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**SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO IMMIGRATION.**

It is heartening indeed to learn there is to be a Parliamentary Joint Committee Inquiry into Immigration.

I am grateful to have this opportunity to forward my submission to the Inquiry with the aim of placing on record my experiences and observations arising from my involvement with, and in support of, men who were detained in the South Australian Baxter Detention Centre between August 2004 and its closure earlier in 2008, some who were detained in the Port Augusta Community Housing complex, and some who were hospitalized in Adelaide's Glenside Psychiatric Centre.

Since the inception of the "Holdfast for Refugees – Circle of Friends No 38" in July 2004, I have been one of its members and its Secretary to the present day. With other members, I made regular visits from August 2004 into 2007 to men detained in Baxter. In 2006 and 2007 I visited detainees from Baxter whose mental and psychological conditions had deteriorated to a level when they were transferred to Adelaide's Glenside Mental & Psychiatric Hospital for professional assistance to address depression and allied problems.

When I met detainees in Baxter in 2004 I saw men, who despite having been exposed to torture (and even death threats), were prepared to leave their countries of origin and seek a new and better life in Australia. Almost without exception they were younger men – pleased to have reached Australia which to them was a 'land of hope and opportunity' – they were confident and hopeful of a new and purposeful life – willing and anxious to learn and study - to improve their already impressive professional or trade qualifications.

What they and others before them experienced for anything from 2 – 5 years was a life of degenerative incarceration – they found themselves victims of Mandatory Detention established by the Keating Labor Government and perpetuated by the Howard Coalition Government until the end of 2007. Those governments sought to justify and maintain this often cruel, harsh and demeaning program under the guise of 'Border Protection'. How cynical a name!!

It can be of no surprise that within the initial few months of their detention visitors to Baxter could see disturbing and worrying deteriorations in the confidence and self-esteem which was so evident only a short time before. A sense of frustration (and in some cases) despair had become 'the norm'. As their time in detention continued they were to encounter a courts and appeals system which saw months and months elapse between each 'process'.

Ironically, in excess of 90% of those who experienced Mandatory Detention have been shown to be genuine refugees – genuine asylum seekers! And yet, the measures metered out to them at times was little different from what is metered out to Australian criminals guilty of serious crimes!

Tragically, many of the detainees became mental and psychiatric cases – where they needed professional attention and special care – and found themselves transferred into Adelaide's Glenside Mental and Psychiatric Hospital. If ever one needed evidence that Mandatory Detention was a cruel and inhumane system – this would be that evidence!

I believe history will record the Mandatory Detention program in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to have been one of the most shameful chapters in Australian history since White Settlement. Accordingly, the Australian community at large should be given the opportunity to be made aware of it – for all it has been – and of the ongoing effects still being manifested to the present day in employment, social and psychological problems in the every day lives of many of its victims.

This brings me to the present day. In ongoing contacts with some of the victims of Baxter and Glenside one witnesses men who, while no longer in detention centres, continue to experience deep seated problems. Their ability to concentrate, understand and retain information when attempting to study is still alarmingly lower than the levels they had prior to detention – even though they have been in the general community for 2 or more years. This constitutes a further source of ongoing anxiety and depression.

One wonders if the Federal Government should grant them special eligibility to enter tertiary institutions or the workforce - to offset the study time lost while in Baxter and Glenside - there was no provision for ongoing study. They were given no incentive to improve their knowledge, except for the 'education sessions' to learn English.

Detention has meant they are very different men from what they were prior to being incarcerated. It may still take years for some to regain the study and comprehension levels they had prior to detention. Many of them continue to express their deep gratitude to support groups such as Circles of Friends and say that that support and interest has made a significant difference to how they have been able to cope over the years.

The attaining of Australian Citizenship is dear to their hearts – and yet it represents another source of anxiety and concern to them. Their time in detention does not count in relation to their eligibility to become Australian citizens. Further, I understand detainees granted Permanent Visa status before 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 are not eligible to apply for citizenship until the visa status has been in place for 2 years – and those granted permanent status since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 will need to wait for 4 years before being eligible to apply. (continued)

If this is the case, detainees who were detained for, say 3 or 4 years, and were only granted permanent visas since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 will have been in Australia for 7 or 8 years before they can apply to become Australian citizens!! Surely, these situations are worthy of particular review.

In conclusion, I reiterate my pleasure at knowing the Joint Committee Review is to take place. I submit the foregoing with the aim and hope that it will be of benefit and assistance to the members of the Inquiry.

We live in an imperfect world and as humans everyone of us make mistakes, some of which can have deep and lasting consequences, not only for ourselves, but unfortunately for others too. My hope is that the sad chapter of Mandatory Detention will never be repeated here.

Sincerely,

FRED JOHNSON.