

Shame of Woomera

THE hunger strike is over and some refugees may go home, but this must not mask the national shame of Woomera.

Before the election, Australians trusted Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock.

They were telling us something like this: "We know you are suffering, and the world is threatening. And look at these threatening people in boats. Trust us, and we will protect you."

Now, with new information coming out in spite of all their efforts, we must revise our trust.

The truth that is emerging is that yes, many of us worried about jobs, and September 11 made the world seem insecure.

But incarcerating refugees fleeing from the very terrorists we were fighting and making them feel worse than in their own countries was illogical and harsh.

It was like making women's refuges worse than the homes where they suffered violence in order to stem the multitude of women who may seek protection.

Which, as a psychiatrist and traumatologist, leads me to the next point.

Psychiatric hospitals were once called asylums and asylum seekers were the mentally troubled, who in peaceful garden sanctuaries were meant to heal their psychic wounds.

But recently we scrapped mental asylums because we learned that incarcerating peo-

**Paul
Valent**

ple, even in pleasant surrounds, and especially with unkind attendants, made people aggressive and suicidal.

Yet with our current asylum seekers, we incarcerated highly traumatised and depressed people in much worse circumstances.

The inevitable happened — violence and suicidal behaviour.

This suicidal behaviour was labelled as "morally intimidating" (whatever that means) and manipulative.

BUT it's clear the accusers didn't understand what drove the victims to such extremes.

In July last year, as president of the Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, I wrote to Mr Ruddock, and as part of a delegation we told the Immigration Detention Advisory Group of the hazards of traumatising the already traumatised further, especially children. We also warned of the negative consequences for staff who applied severe regimes on innocent people, and on the wider Australian community who would eventually know what was being done in their name.

In spite of trying to hide facts in the desert, unprecedented

censorship of the media, disinformation and the demonisation of detainees, the truth is coming out.

In particular, IDAG, the minister's own advisory group, is calling for Woomera to be scrapped.

Suddenly it seems that maybe human rights groups, past prime ministers, the churches, New Zealand, and many other countries were right in criticising Australia.

The truth seems to be that asylum seekers are mainly ordinary people like ourselves who fled to avoid being killed, as we would in their place. They have come this far with their children, to give them a life.

If they now want to die, we have done something awful to them.

THEREFORE, it is time to suspect the information given to us by politicians on which we acted in good faith.

They must let the full truth out now. They must not embroil us in a moral morass any longer.

**If they now want to die,
we have done something
awful to them**

They should give Australian generosity and compassion a fair go. They've won the election and the Taliban are defeated.

Now they must process asylum seekers outside detention, as every other civilised country is doing.

PAUL VALENT is past president, Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies