

## **VICTORIAN LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK – OCTOBER 22, 2006**

### **ADDRESS BY JULIAN BURNSIDE QC**

Remember what you were doing last night at 7.00 pm? When you try to reconstruct it, it's quite a long time ago. Perhaps you had dinner with friends, a few drinks and a show, a cosy night in a warm bed; a long sleep-in and the Sunday papers, a relaxed breakfast and an easy day before battling with the traffic to get here. It's 22 hours ago.

Twenty-two hours can seem quite a long time: try standing motionless for 22 hours without food or water.

When the SIEV X sank on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2001 it took 22 hours for 353 people to drown. Most of them were women and children. There were just 45 survivors.

Twenty-two hours is a very long time floating, crying, praying ... drowning.

The Australian Government is responsible for those deaths. Of course they didn't kill the 353 refugees, but they knew that they were setting out; they knew they were boarding a dangerous, overcrowded boat; they knew which way the boat would be heading. Operation Relex had the area under surveillance but, amazingly, did not see anything: it did not see the boat as it sank, it did not see 353 drowning over the course of 22 hours.

The reason those people embarked on their dangerous voyage was to join their husbands and fathers who were already living in Australia, already recognized as refugees, already on protection visas. But the protection visas they had were only temporary protection visas, which carried the condition that they were not eligible for family reunion. Despite their claimed support for family values, the Coalition Government denied these families the opportunity to be reunited and so the families did what families do: they tried to get back together by any means available. Three hundred and fifty-three people drowned as a result.

The Government recognized the responsibility it bore, so it lied. First it lied about the place where the boat went down, and then it lied about whether it knew the boat was coming at all.

### **Remember the 353 who died that day: they are our conscience.**

Remember Shayan Badrie. Shayan Badrie was the little six year old Iranian boy who had been reduced to a state of helpless paralysis by his experiences in detention. Each time he got to the point where he could not eat or drink anymore, he would be removed from Villawood and sent to a psychiatric hospital. As soon as he was well enough, he was sent back to detention against the advice of psychiatrists. Shayan Badrie's fate was first seen on television because a brave refugee advocate smuggled out secret video footage of Shayan, lying like a limp rag-doll in his father's arms. He was a pathetic sight. Confronted with these images on public television, Mr Ruddock five times referred to Shayan as "it". He said that "it" was like this not because of detention but because "it" had a stepmother. All that from the man who still has the effrontery to wear the Amnesty International badge.

Remember the Iranian family who were moved from Woomera to Maribyrnong in early 2002. They were moved because their experiences in Woomera had reduced them all to the point of psychiatric collapse. Worst in the family was the 11 year old girl who, as the psychiatrists had said, desperately needed immediate psychiatric care. Despite the advice of the psychiatrists, the Department did nothing to help that child and on a Sunday evening in May 2002, while she was alone in her room, she took a bed-sheet and hanged herself.

Remember the report of HREOC which condemned every aspect of Australia's system of holding children in indefinite mandatory detention.

The two people who bear principal responsibility for these things are John Howard and Philip Ruddock. They personally oversaw, encouraged and took political benefit from the cruelest refugee regime this country has ever seen; a system crueler than that known in any other Western country.

Remember John Howard and Philip Ruddock. Remember their role. Remember the lies they have told and remember the truths they have concealed.

**Remember them: they are our representatives.**

Remember how hard it is to be a refugee, especially a refugee in a land which has treated you with open hostility until eventually, reluctantly it gives you temporary protection. Remember the difficulties and confusion of dealing with a petty bureaucracy.

Remember the hardship of trying to live on a bridging visa E, denied the right to work or to study or to receive Centrelink benefits; denied even the right to do voluntary work for the simple dignity that work can bring.

Remember that getting out of detention is not the end, it is the beginning.

Remember the refugees in our community and remember what we have done to them.

**Remember them: because they are our future.**

As we launch into Refugee Week 2006, remember.

Remember.