

Saturday 30th September, 2017

Jane Healy

Dear Members of the Senate Committee into Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2017 [Provisions]

I feel uniquely qualified to make this submission to you as I have visited Christmas Island IDC, Yongah Hill IDC, Brisbane Immigration and Transit Centre, Perth IDC, Villawood IDC and the previous IDC at Wickham Point, Darwin.

As an appendage to this submission, I include a basic report I wrote after I visited Christmas Island. After I wrote this report, I was approached by a parliamentarian from New Zealand who requested permission to table this in New Zealand national parliament – but I refused for fear of embarrassing my country, and because I believed at that time, conditions would improve. But tragically they have worsened.

I make this submission as an Australian citizen, desperately concerned about the current approach to the rights and treatment of individuals who reside in detention centres managed by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

My concern is twofold. Firstly, it is the increasingly poor conditions these individuals are held in; and secondly the continued dismantling of our commitment to human rights as a universal principle.

For the sake of transparency, I will state I am opposed to the use of detention, for individuals engage in the immigration process in Australia – particularly for those seeking their legally entitled right to ask for Australia's protection. I have witnessed young, talented and persecuted individuals develop drug dependency, mental health diseases and accrue damage they will spend the rest of their lives living with in Australian detention centres. Also for the sake of transparency I would highlight that I am a fifty-five year old mother of one – with no history of radical politics or organised political action. I live by the ethos “their but for the grace of God” and what I have personally witnessed in immigration detention centres has radicalised me and driven me to high level involvement in my attempt to save these individuals and my country from losing its heart.

Detention centres are punitive, hostile environments managed by people with no academic or real world experience in dealing with individuals from a diverse background of cultural, political and oppressive experiences completely removed from the Australian way of life. The individuals who reside in them unanimously find it damaging and degrading terrain and their ability to “rise above it” is near to non-existent.

The one lifeline these people have is their opportunity to contact their family, their advocates and the people who make them feel alive. I have been contacted by phone on numerous occasions, by young people in detention and told “I just need to hear a friendly voice” or that

they need assistance with an increasingly difficult situation with their health, or their family or matters with immigration.

Phones are an intrinsic aspect of modern life, and not just as a form of communication. Phones represent self-determination, culture and a connection with the world outside of the vacuum that is an immigration detention centre.

Life in the centre is institutionalised, bereft of joy, humanity and self-regulation. Basic human needs – toilets, personal hygiene, food, self-determination, expressions of culture, are overridden by a routine dictated by economy, shifts of the staff and the whims of bureaucrats in Canberra who work a nine to five day and deal with the individuals in a framework that's focus is on efficiency, not humanity.

I would remind the committee of the opening paragraph of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – “The power of the Universal Declaration is the power of ideas to change the world. It inspires us to continue working to ensure that all people can gain freedom, equality and dignity. One vital aspect of this task is to empower people to demand what should be guaranteed: their human rights.”

A phone is freedom – it is equality – it is dignity.

Viable and self-regulated access to your family, your friends, your culture and the ability to seek help when needed is only possible through a phone in a detention centre – and for Mr Dutton to attempt to deny that this a human right or even that we, as a country would be prepared to rob people of this, damns us and burdens future generations with shame and bewilderment at how it was their country started to compromise its commitment to valuing the rights of other human beings.

No political agenda, no assertion of necessity, no minister led directive is worth the moral and ethical compromise of who we should be. I am secure in the knowledge that my grandchildren will know, that I stood on the right side of history- because history is about celebrating the virtuous and humane, and castigating the human rights abusers.

Human rights should be a steadfast and legally protected framework, that is above and beyond ideology and dogma and should never be rearranged by governments to suit propaganda that creates and maintains an agenda that is focused on winning elections. Human rights should be entrenched in our legal system and as such separate from party platform and nationalistic fervour.

I would implore the committee to closely examine the political and ideological motivation behind the ministers drive to reduce those in detention centres to be truly cut off from all that represents humanity and resolution to them – and to understand that many Australians want better of our government and hope that you will be the voice of the reasoned, intelligent and humane Australia.

Sincerely
Jane Healy