



HUMAN RIGHTS  
in AUSTRALIA

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## AUSTRALIA'S TROPICAL DIPLOMACY

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NEW ARRIVALS - DOROTA CONNELLAN (POLAND) - OIL ON CANVAS

*The above image is taken from the Heartlands Refugee Art Prize exhibition. [Click here to see more.](#)*

*This article is part of our July focus on "Australia in the World". [Click here for more articles in this issue.](#)*

By Kate Galloway

The recent declaration of the Asian Century underplays the influence and engagement Australia has within the tropics – part of which includes Asia, but which incorporates an even more diverse array of societies. While the tropics can be defined according to climatic and isothermal demarcation, they are more generally considered to lie between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. According to this [definition](#), the tropics include Central and Southern Africa; Northern Africa and the Middle East; the Caribbean; Central and South America; Oceania; South East Asia (including China); and South Asia.

Australia is intimately engaged with its tropical neighbours, especially with Oceania. However given its relative standard of living and ascendant Western culture, the power dynamic is not necessarily an equal one. This is no less so because of the sometimes-mixed messages that emerge in Australia's "tropical diplomacy". In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that the "relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony".

To what extent might Australia be engaging in a similar dynamic with its tropical neighbours?

*Requests of Malaysia, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru have in one sense sought to situate Australia's human rights problem elsewhere.*

The diversity of socio-cultural and political environments within the tropics poses a challenge to Australia in terms of its political and human rights engagement there. What provides an additional context for Australian engagement in this region is the history of European intervention in the tropics. Since the European voyages of discovery, the tropics have been sites of colonial occupation.

### European imperialism in the tropics

European discovery, followed by imperialism, brought the West into regular contact with the tropics from the 16th century. Since this time, authors such as Mike Hulme and Richard H Grove (and others writing within the field of tropical geography) envisaged the tropics as paradise, as Eden, in the European imagination. The tropics symbolised a contrast to the order and civilisation of Europe and North America.

Imperial expansion saw the West cast a negative projection on to the tropics, which were regarded purely as a site of exploitation for European ends. European competition to control the spice trade is an example of this. Strategic settlements were established to secure trade routes. The Malaysian sultanate of Malacca, for example, was successively ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch and English while Chinese traders continued to operate from the port. The handover from the Dutch to the English was part of a strategic swap of territories during the 19th century, after which the English controlled the Straits



use of its power in the region and even perhaps the “evolutionary struggle” embedded in the earlier imperial discourses. In making its neighbours complicit in its own rejection of human rights, there is an echo of Australia’s own assumption of the “otherness” of its tropical neighbours.

### Australia as a human rights leader

While Australia represents itself on the world stage as a model international citizen in terms of human rights, it is willing to hold Malaysia, Nauru and PNG to a lower standard of human rights enforcement even in matters that directly relate to Australia’s own international obligations. The question is whether this differential standard reflects a sense of moral superiority in terms of the task of detaining asylum seekers: that such a task is of itself beneath the professed norms espoused by Australia.

In terms of the power imbalance, it is arguable that Australia retains a colonial attitude towards Nauru and PNG reflecting its role as trustee and administrator. In the same way that Europeans colonised the tropics seeking to advance their wealth and trade ties, so too is Australia re-colonising its neighbours to outsource its political problems in a re-affirmation of its sovereignty. Racial survival, itself part of the Eurocentric understanding of the tropics, is thus transformed into the discourse of border protection and the sovereign imperative of, as former Prime Minister John Howard once remarked, choosing “who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.”

While geographically within the tropics, Australia is positioned politically from a Eurocentric perspective. This is reflected in its engagement with Malaysia, Nauru and PNG in terms of asylum seekers. Its lack of insight into its adoption of well-worn narratives of the wildness of the tropics and their contrast to the “civilised” world is an indicator of its lack of genuine leadership in human rights in the region.

A Pacific Solution must be found – but it is no solution to fail to engage our neighbours as equals in the “just, accountable and transparent” adoption of human rights. An inferior or “evolutionary” standard of human rights is simply unacceptable.

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