

It is with increasing dismay, shame and sadness that I have become more and more familiar with the Howard Government's treatment of asylum seekers.

To me, the most significant aspect of the situation is the ongoing gagging of the press at the expense of democracy. There needs to be transparency in the administration of the immigration policy with the media able to interview any and all asylum seekers without interference by the government and/or contractors operating on their behalf. How else can we as a democracy give either our approval or disapproval of our government's policies without independent reporting? It has taken so long for any stories of the asylum seekers to become public knowledge that it is only now that change is taking place due to a grassroots campaign.

I find it difficult to understand the administration of such a cruel system in a country that has such an egalitarian populace and can only attribute its continuation and acceptance (now thankfully changing to non-acceptance) with that lack of media coverage enforced by the Howard Government.

On a more practical note

As regards (a) & (c)

The department/s responsible and in particular, those who are interviewing the asylum seekers and making decisions about their futures should be vetted to ensure they are not bullies. Decisions should be decided from a point of humanitarian grounds rather than "suspicion" on the part of the interviewer. The departmental staff also need to be educated as regards the situation/s in the countries from which they are escaping. They need to have empathy with the asylum seekers, who in many cases would be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Since a vast majority of the asylum seekers are women from Muslim countries operated by fundamentalist despots, where simply being free to express yourself and show your face is enough for them to be persecuted and punished, it seems ridiculous that they were not granted permanent visas immediately.

Asylum seekers need to be treated as though they are going to be permanent residents of Australia. Upon arrival to our shores they should be advised of their rights, which must include access to legal aid, access to the media, access to medical care (including mental health) and given detail of what dates they can expect their hearings and grounds for appeal etc. Basically, to have access to services available to Australian citizens. They need to be able to plan their futures as though this is to be their new home. Strict time limits need to be placed on the department for the processing of visa applications and subsequent appeals and the temporary protection visas which are causing such terrible and unnecessary problems in these people's lives need to be stopped. If they are in need of asylum lets assume they will need it permanently and give them permanent protection.

In relation to (d) it is abhorrent to me that the detention centres are operated by ACM. To learn that guards treating people with any sort of compassion were labelled "care bears" in a scornful manner* was deeply disturbing. To learn that they burst into people's rooms in the middle of the night* like some sort of Nazi concentration camp was equally hurtful. That women had to line up *daily* to ask for nappies and sanitary napkins* is nothing short of a disgrace. The bashing, suicides, hunger strikes and mental illnesses that have come about as a direct result of the government's policies and the contractors they have used to enact their policies is anathema to a populace that lives in a democracy that professes to respect human rights.

If the government cannot administer detention centres in a humane manner and/or ensure that their contractors do so, they have no business in detaining people. They would be better allowing these people to live and work in the community whilst their applications were being processed, saving the Australian populace untold millions and abandoning altogether the embarrassing practice of demanding payment for incarceration.

It is time for the insanity to stop.

I ask that you, the Senate Committee, consider carefully how easily human rights have been subjugated under the Howard Government's immigration policy and do your utmost to prevent it happening in the future.

I thank you for your consideration.

Yours faithfully

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*From: Asylum - Voices behind the razor wire" by Heather Tyler