

Australian government lashes out against refugee detention report

By Jake Skeers
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The release of a parliamentary report in late June exposed sharp tactical divisions within the Australian ruling circles over the country's mandatory detention of asylum seekers. No sooner had the report been tabled—recommending limited changes to reduce tensions in the overcrowded refugee camps—than Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and Prime Minister John Howard denounced its authors, including members of their own government, as “naïve” and “lacking in life's experience”.

The all-party *Report on Visits to Immigration Centres* by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade was completed amid a series of protests, breakouts, hunger strikes and suicide attempts by asylum seekers, which have received increasing national and international media coverage. One of the MPs' main concerns was to find ways to improve Australia's image. Labor Party committee member Richard Price argued that the situation required urgent action because “it brings no credit to Australia”.

Far from opposing mandatory detention, the report sought to strengthen it by streamlining the processing of refugee status applications, while making some reforms to the management and facilities in the detention centres. The proposals are aimed not only at improving the image of the detention centres but at slashing the number of detainees—many of whom would be rapidly deported—and thus cutting costs.

The committee proposed a 14-week time limit on detention, a measure that would allow some detainees to be released while they appealed against refusal of refugee status, yet would also shorten the time for detainees to lodge appeals with the Refugee Review Tribunal. Likewise, the MPs suggested upgrading some facilities and activity programs in the camps to alleviate the stress levels of detention, but also advocated the establishment of a high security area to imprison those accused of “instigating serious disturbances”.

These proposals, particularly the 14-week limit on detention, outraged Ruddock and Howard. Ruddock accused the MPs, including members of the ruling Liberal Party, of being “emotionally affected” by what they had seen inside the centres. “This report comes from a group of people who haven't put in the hard yards,” he declared, dismissing the report as “clearly superficial”.

Howard immediately jumped in behind Ruddock, and quickly revealed the reason for the government's hostility to the report. “The worst thing Australia can do is send a signal to

would-be-illegal immigrants... that we are an easy touch,” he stated. Howard's comment highlighted the central axis of the government's policy—to make the detention regime so harsh and inhumane that refugees fleeing oppression will be deterred from even considering applying for asylum in Australia.

Howard, who faces a federal election this year, is determined to be seen domestically as tough on asylum seekers. With the ruling Coalition's economic policies having alienated much of its traditional electoral base in small business and sections of the middle class, it is anxiously vying with the Labor Party for the support of the nearly one million voters who tried to express their disenchantment with the political establishment at the last election by voting for Pauline Hanson's extreme right-wing One Nation party.

Liberal Party committee members were somewhat taken aback by the barrage they received from Ruddock and Howard. Committee chairman Alan Ferguson commented that the report's recommendations were “not exactly radical propositions”. Ferguson later bowed to Ruddock, agreeing that it had been naïve to suggest a 14-week limit.

The row over the report shed further light on divisions that exist within the ruling elite. For months, major media outlets and prominent figures, including former Liberal Party prime minister Malcolm Fraser, have campaigned for modifications to the detention regime, along the lines advocated by the committee.

Australia is currently the only Western country that currently locks up all refugee applicants indefinitely. This policy is in direct contravention of the international Refugee Convention, which is supposed to protect the right to seek entry, with or without official permission, in order to escape persecution.

There are fears in some quarters that the harsh treatment of asylum seekers will tarnish Australia's image, particularly in Asia, hampering trade and tourism and the ability of the government to exploit the banner of “human rights” to intervene in East Timor or elsewhere. There are also concerns that the government is losing control of the detention centres, where protests have escalated despite increasingly brutal police methods, and over the rising costs of detention.

An *Australian* editorial directly accused Ruddock of trying to attract One Nation voters. “Mr Ruddock is playing into the hands of those who would turn back asylum-seekers the moment their boats entered Australian waters... Rather than embrace sensible arguments for change, Mr Ruddock is sacrificing our tradition of

tolerance and generosity by practising cheap political point-scoring.”

The Labor Party’s immigration spokesman Con Sciacca was intent on not being outdone by Ruddock in insisting on the retention of a harsh regime, which the Labor government first established in 1992. He indicated that, while a Labor government would consider some of the report’s proposals and hold an inquiry into the detention system, it would keep mandatory detention. “There is no question about that,” he told reporters.

Sciacca expressed particular support for proposals to “speed up” refugee appeals and deport all those denied refugee status “as soon as possible.” Sciacca also reiterated his call for a high-security detention centre to deal with detainees who “want to cause a problem”.

The committee’s report provides an official acknowledgement of some of the barbaric aspects of the three main detention centres, which are in remote semi-desert locations in central and northern Australia, and the smaller centres in several capital cities. Committee members toured most centres, holding 13 meetings with groups of inmates—making it the first time that MPs have ever spoken to detainees without the presence of immigration officials.

According to the report: “Some members were shocked by the harsh picture presented by the exterior of some of the centres: double gates, large spaces between high fences topped by barbed or razor wire.” Inside the centres, MPs witnessed “the despair and depression of some of the detainees, their inability to understand why they were being kept in detention in isolated places, in harsh physical conditions with nothing to do”.

The report found a pattern of complaints “that cannot be ignored”. One detainee said he was locked in an isolation cell for two weeks with his three-year-old son. The infant was finally allowed out for 45 minutes after 15 days. The father had been on a hunger strike and was handcuffed and forcibly removed to another centre. Denied food, the child “was crying and screaming”.

MPs visited the Juliet isolation cell block at Port Hedland, which held 33 detainees. They “found shower assemblies incomplete or not working, toilet seats missing and, overall, conditions were totally unacceptable.” Detainees were only allowed out of their cells for one hour in every 24.

A detainee in Woomera, a doctor, said hygiene was “in a disastrous state”. Detainees complained about the lack of cleanliness in the shower and toilet blocks. Generally, conditions were “hot and harsh” and “when fans were provided, they did not work”.

Detainees, including women, were handcuffed whenever they went outside a detention centre to a hospital, a doctor or dentist, or a tribunal or court. There were several reports of substandard education. Three older children were not able to attend school at the Maribyrnong centre. One 15-year-old said their situation was “exhausting and depressing”.

At the Curtin centre, detainees reported that “new arrivals are held in isolation ‘for several months’, with no access to phones, radio, TV, newspapers, or any other communication, ‘not even a letter’.” Some who had been in detention for a month had not been able to contact their relatives to tell them they were alive.

The committee remarked that prisons had a better range of

sporting and other facilities “to deal with the stresses of their situations”. Where such facilities existed in the detention centres, they were often poorly maintained and had limited access. The lack of activities for children was of particular concern. “Combined with uncertainties about their future, this lack of relevant activity could lead to depression and aggression.”

Detention caused what one detainee with medical qualifications called “immigration detention syndrome”. Children experienced “confusion about their surroundings ... the lack of places where they could feel free or play properly, and the general stress of their situation”.

Some long-term detainees were essentially trapped in Australia, unable to be returned to countries like Iraq, despite being denied refugee status. One inmate asked: “What am I supposed to do? My son has been here for a long time. I think he is very tired mentally, and I do not know what to do.”

A number of detainees said they would rather return to their former country even if it meant persecution. One said: “I prefer to go back and be killed... I want to die in my country with dignity. Please send me back home.”

Despite reporting these shocking conditions, the parliamentarians—Liberal, Labor, Australian Democrat and Independent alike—did not call for an end to mandatory detention. In a “qualifying comment,” two MPs—an Australian Democrat and right-wing Independent Senator Brian Harradine—suggested gradually closing the remote centres and considering the release of some family groups, but this was ruled out by the rest of the committee, let alone the government.

Regardless of the differences over certain aspects of the detention system, all of the parties and the media support the maintenance of the underlying policy, keeping Australia’s borders closed to all but a trickle of the estimated 24 million people currently seeking safe haven internationally.

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