

MANDATORY DETENTION

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No Hard Feelings?

By Ezequiel Trumper

We locked up and brutalised innocent people for years - then we stopped. That's not really good enough, writes Ezequiel Trumper

In the wake of the recent changes to our policy on refugee detention, I find myself embarrassed and ashamed. What has happened to this great and decent country? Am I the only one who thinks this way? I am not talking about what happened then but about what is happening now.

I have felt like this since the day on which the Rudd Government announced the abolition of the mandatory detention regime for asylum-seekers two weeks ago. It was obviously not the decision but the reaction, or to put it plainly: the lack of any reaction. No reaction by the public or the mainstream media, little or muted reaction by opinion makers and commentators.

Their silence was deafening. On the day after the dramatic announcement, *The Daily Telegraph* chose to run a rugby league story. *The Sydney Morning Herald* relegated it to page 4. The media coverage was limited to the ABC, SBS, and other relatively low-rating outlets. The public at large could not have appeared to care less. There were no calls for any inquiries into the damage suffered by those affected, no moral censure of the perpetrators of these horrendous human rights violations. Yet this is exactly what we were abolishing - or shall we call the incarceration of children just a "bad policy"?

The Rudd Government decision was not the abolition of a levy, or of some obscure road tax. What Chris Evans did on the day was a public acknowledgement that the previous Australian government had committed serious human rights violations which, in most countries, would have warranted, as a minimum, a major inquiry, with serious consequences for the perpetrators. After all, is there any other developed country in the 21st Century which institutionalised and enshrined in black-letter law the incarceration of children? Isn't this what Howard and their ilk - the infamous Ruddock, Vanstone, and Andrews - have actually done?

Unquestionably yes.

So what happened on the day this shameful chapter in our nation's history was closed by the new Federal Government? Well, very little.

The public cared little. Mainstream media looked the other way. The Opposition made no comment on the demise of their unspeakable policy and its mandatory incarceration of innocent human beings indefinitely, including - I repeat - children.

So there I was on that day, monitoring every mainstream news report on radio and TV - and for the two days following. I found a bit on the ABC and SBS, and very little else. I am not a conspiracy theorist, or a member of any fringe organisation. I am a centrist, free market supporter, conservative lawyer, climate change sceptic. I am as normal and decent as the next bloke. I like my football, and a good yarn. How could I then feel what I was feeling while so many of my compatriots could do and say absolutely nothing? This was a major moment in Australian history after all. So what was the reason?

Are people ashamed that all this happened on their watch? Is the mainstream media embarrassed because in virtual complicity with the perpetrators they said and published so little about one of Australia's most serious errors? Or is it that we as a society just don't care about what we did. Because history will look at the facts and will attest to one thing: in an era of unprecedented economic prosperity the vast majority of Australians solemnly nodded or just tuned out as our very popular prime minister persuaded us that incarcerating children was just, and necessary for the sake of national security. This same majority treated the tiny minority who cared about the horrors taking place with derision, dismissing the plight of refugees as just "a Doctor's wife issue".

I don't buy the argument that the Keating government started off with this policy and for that reason both political parties are equally responsible. That falsification of history ignores the extent to which the Howard administration exploited the race issue and perfected the cruelty of their inhumane detention policy, both within our borders and beyond, through the calculated perversity of the so-called Pacific Solution.

The Rudd Government does not have a clear economic agenda, struggles on bread and butter issues, has dangerously placed too much political capital on climate change in times of economic uncertainty, does not have a strong cabinet line-up in key positions, and now it even appears it will have to fight much harder than most predicted to secure a second term. However, even if everything else turns to custard, it will already go down in history as the government that rectified one of the most horrific institutionalised human rights violations that has occurred in our short history.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Immigration Minister Chris Evans, and Attorney General Robert McClelland have guaranteed their entries in the history books for the best of reasons.

For the victims, now growing up in our wonderfully prosperous country, the battle for justice has not even begun. For Australian society as a whole, however, the shame and the profound introspection that should go with it remain to be dealt with.