

**Speech at the Sydney launch of the People's Inquiry into Immigration Detention  
The Chancellery, UNSW  
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Chris Rau**

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I am an immigrant. Some of my relatives were immigrants and refugees. My grandmother was an escapee from Eastern bloc Germany just after the war. With two children under five in tow, she fled across a border, under gunfire from guards who wanted to keep people in, rather than out.

I was born 18 years after the end of WWII and grew up in Australia. Still, I also felt the collective guilt of so many people of my generation, of German background.

On my occasional trips back to Germany during the seventies it was salutary to see how the debate over the Holocaust unfolded over there, and of how many young people became quite ardent human rights supporters who swore such a thing would never happen again on their turf.

While studying and working in Germany for a few years in the early 1980s, I worked with Holocaust survivors, where I heard stories of such obscene cruelty and hardship that people living here in easier times would think they were surreal.

So I was already deeply uneasy over our treatment of onshore asylum seekers and disgusted at the political manoeuvrings over Tampa years before our family got caught up in the debate.

But, like most other people, I did nothing about it. And, like most other people, I didn't have any inkling of just how unjust and damaging the system was.

Obviously we don't have death camps and (despite the feelings of some who would argue otherwise) we still have a democracy. But the fact that we have camps at all, hidden far from the public eye, which lead to irretrievable damage in some detainees, should fill us with great disquiet.

The information we found out over the past ten months horrified us, as I'm sure it would horrify most Australians, were they aware of it.

That's why this People's Inquiry is so important, as a way of bearing witness to what we all hope will become an aberration in Australia's modern history.

The inquiry has already gathered so many powerful stories in its hearings. The hard task next year will be to effectively compile all this material and to get it out there.

It's been a mixed ten months for the asylum seeker debate.

On the one hand, positive developments *have* come out of the Palmer and Comrie reports. Dozens of long term detainees were quietly released, albeit on crippling bridging and temporary visas.

The Federal Ombudsman is still ploughing through 220 other cases of wrongful detention which he will hopefully release next year.

The sketchy information released by his office last month foreshadows a litany of disaster, with one person being held for up to seven years, one for six, one for up to four years and 12 for up to three years.

That's 15 people whose stories sound a hell of a lot worse than Cornelia's, although so far Vivian Solon's ordeal seems to win the prize in the horror stakes. We should all thank Marcus Einfeld, George Newhouse and their firm for taking on her case. We can only hope that the Ombudsman, John McMillen, will be rigorous in exposing the detail of these other cases. But it's encouraging that these stories might finally come to light.

On a more gloomy note, every time this year when there seemed to be a softening of feeling towards asylum seekers, another terrorist incident occurred.

The London bombs, the second attempted London attack, the second Bali bombings and now the alleged stockpiling of chemicals by homegrown extremists - all had the effect of alienating the general population from Muslims in general, and from all people of Middle Eastern background.

This spectre of terrorism, now heightened, will be the single most corrosive force against any emerging goodwill towards asylum seekers.

When the majority of Australians seem willing to sacrifice some of their *own* human rights to combat terrorism, they are hardly going to go in to bat for the human rights of people they perceive as coming from terrorist countries.

The irony of this is that the very people who opposed extremism and/or religious intolerance in their home countries and risked considerable danger to flee from it, are once again the collateral victims of extremism here and overseas.

So they can't seem to win.

But their dire circumstances are easily lost in a growing community surge of anxiety. There won't be much support for substantive changes like reforming the visa process or overhauling the Migration Act while this climate of fear and cultural suspicion persists.

This can lead to some baffling decisions. There are hundreds if not thousands of people of Middle Eastern background who aren't allowed to work, study or claim benefits under bridging visas, who are waiting interminably for their visa status to change, partly based on so-called "character checks".

At the same time, the Government was found to have granted a study visa in August last year to an American man, despite him admitting on his visa application he was a convicted paedophile.

This was reported last week as he was deported back to the US. He had reoffended in North Queensland in March.

You can't tell me there isn't a racial double standard here.

This theme of criminals and immigration touches on another item recently in the news, where fires lit by some detainees in Baxter caused \$25,000 worth of damage and resulted in 58 men being evacuated out of the White One or single men's compound.

According to witness reports passed to the Asylum Seekers' Resources Centre, no asylum seekers were involved in lighting the fires.

On the contrary, some lost their most valuable possessions.

It was apparently three criminal deportees, who presumably had nothing to lose, who lit the fires.

The Resource Centre's Pam Curr says: "This highlights an ongoing problem at Baxter where men transferred from the prison system and awaiting deportation are placed throughout the asylum seeker compounds."

"There is no good reason to do this when there are nine compounds at Baxter, a number of which remain unoccupied.

"Asylum seekers have always expressed concern and fear that ex-prisoners were placed in their compounds, because they saw this as DIMIA attempting to confuse the Australian people by mixing asylum seekers and ex-prisoners to present asylum seekers as criminals."

Not only that, we've all heard the stories, which are ongoing, about a small number of criminals in detention centres sometimes terrorising the majority of innocent detainees.

Pam continues: "These are two very different groups with very different needs. DIMIA should immediately separate them."

Meanwhile the openness and accountability that was urged by Mick Palmer in July seems to be a long time coming. For example, seven people who arrived from Indonesia off the Kimberly coast two weeks ago are still being held incommunicado in Darwin.

The group consists of two babies, a teenager, a woman and three men.

Again, the indefatigable Pam Curr has been pursuing this case.

She writes that no one other than DIMIA and Indonesian Embassy officials have spoken to these people. It is unclear whether or for what they are seeking asylum. So far, no independent agency, individual or legal representative has had access to them.

She points out we don't even know if they are Indonesians. Could they be, for example, persecuted Christians from Ambon seeking asylum? We simply don't know. Apparently the group is in a Darwin motel under guard. Unfortunately, incommunicado detention under the Migration Act remains legal.

As Pam quite rightly asks: "Is this really our Australia?"

And just an update on another current issue, while I'm at it.

I spoke to Peter Job, a Melbourne activist, last night, who's been acting as a go-between between Chinese hunger strikers in Villawood and Global Solutions limited, the company guarding them.

The good news is that all but one hunger striker have now given up their protest, which was starting to threaten their long-term health.

Three of them fasted for more than 26 days and the remaining hunger striker hasn't eaten since October the 19<sup>th</sup> – exactly a month ago. All in all, six people started the hunger strike.

They are temporarily out of Villawood, being treated in a hotel.

The Government remains intransigent; still refusing them visas on humanitarian grounds.

Peter says they should be released into the community while their cases are processed and rejects the Minister's assertion they have no genuine fears of persecution.

Peter says he has worked on cases, and the Edmund Rice Centre has documented many more, where people denied visas on their first applications were later found to be genuine refugees, often after years in detention.

I'm afraid there will be little community interest in their plight, the plight of the people on BVEs, and the plight of the people still in detention, while people are preoccupied with the broader issue of terrorism.

But one thing I keep getting back to, and that all of us should emphasise, is the potential for a public outcry if you follow the money trail. Forget human rights, forget the abuses that are still going on...people simply don't want to know.

But they would be interested to hear, for example, that it's costing them, the taxpayers, \$2 million each year to keep Woomera in mothballs. For Port Hedland, it's \$3 million a year. Manus Island and Nauru also apparently attract ongoing costs, although I don't have the figures for those. What exactly are we paying for here?

It's still costing at least \$356 million to build yet another detention camp on Christmas Island.....also, for what, and for whom?

A DIMIA spokesman told the Sunday Telegraph in October that another \$324 million was spent on immigration 'law enforcement' last financial year. This figure is expected to rise to \$376 million this year.

Figures confirmed to Adelaide's Sunday Mail newspaper earlier this year show that the government is spending more than \$150,000 a month just to pay the wages of guards staying glued to the detainees so damaged by their ordeal that they're in Adelaide's Glenside psychiatric hospital.

Ten detainees at most are 'allowed' to be treated at Glenside at any one time, which means paying 30 GSL guards a day, as each patient has round-the-clock surveillance by two guards.

So this year you're looking at another cool million and a half for this absurdity.

After the Palmer report, a further \$230 million was targetted to clean up DIMIA, \$50 million of which is to go to a new training program for its officials. Precisely how the rest is to be parcelled out is unclear.

Add to this the scheme which existed until the 2001 election, where the Government paid incentives to the Immigration department for each detainee it deported, and a picture emerges of a Government startling in its generosity towards this arm of the bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, the poor old ABC flounders with ever more stringent budget cuts. If it had 'just' \$50 million extra, a figure puny compared with those above, maybe it would be able to resume its role as the more vibrant cultural force it once was.

My point is, that if these and other figures were set out in stark detail by someone who was, say, an excellent finance analyst or journalist, there'd suddenly be a lot more public outrage about the financial profligacies of detention policy.

When you're waiting in an overcrowded emergency department, or are tied up for the umpteenth time raising funds for basic school equipment, you'd suddenly start to question these spending priorities.

Maybe that would obviate the need for outrage about the moral and social justice travesties of the detention system.

Ends.