

Rae Desmond Jones, Helen Hughes & Alyse Jones

25 August 2011

Re: Inquiry into Immigration detention in Australia

For some time, we have been concerned about the treatment of refugees. We felt that the policies of the previous Coalition Government on 'illegals' consistently involved political opportunism, in that it used the plight of people who were often desperate to escape persecution to demonise a group of human beings unable to defend themselves. These policies were supported by a media campaign targeting the fears of ordinary Australians.

With the change of Government in 2007, we hoped that this politicisation of human tragedy would end. Sadly, the determination of the present Government to maintain detention where it is unlikely that it will do anything but generate depression, self harm and isolation in communities which have suffered more from hatred than most Australians could conceive of. We are taking the vulnerable and using their misfortune for political purposes and effectively persecuting them.

This is not to suggest that some precautions are not necessary, however we note the recent comment by the Head of the Immigration Department, asking you to consider whether mandatory detention is a deterrent. He appears to be asking for a more thoughtful solution to the situation, without the odour of racism. Australia struggled to leave behind the White Australia Policy with an open acceptance of refugees from Vietnam in the 1970s. This policy worked, and we see no reason why a similar program should not work now. The policy of sending asylum seekers (especially but not only children) to Malaysia or Nauru or PNG remains shameful by any measure of common decency. Our desire to do this is a blot on our reputation as a humane Western Democracy.

We submit that there are reasonable ways to handle the arrival of boatpeople. We further submit that Australia has benefited from the energy unleashed by successive waves of migration, whether in the form of refugees or otherwise. All that seems to be required is to expose these groups of people with to the opportunity, and they will work extremely hard, and we benefit. What we are doing is pandering to the lowest common denominator of bigotry. This is unacceptable and un-Australian. Get rid of it please: each case should be analysed promptly on its merits, in accordance with best international practice.

Yours sincerely,

c.c. The Hon Julia Gillard, Prime Minister
The Hon. Tony Abbott, Leader of the Opposition