

To the Joint Standing Committee on Migration,

I appreciate the opportunity to write to the Senate Committee.

I assume there will be many submissions and consequently will attempt to make succinct comments. However, should any areas be deemed worthy of elaboration, I would be pleased to expand on the comments made.

On my first visit to Baxter Detention Centre, after travelling all night and most of the next day by train and bus, I was shocked at what appeared to be excessive and inappropriate security for people who were fleeing for their lives.

As a visitor I was admitted through a cage in groups of three as a maximum, faced packages being scanned by systems that seemed as effective as those of the airlines, had a plastic wrist tag and hand dye stamped, and sent through detection monitors such as at the airports, before have a detection wand moved over me and still I witnessed one woman having her bra checked for metal. And all this after I had submitted details of my application and provided proof of ID with my passport and other identification.

Once inside, every detainee that I met failed to live up to the personal condemnation of the former Attorney General, Philip Ruddock. My own mother feared for my safety when I visited, but, in fact, it was the guards and the system that one should have been fearful of.

The two refugees I visited were honest and had creditable stories of the reasons for seeking asylum. One, obviously not 18 years of age, had fled because he was unwilling to join the Taliban and thus his life was in great danger.

The other had a business as a mechanic but, when his brother refused to continue putting the family business at risk by providing free-of charge service to the Taliban, he "disappeared." My friend did not choose to leave his wife and four children, nor his work and business which he ran, but had to flee for his life. Both men have since been proved to be genuine refugees.

While I visited, other detainees came up and said that my friend had saved their lives when he fixed the motor of the boat each time it failed on the hazardous trip to Australia.

It is incredible that we could keep people locked up for so long with no progress being made to evaluate whether their claims for asylum were valid nor whether they posed any threat to our society. I spoke with Fran Bailey who said Immigration was slow to process applications because they did not have enough staff.

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I said I thought it would be more economic to employ more people on staff than to keep people in detention for such an extended time.

After almost five years, the younger of my friends said he needed documentation from Afghanistan. It was going to cost a great deal of money and he needed \$1,800 Australian. I provided the money for him as a gift and eventually, the documents arrived. But, shortly after his release, my friend had earned enough to repay this money and refused to accept it as a gift to help him establish himself in Melbourne. In spite of my protests, he flatly refused to accept the money.

Australia is fortunate to have people with character traits like that. My mother, who was very sympathetic to the government line and had a very negative attitude to my concern for these people, has met them since their release and is amazed to find that they are such nice people. She cannot understand why they were locked up. She could never understand, or even believe that, as a nation, we could treat people the way we have.

This reinforces my belief that Baxter was so remote that few people could fully appreciate how we treated refugees. Those who did highlighted their treatment. I am most concerned that Christmas Island is far more remote even than Baxter and will certainly have no one to draw attention to inappropriate treatment of anyone detained on that island, for any reason. Even with the most honorable people in the world, given such a remote setting, you can end up with a Guantanamo Bay.

Yours faithfully,

Max Ripper
(Mr) Arthur Maxwell Ripper