

American abortion doctor detained by Australian immigration

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18 November 1999

In a serious attack on democratic rights, Australian immigration officials detained Dr Warren Hern, a leading US abortion doctor, for two and half hours at Sydney airport last week. Immigration officials demanded the doctor sign a letter agreeing to accept the cancellation of his visa if the government considered any speeches or statements he made whilst in the country had incited "discord in the Australian community".

The Colorado-based doctor, who is a former president of the International Society of Abortion Doctors (ISAD), was visiting Australia to attend a four-day "Abortion in Focus" conference in the state of Queensland.

Upon arrival in the country, Hern was escorted to a room by immigration officials, presented with a letter and told that he had to sign it or Philip Ruddock, the Immigration Minister, would cancel his visa. The letter acknowledged that the signatory had been "counselled" about behaviour in Australia "inconsistent with any visa granted".

"Australia supports freedom of speech and the freedom of individuals and collective religious and political beliefs," the letter said, but warned that the "exercise of these freedoms involves responsibilities to avoid inciting discord in the Australian community or segment of it. It also requires that you do nothing which could breach Australian law. Robust, public and private discussion of issues relating to social and political matters is a feature of the Australian way of life but this is tempered to avoid incitement of discord and possible criminal conduct."

Hern, who strenuously protested the action, and later told the media that the government actions were "Orwellian" and "police state tactics", refused to sign. After being held for two and a half hours and missing

his connecting flight to Queensland, he was eventually released and allowed to enter the country.

Two other US doctors attending the conference—Dr George Tiller and Suzanna Poppema—had received letters in the US warning that their visas could be cancelled if the Immigration Minister had "reasonable suspicion" that they were the source of community discord. The Immigration Department letters informed the doctors that their behaviour in Australia would influence future visa applications.

Suzanna Poppema is a former president of the US National Abortion Federation and a clinical associate professor of family medicine at the University of Washington, Seattle. Dr George Tiller, medical director of Women's Health Care Services, Kansas was once shot and wounded by people suspected to be members of the anti-abortion "American Coalition of Life".

Dr Hern has been the victim of violent attacks by anti-abortionists. In 1995 a group known as the "American Coalition of Life Activists" held a press conference and issued a hit list of 13 doctors they wanted eliminated, including Dr Hern. In 1998 five shots were fired into Hern's office and he has received numerous death threats.

Last year, anti-abortionists in the US assassinated Dr Bernard Slepian. A high profile target of the anti-abortionists, Slepian was shot through the back with a military weapon in his Buffalo home. He was the seventh doctor to be shot in the US during the past five years.

Immigration officials told Hern that a "number of people" believed he may "cause discord". When Hern asked who they were, the officials refused to answer.

Hern believes that anti-abortion campaigners played a role in the incident and told ABC radio's *PM* program: "I have no question that the anti-abortion people—or

what some people would call 'the right to run everybody else's life committee'—orchestrated this and found sympathetic people at the highest levels of the government."

In fact, information has now come to light that Dr Van Gend, an anti-abortion campaigner and secretary of the Queensland branch of the World Federation of Doctors Who Respect Human Life, wrote to Immigration Minister Ruddock in October asking him to refuse Dr Tiller entry to Australia. Gend told the media that his group had appealed to Ruddock to disallow visas for Dr Hern and Dr Tiller. Ruddock has so far made no comment over the incident.

The Queensland Right to Life movement protested outside the hotel during the Abortion in Focus conference and two protesters were ejected from the conference on Saturday for attempting to disrupt the proceedings.

Australia's anti-abortion movement has the support of a wide range of state and federal politicians. This includes federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Heron, who is patron of the World Federation of Doctors Who Respect Human Life.

Con Sciacca, Labor's federal immigration spokesman told ABC radio last week that he was "appalled" over the Immigration Department's actions but then qualified this by declaring that he was "on the side of the anti-abortionists".

Fiona Simpson, state Liberal opposition health and women's policy spokesperson, attended the anti-abortion rally outside the conference and said she planned to introduce a private Member's Bill outlawing "late-term" elective abortions in the state.

The assault on civil liberties represents the latest incident in a series of attacks on the democratic rights of visitors, immigrants and refugees by Immigration Minister Ruddock.

Late last year the Howard government refused a visitor's visa to Rajendiram Sutharsan, a Tamil member of the Socialist Equality party of Sri Lanka. Sutharsan, who had been detained in Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, had been invited to attend an education conference and address public meetings over the successful international campaign to secure his release from a Tamil prison.

In January 1999 the Immigration Department attempted to bar entry, unsuccessfully, to members of

the Vietnamese Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe who were scheduled to perform at the Sydney Festival. A few months later it came to light that Ruddock had instructed his department to expel a pregnant Chinese woman seeking refuge in Australia. The woman, who was nearly full term, was forced to abort her child on arrival in China.

In July, 51 delegates to the World Federation of the Deaf Congress being held in Australia were barred. Almost all the delegates were from Africa and the Indian sub-continent. Weeks later in August, 12 members of a Liberian youth soccer team were also denied entry. The boys aged between 13 and 17, many of them orphans, were due to participate in a human rights and sports conference.

Last week's detainment of Dr Hern sets another dangerous precedent. It creates the conditions where any critic or opponent of the government can be denied entry.



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