

The Committee Secretary  
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600

Terms of Reference: Any information relating to the processing and assessment of visa applications, migration detention and deportation of people from Australia.

23 July 2005

Dr Peter and Mrs Jan McInerney  
Rose Park, South Australia

There are many aspects which we could address in this inquiry, but we would like to focus our attention on one which we believe could well be overlooked—namely, the damage to the mental and physical health of many of those Australian citizens who care for asylum seekers, refugees, and those on temporary and bridging visas. These supporters are enduring enormous personal cost, both emotionally and financially. We have observed this occurring in the people we know who are involved in groups such as church social justice and refugee groups, Circles of Friends, Oxfam, Amnesty, Rural Australians for Refugees, Chilout, Projectsafe, A Just Australia, Justice for Refugees and the Australian Refugee Association. Over the last four years they have made friends with people from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and African countries such as Somalia. Many are retired, and in their seventies and eighties. They come from all walks of life. Many work or have worked in the caring professions and are also involved in other charity organisations which they would support more if they were not supporting those in detention. They see an overwhelming need to help those who are not being looked after by the federal and state governments and whose situation is in many cases caused by the federal government's treatment of detainees. We speak of the instances we know of in South Australia but know there are many more.

### **Those effected**

The people we know personally support and have supported asylum seekers and refugees by:

1. offering friendship to detainees by
  - visiting at Baxter each week from Pt Augusta, Pt Pirie and Whyalla and monthly from Adelaide
  - travelling from Tasmania, Canberra and Brisbane
  - providing hundreds of hours of pro bono legal aid
  - driving the bus to take the lawyers to Woomera
  - planning their weekends and holidays to visit friends in Baxter
  - writing to asylum seekers on Naura and at Baxter
  - dealing with the despair of refugees when their applications for visas have been rejected
  - phoning those in detention

- signing guardianship board forms so mentally ill detainees can be released from Glenside
- helping with their submissions and attending court with them
- listening and encouraging those who suffer sleeplessness and depression
- providing toiletries for detainees, especially woman and children
- hearing one man say: 'This is the most important day of my life'.

2. helping refugees in the community by

- sharing their homes with those recently released
- listening to stories of the circumstances of their asylum seeker friends' flight; their sense of loss at leaving family and homes; their not knowing what has happened to their children left behind; their fear of being deported and not knowing when they would be released
- coping with their psychological state
- attending immigration courts with them
- looking for houses and flats for those in the community
- giving rent and bond money; providing food, clothing, and household items
- giving financial aid and help with budgeting
- helping with filling out forms
- taking them to medical appointments
- providing education funds for forklift driving courses, taxi courses, university fees
- tutoring in English
- helping with sewing classes
- settling children into school and making sure they have school and sports uniforms
- organising computers
- transporting families to church and childcare
- teaching them to drive and purchasing cars
- knitting rugs for refugees, because many are cold
- providing immediate help. One family had no food so the helper rang the church soup kitchen and took food parcel to the family. Recently, we have found that the newly arrived Africans in Adelaide are also needing a lot of help.
- arranging for swimming classes for a family and taking the children to the pool
- taking children to and from childcare.

3. Financially supporting asylum seekers and refugees by

- making regular contributions Circles of Friends
- providing pro bono medical and dental help
- buying phone cards, stamps and bus tickets
- buying clothes for detainees and those in the community

- paying for lawyers for applications for permanent visas
- buying food to take to those in detention
- paying for their own accommodation costs when staying at Pt Augusta
- paying for petrol to drive to Pt Augusta
- organising fundraising to support those on bridging visas; these include film nights, concerts, dinners, trading tables, raffles.

#### 4. Being advocates by

- writing and editing books and papers about the issue
- speaking on the TV and radio
- writing letters to the editors of newspapers
- educating the public by giving talks to groups
- talking to politicians about individual detainees
- organising petitions and writing submissions to the minister to gain visas
- organising and attending rallies and marches
- lobbying for improved medical care and food in the detention centres.

However, we are worried at what we call 'refugee burnout' in those helpers.

### **Burnout**

We have recently heard a health administrator, university lecturer and ex-teacher all talk of their own 'refugee burnout' and have seen lawyers, church ministers, nuns, priests, school children, parents, grandparents and other community minded Australians devastated by the deportation of their friends, especially the Bakhteriyaris and some Iranians. They worry at the fate of the young children and the Christians deported to Iran. These people are well-informed and they know that their refugee friends have been deported to danger, possible torture and death. They have talked to the asylum seekers about conditions in Iran and Iraq and have read the Edmund Rice report. They listen to the ABC and watch programs on this issue.

We have also seen and heard of the sorrow felt by those who visit Baxter, hearing that those they knew have been forcibly deported to Iran, without the chance to say goodbye and knowing they will probably never see or even hear from their friends again. They worry at their fate.

We have seen those mentally and physically damaged by their detention and the effects of their protests on their own bodies.

There is an enormous sense of shame at what our country is doing and some apologise to their refugee friends. These carers feel anger and frustration at the attitude of the federal government and many Australians. A chaplain who has visited Baxter more than 100 times said:

The whole beauty of this town [Port Augusta] has been forever tarnished by this obscenity. I'm proud of the Anzac tradition. My father fought in the Middle East in World War II. But this has, for the first time, made me ashamed to be an Australian. I've never lost as much sleep over any issue as I have over the past few years over this detention issue. (SMH 24 May 2005)

Many of these supporters feel an inability to cope with new situations, such as finding food and accommodation for those in the community when things are out of their control and often beyond their means. They have been confronted by persons suffering distress about their past, memories of their escape and in some cases torture, and worrying about their future. They are rung up at all times of the day and night by their refugee friends. Sometimes feel their efforts have not been appreciated by those they are trying to help. Some are in poor financial circumstances themselves.

Many supporters are upset by arguments and breakdowns in their own families and with work colleagues. They also feel denigrated by those in power. They feel anger at the selective information which is provided by the federal government, justifying their actions towards detainees. The dismissive attitude of those who do not support asylum seekers can also cause psychological damage. For example, part of this letter from Laurie Ferguson:

No, I have not visited a detention centre as a normal visitor. Why should there not be restrictions on food going into detention centres? No, I do not write to detainees. I have not become obsessed with individual cases at the expense of the demands of international humanity and the plight of the millions of unseen claimants whose places are under threat. ... I genuinely do not comprehend what the phrase "*the humanitarian aspect of the situation*" intimates. If you are saying that people are rejected as asylum claimants and should stay anyway, then we are in total disagreement. Genuinely, stateless people do need a solution. That does not mean that we should bend over backwards to avoid return for every fraudster [sic].

Many of us who have written letters to the newspapers have received hate mail and some have been phoned at home and work by those who disagree with their stance. This can prey on one's mind and cause great anger and frustration.

The volunteers' own families are suffering from attention being spent on refugees. Some helpers have had to give up their work with refugees because they realised their families were suffering. Some spend hours on the phone encouraging other helpers who are feeling despair.

## **Symptoms**

Some of the symptoms we have observed include sleeplessness, feeling disorientated, a loss of appetite, feeling nauseous, suffering cold sores and migraines and constantly thinking of those in detention and on TPVs. Supporters feel ashamed, angry, despairing and frustrated at the injustice of the situation. This issue dominates their lives. Listening to refugees' stories of the torture they endured in their home country can cause stress. They feel exhausted and under pressure when writing submissions to gain the release of detainees and planning visits to politicians because other people's lives depend on what they are doing. All this affects the Australian helpers' health.

We have seen Australian men and women in tears when talking about the dangers to the family of their friends left overseas, and about the despair of their friends who have tried to commit suicide.

### **What needs to be done**

We believe that this is an issue that should be recognised and addressed by the inquiry because it is an untalked about looming mental and physical crisis for Australians. Many of these carers will not talk about the effect on their lives of helping asylum seekers and refugees. They want to continue to help. However, these helpers need to learn how to care for themselves first so they can care for others. We feel that there is also a need for educating the helpers as to how to acknowledge and deal with this stress. Some strategies include debriefing and talking to others who have similar ideas, giving time to oneself, having a break and working out individual distraction techniques. Bernie Goodwin at the Australian Refugee Association organised an excellent conference last year which dealt with some of this.

We have only scratched the surface in this submission and would urge that the inquiry investigates strategies to deal with the problems being experienced by individuals and groups. It is important that we support those under stress if for no other reason that the continued support of refugees and asylum seekers is highly dependent on the physical and emotional wellbeing of their supporters, carers and advocates.

To close on a lighter note, we have over the past four years met some amazing people—both refugees and Australians—who have shown their great love of others by their friendship. We have seen a woman who fled Afghanistan with her family going to university and learning to drive a car. We have been treated with courtesy and welcome by these people. Our knowledge of different cultures has been enhanced and we wish that all Australians can benefit from meeting these people who have come to live in Australia.

Yours sincerely

Peter and Jan McInerney