

NO, NOT US

(Article 645 words)

Torture and sexual sadism in Iraqi prisons. The pornographic violence of an American civilian's beheading spread on the web. Such things could not happen here. Such primitive displays are not part of our way of life.

True enough, but we can no longer self-righteously condemn human rights abuses in front of the world. This is because last week we have been told once more to look in the mirror. The report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC's) report on Children in Immigration Detention has found that we transgress human rights by detaining children in harsh circumstances. Thereby we traumatise them, steal and distort their childhoods, and jeopardize their adult lives.

As a psychiatrist and traumatologist, I was a member of two organizations that made submissions to HREOC. The many cases reported to us could only melt or harden your heart; or make you want to turn the other way. Melt, because of compassion for the wounded children; harden, because the pain is too great; turn away, because of shame of what was done in our name, and confusion that the values we were fighting for were desecrated by our leaders.

Consider for instance a ten year old boy in nappies who became incontinent after a riot. A mother knocked unconscious by a guard, and her son asking, 'If this can happen, what does anything mean?' A mother smearing the vulva of her eight year old child with faeces to deter her being sexually abused.

'Yes,' I hear many say, 'but this does not compare with Middle East atrocities.' True, but on the other hand, we cannot be proud of being lower down on the scale of abusers.

Amanda Vanstone countered the HREOC report saying that if we released the children in detention, it would be a signal for people smugglers that they would do better to bring children along with adults. But she is advocating human rights abuse in which innocent people are made to suffer and be examples of what happens if government desires are not complied with. Tyrannical regimes act this way.

'It is the parents' fault to bring children into dangerous situations.' 'They are illegal queue jumpers.' Such are phrases we hear from defenders of our government's policies toward asylum seekers. No: The great majority are found to be genuine (therefore legal) refugees from countries where there are no queues available. Refugees fled here not to endanger their children, but to save them and give them a chance in life. It is the government that is illegal, having breached the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

'They will flood us and take our jobs.' I hear. There is no flood. Those that have been released and work are valued. No, we waste \$100s of millions, incarcerating children. Spending such sums on our own needy children would be more useful.

'OK, but in this age of terrorism you cannot be too careful.' Detainees are not terrorists, but have in fact fled the terrorist regimes against which we have been fighting.

‘All is fair in war.’ As the graphic images from last week remind us, all is not fair in war. It is precisely out of war that human rights conventions arose, to limit barbarity, protect the innocent and to give refuge. Human rights were developed to guide us in times of fear, when principles are tested and challenged. The Howard government whipped up warlike fears against refugees to get elected, and then kept on abusing them on the basis of those fears.

We feared too much and relinquished too many of our values.

Unlike Islamicists, and the Abu Ghraib prison guards, we can still retrieve our moral values.

Therefore we should accept the HREOC recommendation to free all children from detention camps within a month.

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