

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

INCORPORATED IN A.C.T. - ABN 87 956 673 083

37-47 ST JOHNS RD, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
PO BOX 946, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
TELEPHONE: (02) 9660 5300 • FAX: (02) 9660 5211
info@refugeecouncil.org.au • www.refugeecouncil.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

14th February 2002

REPRESENTING ASYLUM SEEKERS HONESTLY

The Refugee Council is profoundly disturbed that a report presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister reveals that the claims made by ministers before the recent federal election that children had been thrown from a boat containing potential asylum seekers were in fact false.

The Council notes that within four hours of the story first surfacing, the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs chose to air it at a press conference. Manifestly, the speed with which the claim was thrust into the public arena came at the expense of a careful exploration of the veracity of the claim.

The Council notes that the Minister asserted that children had been thrown overboard 'with the intention of putting us under duress'. The Council is appalled that a minister would not only circulate untrue claims, but add derogatory insinuations as to the motives of the alleged perpetrators of the actions which it was falsely alleged had taken place.

The Council is also concerned that similar unsubstantiated claims, derogatory to asylum seekers, have been made to the effect that adults in Woomera somehow induced children to sew their lips together. Subsequent inquiries by both HREOC and the South Australian Government found that these claims have not been supported by evidence.

It is less than a month since Neville Roach, AO, resigned as Chairman of the Government-appointed Council for a Multicultural Australia, in part in protest at the demonisation of asylum seekers. His resignation should have come as a 'wake-up' call to Mr Ruddock. A minister whose portfolio is concerned with protecting Australia's social fabric bears a special responsibility to be careful about any statements he makes that might inflame opinion against vulnerable people such as likely refugees. The Council calls on Mr Ruddock to ensure that future statements on asylum seekers and refugees are made on the basis of concrete evidence."