

A sincere and evocative protest

Letters to Ali, directed by Clara Law

Richard Phillips
11 October 2004

Clara Law's latest film *Letters to Ali* is a deeply personal and at times powerful protest against Australia's reactionary and inhumane immigration policies. The feature-length documentary, which was released last month in local cinemas, examines the situation facing Ali (not his real name), a 15-year-old Afghan boy held for over two and a half years in an Australian immigration detention centre, and the protracted struggle by an Australian family to secure his release.

Law, who was born in Macau in 1957 and studied filmmaking at Britain's National Film and Television school during the early 1980s, has been directing feature films since 1988. She prefaces *Letters to Ali* with her impressions of Australia when she and her partner Eddie L.C. Fong immigrated to the country in 1995. Initially believing that freedom and democracy existed in Australia, their naïveté was soon shattered by the government assault on the democratic rights of asylum seekers.

Australia is the only Western country that applies a mandatory detention policy to all asylum seekers. In 2001 over 7,000 refugees—a quarter of them children—had been imprisoned in Australian detention centres. Currently hundreds of refugees, including, as of this February, over 170 children, some of them born in custody, are incarcerated in prisons in outback Australia or on Manas Island and Nauru in the South Pacific. The average time children spend in these facilities is over 12 months.

Australia's High Court recently ruled that stateless immigrants denied refugee status in Australia could be held indefinitely. Early this month, one refugee, Kashmiri-born Peter Qasim, began his seventh year in detention. More than 75 percent of those detained in these hellholes are denied refugee status and forced to leave the country.

The detention centres, most of them run by Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), which is part of a multi-billion dollar US corporation, are surrounded by razor wire and electric fences and fitted with surveillance cameras. All ACM staff, including health professionals, are compelled to sign a secrecy clause preventing them from publicly

commenting on conditions inside the prisons.

Journalists are barred from the facilities, as is Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and various local child protection agencies. The Howard government has also refused to endorse the "Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture" and other human rights conventions because it would allow international agencies the right to access and report on the detention centres.

Conditions in the camps are so oppressive that there have been suicides, hunger strikes and riots. Protesting detainees have been sprayed with mace gas, beaten and thrown into solitary confinement. A number of asylum seekers, including children, have sewn up their lips during hunger strike protests or have slashed themselves. Many children suffer depression, bedwetting, nightmares and other psychological problems caused by their detention.

Increasingly alarmed by these measures, Clara Law decided to contact Dr Trish Kerbi, a general practitioner, who wrote a letter to a Melbourne newspaper in 2002 protesting the detention policy. Kerbi's letter explained her close relationship with the Afghan boy in Baxter Detention Centre, Port Hedland in northwest Australia, and the efforts of her husband Rob and their four children, to secure a bridging visa for Ali so that he could live at their home in regional Victoria.

As Kerbi explains in the film, she did not know the boy's name or background but began writing to him in 2001 after finding the identification number assigned to him by the Department of Immigration on the Internet. Two weeks after her first letter Ali replied, explaining that he was originally from a small Afghan village that had been attacked by the Taliban. Encouraged by his parents he fled the village and travelled to Australia seeking asylum. He had been in detention for the past seven months and lost all contact with his family.

Kerbi and her family soon developed a close relationship with the boy. Letters, regular phone calls and gifts followed and after 12 months the family decided to make the

6,000-kilometre journey from Melbourne, across Central Australia's harsh deserts, to visit Ali.

Inspired by Ali's plight and Trish Kerbi's determination, Law and Fong decided to accompany the family on the second of these long and difficult journeys to Baxter detention facility in 2003 and to document their struggle. Much of the film is taken up with this trip.

Law brings her skills as an artistic innovator to the project—there are some striking visual sequences of outback Australia; the use of animated text, rather than voiceovers, is interesting; and Paul Grabowsky's musical score is haunting and effective.

Ali is never seen in the film. Cameras or any other recording devices are not allowed in any of the detention centres, and when he is temporarily released to the care of an Adelaide family and visited by Kerbi and her family, his face is digitally smudged to protect his identity. This measure was adopted on the advice of lawyers because of ongoing legal action over his detention.

But this "absence" and Ali's letters—the accounts of his cruel treatment and the bureaucratic stonewalling of his applications for refugee status—further highlight the dehumanising character of Australia's immigration laws. In an attempt to deny Ali's appeal for a bridging visa, the government claimed that bone testing proves that he is over 18 years and therefore not eligible. Kerbi, however, was eventually able to demonstrate that these tests are scientifically unreliable.

Some of the film's simplest presentations are probably the most powerful. These include several interviews with Kerbi and her husband Rob Silberstein, and the comments of their children about the Baxter prison. ACM management rejected the family's application to take Ali on a day trip and even barred the children from taking pizza into the facility for the Afghan boy. The contrast between the innocence of Kerbi's children and the hellhole conditions at Baxter is obvious and effective.

The film provides numerous other illustrations of the callous treatment of child detainees. For example, when Ali is sexually assaulted and complains to detention centre management at Baxter, they respond by placing him in solitary confinement.

Trish and Rob make parallels between Australia's immigration laws and the racist policies of Nazi Germany. Rob, whose father was a Holocaust survivor and never recovered psychologically from the ordeal, explains how the Australian government's policies are destroying Ali's youth: All those held in the camps, like his father, he says, will be scarred for life.

Law comments during the film that she had to "find out the truth" about Australia's immigration laws but her

investigation is restricted to a couple of interviews with former Liberal Party Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975-83) and his Immigration Minister Ian MacPhee. Opposed to current legislation, they explain their policies, particularly towards the thousands of Vietnamese refugees who entered Australia in the late 1970s. Fraser also warns about the political dangers of populist appeals to anti-immigrant sentiment.

Fraser's comments constitute a damning indictment of the Howard government and highlight the sharp rightward shift in government policy over the past two decades, but he is unable to explain why such brutal immigration policies now prevail. Instead, he suggests that the problem is "human nature"—people are imperfect and therefore so are governments. Law never challenges these views and tends to present the issue as a moral, rather than political, problem.

While *Letters to Ali* is almost two hours long and could have been improved with more rigorous editing, a more significant weakness is its failure to probe the history and politics of mandatory detention. The Labor Party's role in imposing restrictive immigration policies is not mentioned nor is any reference made to the racist White Australia policy, the bedrock of Australian immigration practices for almost a century.

The Keating Labor government, with support from the trade unions, initiated the mandatory detention policies in 1992, which were further toughened by the Howard government. Both the Labor and Liberal governments have scapegoated refugees, blaming them for the deepening social inequality and poverty in a bid to divert attention from the devastating consequences of government policies on health, education and other social programs.

Despite these omissions, *Letters to Ali* is a welcomed contribution to the struggle against the Australia's immigration laws. Moreover, it demonstrates that, contrary to government and media claims of popular support for these policies, there is a deep-seated and growing determination by ordinary people to end mandatory detention and other repressive measures. This is indicated, not only by the dogged fight conducted by Kerbi and her family, but in the generous and extensive assistance Law received from a wide range of local filmmakers, musicians and technicians.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)