Submission to your inquiry
Re Terms of Reference and Inquiry
I only became aware of this inquiry today so this is a brief and hurried response to a serious policy problem that undermines Australia's reputation as a civilised nation and damages many lives. Where does one start? The question is not just the physical limits and locations of most of the centres but the serious social and psychological damage that occurs when people are locked up. They, have nothing to do, no sense of how long they will be there and have no control over almost any part of their lives from the food they eat to their daily activities and maybe the rest of their lives.

We know that a sense of agency and control is essential to well being and extended lack of all such control is likely to create long term damage. Parents can't really parent and care, and children become institutionalised! This is shown in many studies under the social determinants of health approach endorsed by WHO.

Subcontracting does not work in services that create such political and social flak because control over media stories and concern at the political aspects makes it hard to administer . Why subcontract? It makes for lower accountability and expense, Fining providers is not a guarantee of quality. Employment conditions and training are costed to make a profit, not provide quality, and are inadequate as is shown by the Comcare Report.

My responses to the bulk of the terms of reference would in detail show my and many others' concern about a program that seem similar to be concentration camps, in their original sense, where we contain people who have done nothing wrong and broken no laws but offend the politics of the state.

I was a post war Jewish refugee who was allowed to come here, despite the Gallup polls showing similar levels of antipathy and public rejections of Jewish displaced people as immigrants. The Labor government in 1948 showed courage and commitment to justice for those in need of safe places, not narrow minded political pandering to voter fears. I am appalled at what is happening. I have had some involvement with refugees who have survived the system and watched both their pain and successes. Why spend so much money for such grim results? Why not just release them into the community pending assessment?

Why put people through such pain for narrow minded political ends that may not even occur ie to get votes? The evidence from overseas is that letting people out into the community, even with minimal supervision, does not lead to disappearance. And even if it did in a few cases, there is no evidence of serious risks from those who arrive by boat.

As someone who is very aware of the political process, I am concerned that I have only found out about this Inquiry today. Why has there been so little publicity on such an important issue? Many more responses could have been assessed from people in the field.

I hope that the whole idea of mandatory detention will be rapidly reconsidered and those currently in the centres will be released. There should be a maximum of six weeks for basic health and identity checks and the recipient facilities should be in major population centres with minimal

supervision. In this way we reduce costs, remedy damage to the arrivals and still apply the law to decide who stays long term and who is not a refugee.

The use of this particular category of asylum seekers as public scapegoats and political scarecrows is pathetic. Given most asylum seekers come by plane, the justification for the savage treatment of those arriving by boat is inexplicably different. Using the people smuggler argument is not valid as we punish the arrival, not the real culprits and it does not discourage those who profit.

If we want to stop the boats, we should open up immigration queues and offices in the areas where most departures occur, and offer Qantas charter flights to those who qualify and maybe also meet other criteria such as skills. It may raise the numbers of refugees we take but they may also fill many of our vacant jobs eg in aged services.

Swapping people on a 1 to 5 ratio treats them like ciphers not human beings. If we xan take more from Malaysia we should do so on humanitarian grounds. Our immigration figures are high enough to increase the proportion without serious problems.

As a active feminist advocate, I find the situation of women and children very problematic in the process. The situation of women on their own or in a minority in very male environments is not acceptable and carries extra threats to their well being. I reported on this some years ago and am not convinced that the situation has improved for them. I would like to see a report on how their needs are being handled.

I have attached an earlier report I have done and a submission made to the previous government. I hope those issues have been addressed.

Eva Cox AO

Convenor - women's equity think tank - WETTank