



Lessons of detention and resistance

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The UN Human Rights Commission estimates that there are more than 27 million refugees worldwide - more than the population of Australia. The invasion in the early 1990s of boat people, queue jumpers, illegals, economic refugees, posed a threat.

The response of the Government is to protect Australia from the invasion - deter, detain and deport.

Taking a Freirean look at the words and their meanings, we can name and rename the realities of Australian immigration policy, and question it. We can shift from words such as illegal immigrants, queue jumpers, detention to be available for processing, floodgates, invasion etc to refugees, asylum seekers, concentration camps, human rights, solidarity.

The image that forced me to respond and passionately rename Australia's treatment of refugees was a visit to Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. I did already know that the human rights of refugees were not being respected - but the intensity with which I now see the injustice is for me an irrepressible response to what I saw at Villawood.

The purpose of the Immigration Detention Centres became more apparent when I heard Maxine McHugh on the ABC 7.30 Report ask Philip Ruddock why English speaking overstayers and visa violators were not to be found in the Detention Centres. There is no threat of a flood of refugees from their homelands, I realised, though the Minister did not say so.

Australia's immigration policy is educational! It is designed to do the extraordinarily difficult job of teaching a lesson to 27 million people scattered around the world, in life-threatening circumstances, with little if any access to the mass media or basic services, and desperate to secure some sort of future for themselves and their children. The lesson is don't even think about coming to Australia if you have not first been granted one of 12,000 refugee/humanitarian visas being issued this year.

How is the lesson being taught?

Boat people and others arriving without a visa are placed in Immigration Detention Centres, the largest and most recently established in isolated settings, far from Australian communities which might help or sympathise with their plight, where temperatures are extreme and the landscape is harsh. IDCs are at Villawood, Sydney (1976) Maribyrnong, Melbourne (1966), Perth (1981), Port Hedland, WA (1991), Curtin, Derby, WA (1999) and Woomera, SA (1999).

In detention the lesson is reinforced. The daily routine is boredom, depression and disrespectful treatment. There is no limit on the time people can be detained.

Dr Aamer Sultan fled Saddam Hussain's regime in May, 1999 and is still detained in Villawood as you read. His testimony is supported by Professor Derek Silove of UNSW writing in *The Lancet*: "Detention leads to a day-by-day mounting of stress and tension caused by the environment of the facility, where several factors...converge to undermine an individual's mental state. ... [There is] involvement in a time consuming, legalistic, and confusing refugee determination process that is adversarial and confrontational. The handling and treatment of detainees is done in a manner which appears arbitrary, deliberately harsh, culturally insensitive, and highly disrespectful ... there is a significant lack of emotional and psychological support or care."

For the detainees there is no knowing when, where or if a normal life can be resumed as they wait behind razor wire, with numbers for ID, and musters several times a day, interrupting sleep at night.

This education campaign uses shock tactics. The refugees are to spread the word back home - don't even think about coming to Australia, you will suffer in hell.

The refugees are increasingly resisting the conditions in detention. There have been hunger strikes, escapes, physical clashes with guards (and tragically suicides) in the last couple of years.

By their own actions, the refugees and their supporters seem to be slowly re-educating the Australian public. Two years ago less than 5% of people responding to a poll supported extending refugee rights. A recent Channel 9 poll found the more significant minority of 25% support for refugees.

To conclude with the words of Aamer Sultan: "I and my fellow detainees came in search of freedom after suffering extreme persecution in our home countries. What has shocked us most is that our human rights have been profoundly violated again, this time by a country that is supposed to respect the principles of human rights. If a western country can do this and get away with it, what hope do we have?"