

## Asylum seeker issue shouldn't stop frank Australia-PNG discussions

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**Date :** July 15, 2013

During a whirlwind visit to Papua New Guinea yesterday and today, Australian PM Kevin Rudd spoke with PNG PM Peter O'Neill on a range of topics. Rudd also made several announcements on the trip, including [Australian support for law and order](#), [improved travel arrangements](#) for PNG citizens and support for the Ramu-Madang highway and a courthouse building project in Port Moresby.

Asylum seekers and the conditions at the Manus Island detention centre were a [priority issue](#) in the discussions.

Development Policy Centre Director Professor Stephen Howes [told Radio National Breakfast](#) on Monday morning that the Manus Island detention centre was controversial in both Australia and PNG, but that there was a price to be paid for prioritising a single issue.

"My sense is that if you look at recent visits or statements, we have become very reluctant to say anything critical of the PNG government. Not that we should be hostile by any means, but as a long-time friend, a close neighbour and also a very important aid donor, with the half a billion dollars we give every year, there has to be some allowance for a critical, frank dialogue," Professor Howes said.

Professor Howes highlighted the sovereign wealth fund as one example where Australia could play a useful role. Australia had been advising PNG on the fund, but in recent times progress has "pretty much come to a halt".

"The fear and risk is that concerns about Manus and not wanting to offend anyone will result in this issue being downgraded," he said.

Professor Howes also spoke on the positive steps the aid program has made to improve its effectiveness in PNG, particularly in moving away from an overreliance of advisors. However, he said there was still debate between PNG politicians and AusAID around the question of impact and whether aid funds should be used for new projects or on maintaining existing infrastructure and services.

In a separate [interview with Fairfax Media](#), Professor Howes also spoke on the crisis in PNG's university sector and the need for tertiary education reform. In 2008, Rudd helped set up the Garnaut-Namaliu Commission on Tertiary Education, and "given his personal involvement" in the initiative it would be good if he refocused on this issue, Howes said.

Watch [Stephen's video interview with Fairfax Media](#) or [listen to his interview on Radio National](#).