

CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

CLRI (NSW)

ABN 52 476 362 010
Member of Catholic Church Religious Group

The Honourable Senator Amanda Vanstone
Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra

Monday 17th May, 2004

Dear Senator Vanstone,

Re: The Minister's response to the HREOC Report

I write on behalf of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW), a body representing several thousand Catholic Religious men and women across the State.

The Minister's response in various media outlets in recent days since the release of the HREOC report into children in detention is most alarming as you are often quoted as saying that the detention centre policy is 'successful' because mandatory detention acts as a deterrent to other refugees who might want to come to Australia. Indeed in most instances this has been one of the first responses given by you in reply to questions about the Government's response to the HREOC report.

The denial of human rights to any one, particularly vulnerable children, *as means to an end* is morally unacceptable. That the Australian Government willing acknowledges that the internationally recognised and ratified human rights of children are being denied in the hope that 'people smugglers' might be deterred is unconscionable. That this can be given as a reason for continuing the practices which deny children their rights is outstanding in its audacity given that Australia is a signatory to all the relevant UN Conventions and Protocols on refugees and on children.

The detention centre at Villawood that many of our members visit on a weekly basis is a place where human rights and human dignity seem to be all too easily expendable. It appears to us, week after week, that the regime honours the 'integrity of the system' rather than honouring the integrity of the person. It is clear to us, given our first hand knowledge, that the HREOC report is based in fact and more importantly it is truthful about persons, about processes, and about principles.

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We implore the Minister to re-consider the Government's unnecessarily harsh stance towards the rights of children and their parents. Alternative policies do exist. More compassionate and more dignified ways of treating human persons do exist.

In preparation for the federal election the CLRI (NSW) will be conducting an extensive State-wide education campaign. The treatment of refugees – those who seek to come here on perilous journeys, those who are arbitrarily detained here for endless periods, and those who are treated unjustly through the provision of 'temporary protection' visas – will be one of the major focuses of our campaign. We believe that the political tide is turning as Australian people realise the extent to which the detention policies and practices carried out in their name are appallingly unjust.

The differences in the policies of the two main parties will be highlighted for our constituents. While the differences have not been substantive in the past, we are hopeful that a more compassionate approach to children in detention recently articulated by the Opposition will allow us to shed some long awaited light on the refugee 'debate'.

We will be helping our constituents to approach their local Members of Parliament with a series of questions about children in detention - believing that policies and procedures can and must uphold and protect human rights and human dignity. We are well aware too of the deep disquiet in the Coalition's backbench on this issue and we will be encouraging our members to voice their principled stand on the human rights of people – especially children - in detention.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Morgan
On behalf of the CLRI (NSW) Social Justice Committee