

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Talk to Tasmania Royal Society Hobart 2003

Introduction

It has been said that one can learn a lot about a people from the way they handle their prisoners. Today, I warrant, how they handle asylum seekers may be added.

In this paper, I want to say a little about the way this nation handles asylum seekers, the significance of such behaviour, and the corrosive effects the behaviour has on its citizens.

I should tell you that my first memory is being an illegal people-smuggled asylum seeker. I was sitting on my father's shoulders in the middle of the night, avoiding barking dogs, having to be totally quiet. We were crossing the border from Slovakia to Hungary in 1942 to avoid the fate of our family, who had been deported to concentration camps. I was 4 years old.

Had we tried to obtain legal passports and visas or not have a paid people smuggler, we would have been dead.

I do not want to tell my story, but start to give you faces behind euphemisms. The government has consciously prevented asylum seekers' faces to be shown. To do so, may have revealed that they were people like us.

VIDEO

In the time of the Holocaust Australia was at the vanguard of restrictive quotas on refugees. It interned German Jewish refugees in Hay.

After the war, the world enacted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Refugees, in order to stop repetition of the bottlenecks that nations imposed, leading to the slaughter of trapped citizens in despotic countries.

International Forum on the Holocaust

In the first month of this millennium, 44 heads of state attended the International Forum on the Holocaust in Stockholm. I was honoured to be there as an Australian delegate. The participants wanted to learn lessons from the worst event of the last century, in order not to repeat them in this one. The heads of perpetrator and collaborator states detailed their World War 2 histories and said sorry, because that was the first prerequisite to learning new ways.

At the conference, Dr Michael Naumann, German Minister of State for Cultural Affairs, from a study on genocides, described their shared precursors. He warned that nations should be alert to them, and reverse them while there was still time.

The precursors were :

A specific group of people is identified by the government as dangerous, and is blamed for current political and economic anxieties.

The anxieties may be fanned and the blame exaggerated by demonization, and mobilization of nationalist, racist, or religious prejudice.

The government puts itself in the forefront of defending the nation against the scapegoated group.

Members of the group are homogenized and dehumanized.

The group's culture is denigrated.

Members of the group are identified by racial features, special identity cards, and other special markings. The group is placed outside laws and rights applying to everyone else and special laws are promulgated to enforce their exclusion.

The group is undermined economically, constrained geographically. If incarcerated they are identified by numbers, not names.

If these precursors are not remedied the final solution is to be rid of them, by throwing them out of the country, or killing them.

Each step breaks a taboo on human rights. Australia has broken to variable degrees each taboo, but the last. They are still trying to preserve the physical lives of detainees, even if not their mental lives.

Detainee Stories

ASTSS participated in three ways to ease the plight of asylum seekers. It wrote letters to the editor and opinion pieces. It consulted to Phillip Ruddock's Immigration Department Advisory Group, which advised that Woomera should be closed, and we participated in the mental health part of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity submission on Children in Detention. Individuals helped in many other ways.

Here are some VIGNETTES of first hand reports of cases from detention centres that we collected for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity submission on Children in Detention.

1. A jolly 2 year old boy who loved to be touched and hugged became a **withdrawn, kicking, hitting** boy.
2. A girl of 11 was terrified that the men in blue would kill her father. She became a **nervous, bedwetting** child.
3. A boy saw his **mother knocked out by a guard**. He thought she was dead. From that moment on, he **lost faith** in a meaningful world. “What sort of world is this where adults treat each other like this?”
4. A mother could not protect her children from seeing a man drink **insecticide** in order to die. Her younger child became **mute**. The other children kept asking her **why she cried in her sleep**.
5. After an altercation, a **boy was put in solitary confinement** for a prolonged period. He felt a **broken person** since.
6. Children generally **regressed** in speech, behaviour, poor sleep, rings under their eyes, avoided eye contact. They suffered **separation anxiety, bedwetting, soiling, stereotypic behaviour, mutism, refusal to eat**.
7. A mother was **not allowed to bring food** to her room during Ramadan. She stole some milk to eat in her room after dark, to help her to breastfeed. A detention officer took the **cup of milk and spilt** it in front of her.

Other stories

You have heard of other cases. Shayan, who went mute after seeing adults make repeated suicide attempts. Mr Ruddock blamed the parents.

You saw Mr Ruddock affirm on television, that he refused to allow the mother whose three children drowned to visit her husband in Australia, or to allow the husband to return here if he went to visit her in Indonesia.

There is the story of Fatima, interned in the now excised Christmas Island. She was reassured about her severe headaches in spite of very high blood pressure. She collapsed, and died in a hospital in Western Australia. Her Australian carer was not allowed, by the order of the Department of Immigration, to see her husband who was by his wife's bed as she was dying, in spite of her being the only human contact he and his children had who might comfort them. The family was deported back to Christmas Island the day after the death. The husband still does not know what happened to the body. When he was forbidden contact with the carer in the hospital, his "heart became so swollen he felt it would burst through his mouth."

Lastly, my wife visited a young woman and her three children in Maribyrnong detention centre. After years in detention, she could not bear her claustrophobic panic attacks, and threats that if she did not return to Afghanistan, she would stay imprisoned forever. She felt that she would die in prison, and her children would stay there alone. She went back.

Steps in the Implementation of the Naumann Process

How have we arrived at compassion being equated with the caricature of bleeding heart, leftie, chardonnay swilling elite?

For further information about this process, refer to two books – Peter Mare's *Borderline*, and David Marr & Marian Wilkinson's *Dark Victory*.

ASTSS awarded Peter Mares the inauguration Media Prize.

Truth was the first casualty. Information about asylum seekers was subject to unheard of peacetime censorship. The press was excluded from detention centres, staff were subject to confidentiality clauses. Mr Ruddock threatened that leaking individual stories would prejudice the asylum seekers' cause.

Fanning of fear There was a level of anxiety in Australia, with unemployment relatively high.

John Howard readily appropriated the fears and the scapegoats offered by Pauline Hanson against aborigines and migrants, by stepping to the right of her.

He could do so with some genuine conviction. He had already maintained that Australians need not wear black armbands for their treatment of aborigines, he questioned the veracity of the Stolen Generation, and he was adamant that there was no need to say sorry.

He led a U-turn on the Mabo decision, multiculturalism, and the Republic. He offered a homogenous fortress Australia instead.

But the greatest scapegoats of fear mongering were the asylum seekers. John Howard and Phillip Ruddock painted them as invaders, fanning the old yellow horde fear. They created images of 20 million refugees streaming to invade Australia.

David Marr and Marian Wilkinson in *Dark Victory* just published, detail how within a few weeks, asylum seekers became enemies. In secret operations of Deter and Deny and Relex, asylum seekers became equated with enemies of the state. The Navy's role changed from rescuing asylum seekers from the high seas, to repelling and towing them out of Australian waters. The Tampa incident, where SAS troops boarded the rescue ship and diverted it, was the first public manifestation of this policy. SIEV X, where 322 drowned was the natural outcome. It is from this boat that the parents of three drowned children were not allowed to reunite.

The Navy was especially censored. When the prime minister intoned, “We do not want that sort of people here.” the navy was prevented from telling the true story.

Dehumanization and Demonization. “That sort of people..” the policy of not showing human faces, and calling detainees by numbers was part of a dehumanizing process.

Any attempt to restore humanity to asylum seekers was countered by upping the ante, and attacking the critics. When the child Shayan was used as an example of children’s suffering in detention camps, Mr Ruddock countered that children should be strip searched in case they were hiding weapons. A new vocabulary of attack replaced one of humanitarianism.

An unrepentant prime minister painted fearful scenarios for us, by implication equating asylum seekers with criminals and terrorists. His foil, Phillip Ruddock presented the unfeeling bureaucratic face. He seemed irritated that asylum seekers did not follow his neat plan like stamps put in the right order in his stamp album. They appeared higgledy-piggledy, on the wrong pages.

Costs to the Nation

Effects on ordinary Australians

My first experience of major effects on ordinary Australians was Jenny. She was an ordinary Aussie battler from the country who was offered a well paid job in a remote detention centre, working six week stints.

Her situation was unusual, in that she had detainees working for her, and she made personal contact with them. She brought helpful suggestions to the Australian Corrections Management management committee, of which she was a member, on how matters could be improved for detainees. She was denigrated and ostracised.

She saw her staff with sewn lips. She saw unnecessary suffering and humiliation, which she could not mitigate. She was terrified during riots, which she saw were mishandled.

After the riots, Jenny shut down, she became irritable, and callous with detainees. When a woman she knew well supplicated the staff for help, and they responded by humiliating her, Jenny found herself joining in with them. Seeing the look of betrayal in the woman's eyes frightened Jenny. She was terrified of what was happening to her. She broke down with PTSD, and a multitude of severe psychosomatic illnesses.

Since Jenny, I have become aware of other staff suffering similarly.

Jenny characterises the switch from a human, compassionate mentality to a fearful, bullying, denigrating one. She was lucky, because she realized what was happening to her and the cost involved, so she sought help.

Many others are suffering silently. Many others have become callous.

The Navy was demoralized. They had to reverse maritime principles of rescue at sea for political reasons. It seemed wrong to repel refugees of the tyrannies the Navy was supposed to fight.

Many bureaucrats were similarly turned from sympathy for refugees to treating them as criminals. They also became demoralized or callous.

The Wider Society

To recognize that the electorate was manipulated and duped, in order for the government to win an election is too hard a pill to swallow. That would shatter assumptions that our governments are ultimately fair, and protective of us and our values. Therefore, for most it is easier to accept the government's views.

But our values have been eroded, for instance, by eroding our independent legal system. The government blamed the legal system because it exposed human rights violations, and prevented smooth deportation of refugees.

The government subverted the Refugee Appeal Tribunals by appointing staff to it who were the same Immigration Department personnel who initially rejected refugees' applications. Tribunal staff were appointed for short terms, so they could be easily replaced, if they overturned too many prior negative decisions. The next level of appeal, the Federal courts, had their power curtailed by the enactment of new laws.

New laws were made on the run, such as exclusion of parts of Australia for the purposes of immigration. Neighbouring countries were bullied to take our refugees.

The costs of detention centres, naval surveillance, and foreign storage of refugees cost many hundreds of millions of dollars. To have refugees processed in the community as all other civilized countries do, would have been much cheaper.

Morality was turned on its head. It was not the asylum seekers that threw children overboard; it was the government that threw them into detention centres. They were called illegals, but it was the government that flaunted international obligations.

In the eyes of the world, we have lost standing as a moral, generous nation. For the first time many say, "I am ashamed to be an Australian."

Such measures could have only been justified if asylum seekers were a dangerous enemy, and we were on a war footing.

Whatever we may think of 9/11, Al Qaeda and the War with Iraq, it may be that Mr Howard has readily transferred his war footing on to a wider stage.

Now it may be that Mr Howard is braver than most and is prepared to not give in to the blackmail of Al Qaeda retaliations, and to get rid of a tyrant in Iraq. But it

may be more than a coincidence that we are the only country (except for a few Poles), fighting beside America and Britain in this war.

We said that we can judge a nation by the way it treats its unfortunates, asylum seekers among them. Let us look at comparable nations to ours, such as Canada and New Zealand. They have more enlightened views to Australia with respect to their indigenous people, and asylum seekers. They are not at war.

“In a democracy, the majority’s view is followed.” This appears to put a positive light on asylum seeker policy. But the truth is, that the majority can be manipulated if made afraid. The majority view did not hold with the war with Iraq, but we were led there anyway.

Changing the Australian character

One can judge a nation by the way its treats its prisoners, unfortunates, and asylum seekers, because such treatments expose the country’s values and humanitarian attitudes.

Not long ago, Australia was seen as a vanguard multicultural nation, concerned for individual liberties and international freedoms.

From having taken in tens of thousands of Vietnamese boat people, we have become the nation that has treated boat arriving asylum seekers worse than any other civilized country.

Rather than leading human rights in the United Nations, we have flouted UN Conventions, been criticised by it and other bodies, and we have retorted to them to mind their own business. We stopped being a compassionate society.

The society has become relatively more unsure, fearful, divided, suspicious, less kind and generous. All of the following have been diminished – national confidence, desire for independence, reaching out to neighbours, cherishing

multiculturalism, helping the suffering, reconciling with our indigenous people, an impeccable legal system, unrestrained media, expectation of truth from the government, and holding our heads high in the world. All of those are a loss.

With emphasis on cohesive fortress mentality, traumas that expose lack of cohesiveness in the fortress have returned underground. We do not hear lately of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and so on. That is a cost.

Instead, we have maintained the monarchy, and fought wars in far removed lands volunteering for our parent figure allies, hoping that they would reward us with protection and favours.

I do not forget 9/11 or Bali, but *The Tampa* and the whipping up of anti-refugee feeling was our own country's doing.

We cannot see asylum seekers as an encapsulated sore. The sore infects the body.

Lessons to be learnt

As a trauma society, we can be proud that we have stated that traumatised asylum seekers should not be traumatised further, and have stood up for the plight of children in detention.

But the experiences of this recent era should enable us to learn more.

To the extent that undigested trauma tends to repeat itself, I find it interesting that the current drivers of asylum seeker policy are also those driving indigenous policy, from a position of not being sorry for the past.

If we want to know something about the mindset of the past toward aborigines, perhaps we might learn it from a similar mindset about asylum seekers.

We find similar fears, dehumanization, lack of rights, persecution, including children, lack of respect for culture, being confined to desert areas, out of sight,

censored and lied about. All that is missing is alcohol introduced into detention camps, and we have the whole catastrophe repeated in cameo.

We may see in front of our eyes the answer whether the Australian population knew about the treatment of aborigines. Yes, the way we know about the treatment asylum seekers. Half knowing, half looking away, half approving, some hatefully approving.

Conclusion; Wind up the clock again

To the extent that we recognize the situation, we can rewind the clock. Like Jenny, we can feel frightened at where we have arrived, feel sorry, and retrace our empathy and humanity. We can continue the Australian narrative where it was left off, before we lost compassion for human beings.

Under the government, we have seen a rewinding of the clock. We have returned to a previous level of indigenous, migrant, and racial prejudice. We have returned refugees as in the Holocaust, and interned refugees, even more harshly than before. We have returned to a paranoid fortress Australia view of the world. Let us wind up the clock again and move on.