

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 Mark Latham
Leader, Australian Labor Party
Parliament House
Canberra

Monday 21 June, 2004

Dear Mr Latham,

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*.

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. We continue to hope in a more humane response from your Party.

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 certainly can be identified. It is difficult to understand how the 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 in your Party, 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.

72 Rosebery Ave (P.O. Box 259) ROSEBERY NSW 1445

Ph: (02) 9663 2199 Fax: (02) 9663 5399 Email: clrinsw@ozemail.com.au
Website: www.clrinsw.org

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The differences in the policies of the two main parties will be highlighted for our constituents in the coming months. 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 Labor Party, will allow us to shed some long awaited light on the refugee 'debate'.

We are well aware of the deep disquiet in the backbenches 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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