

## **THE CULTURE OF DETENTION**

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At the end of one his poems, the writer and asylum seeker Angel Boujbiha poses a question: "Why so many years detained?" And it is questions which come to my mind: Why are there asylum seekers in prison in Australia, in Manus and Nauru, without having committed any crime? Why do we spend hundreds of millions on naval operations to deter asylum seekers, and damage the morale of our defence forces and our relations with our neighbours? Why does a government which champions the openness of borders to capital and trade close them to people? Why does this nation ignore its obligations under international law, under treaties it has signed and ratified? Why have we made the systematic abuse of human rights central to our political culture? Why so many years detained?

I am still not sure, but I know a lot about the reasons we're given – this is to protect our borders, our sovereignty, our security, our national way of life as the 2000 defence white paper says.

Security is a simple, reassuring word, but behind its door lies a long and terrible corridor. The despair of the asylum seeker, the suicide attempts, the riots, the self-mutilation, the protest, the voicelessness, and the lack of understanding.

By what Orwellian perversion are we buying our security with another's insecurity? Refugees are the victims of our security, the same way that the people of Vietnam and East Timor were in years past. We are told in order to be free we must first be secure, but why is the asylum seeker not free?

This is to ask whether Australia is genuinely a liberal society or some kind of 19th century sham, weighed down by its fear of others and its obsession with exclusion and control. It is to ask if we are truly free, or slaves to someone else's claustrophobic idea of our freedom.

Just before the last election John Howard told Sydney radio listeners that “I don’t want to use the word invaded...but the shores of this nation [are] thick with asylum seeker boats”. When I hear our leaders talk about security now something turns in my stomach. The promise of security has ceased to be comforting: it is something that controls and cramps our lives rather than something that enables and enriches them. Security is a subtle form of social control, one that uses the entire armoury of domestic and foreign policy to control and exclude, but also reaches into our hearts with a grubby fist—making us afraid, making us compliant, dividing us and distracting us from the real sources of our pain.

Because if there is a sense of insecurity, what is its real source? Unemployment, rapid change and uncertainty. The uncertainty built into gaining access to opportunities like education and training, and services like health. Uncertainty about the way Australia is continually buffeted by an unstable world economy. And the Howard government has in fact increased this level of uncertainty by strangling funds for education and health, by taking a draconian approach to welfare, and by standing idly by as major corporations lurch and collapse, leaving workers, investors and consumers bereft. It also stood by as the irrationality that governs global currency markets helped to destroy the economies of East Asia in 1998.

The writer Zygmunt Bauman argues that this pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty has resulted in a backlash against the stranger, as people search for something visible, a face, to blame for the forces they can no longer seem to control. But it is the wrong face. Yet John Howard has repeatedly told Australians they cannot say no to economic globalisation and the change it brings, even in the smallest ways. Instead he claims to offer us what he calls a sense of ‘security’ and ‘home’ to reassure us: a home surrounded by barbed wire, armed force and the silenced cries of the homeless.

I am in awe of the many people who give so much of their time to assist asylum seekers and campaign on their behalf, but there is also a bigger cultural problems that we face as a nation. In his poems Angel Boujbiha writes of the detention centre having only one culture, the detention culture, but he could have been writing about Australia. We have replaced a culture of vision with a culture of detention. And we are all prisoners of it.

But this is no time for being defeatist. We have to take back the terms of public debate, and articulate a different and unavoidable future for this country and the global

community in which it must exist. If we do not begin to act now, we face a very troubled future. A future in which the world economy will only become more dysfunctional and inequitable if we do not change its structures, and its distribution of wealth and power. A carbon-constrained future, which we must begin preparing for now if we are not to be overwhelmed by the costs of dramatic structural change. A future in which we must, as a species, find cooperative global solutions to conflict, poverty, injustice and dislocation, or risk repeating the last century's 100 million-plus death toll in the century to come.

The demonisation and incarceration of refugees in this country is a symptom of a much larger crisis, and they must be solved together. Its time to set out a positive new direction for this country, and to ask Australians to take it—knowing that our culture has the skills and resources to do so. A direction based in a generous, outward-looking diversity, which sees this country as both vulnerable to global developments but active in trying to shape and improve them. The policy directions are clear enough. Improve international law and cooperation, not undermine it. Reform the global economy rather than be helpless before its worst features. Invigorate democracy and the free flow of information rather than shut it down. Begin the transition now to a low emissions economy, and begin developing creative economic policies that will create jobs, safety nets, training and opportunities for those who need them. And I will know we have begun to do this when we develop a humane and just policy towards asylum seekers. I will know then that we can replace our culture of detention with a culture of freedom - for all of us.

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