SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DETENTION NETWORK

I am a resident of Christmas Island, an emergency services volunteer, visitor to many young men at NWP and a teacher of students in detention.

As a resident I have seen a marked negative change in the quality on the lifestyle here on Christmas Island since 2009. The increasing pressures of a higher population level, mainly through the advent of a fly in – fly out work force; higher prices, increased pressures on a very limited transport system and local infrastructure of roads, sewerage, recreation facilities and health services, people not familiar with or supportive of the local social , cultural and physical environments have already been noted in several submissions. Along with these pressures has been a rising stress level in many residents who have felt isolated and unsafe due to their perceptions of events on the island. There is also a lack of certainty about the future of the island and its people as every week seems to bring more changes and challenges for everyone. Whether these negatives are offset by the increased number of employment opportunities, especially for the younger people of the island and higher pay levels offered by SERCO, is debatable.

I have also noted a polarization of attitudes as people become more disaffected with the situation from both sides of the immigration debate and a very vocal minority becoming the 'spokespeople' of Christmas Island, often targeting the asylum seekers as the problem and cause of their unhappiness rather than co -victims of current government policies. This situation I see as a very destabilizing factor and one that is eroding the social cohesion of Christmas Island.

I would submit that the facilities on the island in terms of the IDC at North West Point were suitable for a limited number of people, 400 with a possible extension to 800 at the maximum as first stated by the Commonwealth government of the day. This does not take into consideration the impact on the island of the numbers of service providers; SERCO, DIAC, interpreters, AFP, journalists, health and mental health professionals that also exploded onto the island, greatly increasing the demand on every service and infrastructure. It also does not take into consideration the increase of traffic on the main road out to the IDC and the porr maintenance and huge death toll of our crab population.

The IDC was also suitable for the purpose of the processing of asylum seekers within the 90 day period first set out by the Government of the day, before the brilliant decision to 'freeze' processing for Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers took place in 2010, contributing to the huge backlog of problems we face today. The center and its service providers are not suitable for the indefinite detention of people, some now having been confined for more than 18 months and with no end in sight. This has been detrimental to the mental and physical well being of not only the asylum seekers but also to the many people trying to deal with people in a just and humane manner, islanders and Mainlanders when faced with an immoral situation. The stress is added to by the knowledge of all that over 95% of those in detention are being acknowledged as refugees and eventually being processed as such.

The Alternative Places of Detention , ie Phosphate Hill also add to the farcical state of affairs on the island. Families, children and unaccompanied minors from a number of different national, cultural, religious and social groups, forced into close proximity with limited facilities and distractions, has been a low point of the system, despite the valiant efforts of many people from both SERCO, DIAC and the community. However, even the most caring of people are facing burnout of compassion and capacity and this will become an increasing problem over the next few months. Detention is not a solution, merely a compounding of the problems.

As a member of the volunteer ambulance organization I have been frustrated by the huge demand on the services provided by a fully volunteer organization, with little assistance from DIAC or SERCO. This demand has risen from 2007 with 5 community to having over 50 callouts in 2011, 95% to NWP, Phosphate Hill and transfers to the RFDS at CI Airport. The stresses of the nature of the callouts is also having a negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of some of the volunteers, especially those who have been part of both the tragedy of SIEV 221 and the riots of March 2011.

So, I would submit that I have many concerns over the continued long term detention of large numbers of people here on Christmas Island. I would be confident that short term detention for initial processing is within the capacity of the island to support and sustain ie less than 2 months which would involve the relevant authorities working far more efficiently, but that there needs to be far greater support of the local community in terms of physical , financial and social infrastructure. I would also submit that detention of people seeking asylum is not the solution to this problem and being placed within the community on the Mainland is a far better approach for the majority of people