despised, because it will only apply to people who are there.”

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

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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