

## A Small World

To me, human rights are the vital privileges that all people from all walks of life should enjoy. What I most associate with “human rights” in Australia, is the proclaimed “better ideology” that Australia and the United States strive to set for the world, one “based upon human rights and dignity” as according to Bush on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2005. In moral contradiction, what also springs to mind are the drawings of a six-year old Iranian boy named Shayan Badraie. Shayan was incarcerated in the Woomera detention centre in 2001, and as a result of his traumatic experiences, he turned mute and depicted his life in Woomera in drawings that would leave any psychiatrist seriously worried. Somehow, our role as the arbiter of human rights and dignity in the world is detached from our actions, and we need to ensure we set the right example and “ideology” for the rest of the world.

I am proud to live in the “land of a fair go”, where miners in Broken Hill won their first 35 hour week 50 years ahead of Europe and America. Yet regardless of all the civil rights advancements that have occurred in this great country, for some these are completely irrelevant. That is those who we shun and deny access to this great land, when part of the UN Declaration of Human Rights that we pledged to uphold includes the statement that: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”

Yet, our country is parochially cut off from the rest of the world by razor wire.

Admittedly, I have not had overly much experience with refugees. I have seen Sudanese around Collingwood, but have no exceptional interaction with these people, and no knowledge of their stories that cause them to flee their home, family and friends. What I do know, is that Australia has one of the smallest number of “illegal” asylum seekers that come into our land every year, around 4,000. Three-quarters of these asylum seekers are eventually accepted, but not before they have needlessly endured years of traumatic conditions in our draconian detention system, that earns the American business that runs them a profit of \$387 million a year.

A study was conducted on 33 inmates in our detention centres, which found that 19 had been tortured and nine had lost at least one immediate member of their family. On migration they find themselves helpless again, surrounded by razor wire, and conditions that are so macabre that they resort to suicide, hunger strikes, arson and mass escapes.

I was introduced to Shayan Badraie, who arrived in Australia in March 2000 by the ABC program Four Corners. In Woomera, Shayan spent a quarter of his young development behind bars, witnessing hunger strikes, fires and riots where tear gas and water cannons were used, and a desperate detainee who slit his wrist. Shayan became silent and depressed, refusing food and drink and drawing many pictures where his family was trapped and crying behind razor wire. Shayan was eventually released, and was awarded an out of court settlement of \$400,000 earlier this year, but this will never make up for the memories and social isolation that will haunt him for the rest of his life. Still, after the payout no steps have been made to mitigate our immigration policy; rather steps have been taken to make it more extreme, by moving the processing of refugees offshore and asylum seekers even more out of our conscience.

This approach to violating human rights is not a “better ideology”, and not one we should be broadcasting to the world encouraging them to adopt.

As the case with my interaction with refugees, I have no contact with Aborigines. I go to a predominantly white and exclusively rich and upper class private school. The only Aborigines I have seen have been those that were a little crazed and babbling at Flinders Street Station, where embarrassingly, I felt a little anxious and hurried past.

The Aborigines I read about have serious welfare problems and ridiculously low literacy rates. No steps have been made to correct this, with the first action Howard took when he achieved office was to remove \$400 million from the Aboriginal welfare budget. Consequently the welfare of Aborigines is on the decline, with a parochial education system where only 20% of Aboriginal children meeting the benchmark literacy rates. This negligence and removal of funding results in backward communities imbued with youth disillusionment, where youths have resorted to petrol sniffing, alcohol and crime.

Yet no substantial commitment is made to these issues. In fact we are so ashamed of the condition of Aborigines in this country, we refuse UN human rights inspectors access to our country and censor their displays of Aborigines, such was the case in the lead up to the 2000 Olympics. This approach is just the same as that taken with the Homeless during the Commonwealth Games, where they were swept off the street and into short term housing to preserve our “image” with no steps made towards a long term solution. This negligence of our responsibilities, and happiness with short-term measures that solve nothing, is against the very principles of human rights.

I have come to realise that I do not “live in a small world”, no matter how many old friends I coincidentally bump into that are friends with my new friends. The world I live in is a very isolated world, surrounded by people from privileged backgrounds like me, with those that do not conform kept out of sight and out of mind. This has been the case with the trophy we have of being the worst in the world at addressing indigenous issues, and how we treat the asylum seekers that we seek to exclude by razor wire. Actions speak louder than words, and Australia needs to reevaluate our concept of human rights and reassess the “better ideology” we set for the world.