

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 21 June, 2004

Dear Senator Vanstone,

Re: Continuing lack of response to the HREOC Report

I write on behalf of the CLRI Justice committee, a group representing the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in NSW. CLRI represents approximately 4,000 Catholic Religious and their associates throughout the state.

The concerns expressed throughout Australia as people gathered to remember World Refugee Day were indicative of the strong disquiet within the community about the plight of refugees and the lack of response by the Government to the HREOC Report: *A last resort*.

You continue to claim that the detention centre policy is 'successful' because mandatory detention acts as a deterrent to other refugees who might want to come to Australia. We continue to argue that 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. Given that Australia is a signatory to all the relevant UN Conventions and Protocols on refugees and on children, we are shamed by current policies, which take such actions 'in our name', and undermine justice, as well as the goodness and decency of ordinary citizens of this country.

As we pointed out to you in our previous correspondence, many of our members visit the detention centre at Villawood on a weekly basis. They describe it as 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 appears clear to us, given the first hand knowledge of our members, that the HREOC report is based in fact and that, more importantly, is truthful about persons, about processes, and about principles.

Alternative policies do exist. More compassionate and more dignified ways of treating human persons can certainly be identified. It is difficult to understand how the

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goodness of the majority of politicians can be made subservient to political ends, and how the lack of leadership in this area of human decency and human rights can so easily be used to misinform and mislead the Australian public. We look forward to an increasingly emerging leadership (evident on the back benches and in the wider community), which can place the human rights of individuals and a fair deal for all, at the heart of its political agenda.

We are well aware 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,

Jan Barnett rsj

(for CLRI NSW)

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