

Submission to the: Joint Select Committee on Australian Immigration Detention Network.  
From: Bruce Haigh

Bruce Haigh was an Australian Diplomat from 1972 – 1994. From 1995 – 2000 he was a Member of the Refugee Review Tribunal. Bruce served in Pakistan in 1972/73 and 1986/88 and was accredited to Afghanistan. From 1976/79 he served in South Africa, from 1982/84 in Saudi Arabia and in 1994 in Sri Lanka. In all those posts the issue of refugees formed a substantial part of his official duties.

1972/73 – Refugees from the old East Pakistan (Bangladesh) trapped in West Pakistan.  
1976/79 – Refugees fleeing Apartheid South Africa for neighbouring states, Europe and America.  
1982/84 – Displaced persons from Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia working in Saudi Arabia.  
1986/88 - Afghan refugees living in Pakistan as a result of the Soviet occupation.  
1990/93 - Established a program to bring displaced black South Africans to Australia for training.  
1994 - Refugees from the Tamil north of Sri Lanka seeking resettlement.  
1995/2000 – Refugee Review Tribunal.  
2002/2011 – Looked after members of the Hazara community who came to Mudgee to work.  
2000/2011 – Advocated on behalf of East Timorese, Hazara and Tamil refugees.

(1)(a)

Fundamental reform is needed to the current Immigration Detention Network. The need for that reform is glaringly obvious.

The people spread amongst detention camps around the country, have arrived by boat. They represent a small proportion of people arriving in Australia who subsequently seek protection. Asylum seekers are entitled to be treated with compassion, dignity and respect, under the Convention, under Australian law and by the norms of decent behaviour which should govern all of our lives.

The treatment of so called boat people is not in accord with the above because the issue has, through fear, been politicised. The treatment of boat people by the Australian authorities and their agents is governed by a perceived need to deter further arrivals. There is an untested view that by treating boat arrivals as we ourselves would like to be treated there will be an uncontrollable influx. By that perverse logic planes arriving in Australia would be chock-a-block with asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers arriving by boat and other genuine asylum seekers are generally traumatised. They require professional care and attention, which they used to receive in Australia. Not only do they not receive professional help they are further traumatised by the terms and conditions of their incarceration in Australia, some are driven to suicide.

(b)

As a Member of the Refugee Review Tribunal, at the conclusion of a hearing I would always tell an applicant my decision in order to reduce the intolerable anxiety the genuine asylum seekers brought to a hearing. There are people in detention that have been forced to wait a year and longer before hearing what their fate might be.

The current practice of what - mandatory detention, Malaysia, Manus Island or Nauru should cease, be abolished, consigned to history, asylum seekers should be processed on shore and held no longer than 6 weeks while physical and mental health checks are carried out. The war on terror should be removed from the process of assessing boat people. Terrorists do not come by boat. Having a mission to wreck mayhem they presumably would want to arrive in one piece on Australian soil in order to do it.

(c), (d), (e)

See (b) above; no one should be in detention, least of all children.

(f)

Serco is a disgrace, however in view of (b) above their role would disappear.

(g)

Please note the number of suicides and attempted suicides. Please note the state of the mental health of long term detainees.

(h)

Riots are caused by the cruel nature of long term detention, the absence of timely advice relating to inmates claims and the fact that the review system is fundamentally flawed, by use of incorrect country and other information to meet a political imperative.

(i)

Their performance is poor; there is a complete lack of empathy with asylum seekers in Commonwealth care.

(j)

No doubt for many the brutalising nature of their work will affect them for the rest of their lives.

(k)

Poor

(l)

What values might they be?

(m)

The Commonwealth has ridden roughshod over the states in its undying panic to try and sweep asylum seekers under the carpet, by housing them in remote locations. They are not irregular maritime arrivals, they are asylum seekers.

(n)

There can be no such thing with regard to the present 'immigration detention network', or any similar scheme. Ask the descendants of the Boers locked up by the British at Irene in the Transvaal, as it was then known. The British called it a concentration camp, so are the current Immigration detention centres and they are causing equivalent misery.

(o)

Outrageous and unnecessary.

(p)

See (o)

(q)

See (o)

(r)

See (h)

(s)

There needs to be a judicial enquiry into the Department of Immigration in relation to the handling of asylum seekers. Former refugees who arrived by boat now living in Australia should be allowed to place on the record under oath their experiences.

The grievous issue of corruption, in the issue of student and business visas, and in assessing claims for migration, need thorough and intense examination.

Bruce Haigh

2.8.11

