

# Australian Education Minister declares SIEV X history resource is “political propaganda”

**Our reporters**

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“The Sinking of SIEV X: A Case Study for Secondary Schools” was launched last Thursday in Canberra, marking 5 years to the day since 353 refugees—more than two thirds of them women and children—perished in the region’s worst sea disaster since World War II. Politicians and media outlets conducted a virtual boycott of the event, held in the Main Committee Room at Parliament House, with the study under immediate fire from the Howard government and the Murdoch press.

The resource, a 35-page reader and CD, was compiled by the SIEV X Secondary Schools’ Case Study Committee, in conjunction with members of the History Teachers Association and the NSW Board of Studies. It presents a range of primary and secondary source documents relating to the ill-fated voyage of 400 asylum seekers on board Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel Unknown (SIEV X).

Unseaworthy and overcrowded, SIEV X set sail from Indonesia to Australia’s Christmas Island on October 18, 2001, in the midst of a federal election dominated by a hysterical and bi-partisan scare campaign against “illegal” immigration. A military-style operation along the Australian coast—Operation Relux—was in full swing, aimed at deterring boat arrivals.

As news of the mass drowning broke on October 23, the Howard government immediately denied any prior knowledge of the boat’s condition or whereabouts. But in the subsequent weeks, months and years much evidence, including that presented at a 2002 Senate Inquiry, has belied that claim (see Linda Tenenbaum’s four-part series, “The tragedy of SIEV X, Did the Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?”).

Opening the October 19 launch, 79-year-old Emeritus Professor of History from the Australian National University (ANU), John Molony told the audience, “we are here to remember the dead”. He offered a direct riposte to government attacks on the SIEV X case study as “a bizarre mix of unfounded allegations and rumour presented as fact”.

“I am very keen for students to study the facts in relation to any historical event and draw their own conclusions and

make their own judgments.”

It is precisely this right that Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop, along with the ministers for immigration and defence—who also publicly attacked the case study—are seeking to deny. Their outburst clarifies the real aim of the current campaign led by the prime minister for a “root and branch renewal” of the teaching of Australian history. Any “facts” which do not toe the government line must be expunged from school curricula.

In compiling the resource, members of the SIEV X Case Study Committee received some 80 submissions from a range of government departments, journalists and relevant individuals. The reader is divided into nine chapters, providing a focus for study and discussion: “Why were the passengers trying to reach Australia?” “Who arranged the trip and were passengers forced aboard?” “In what state was the vessel and how did it sink?” “What events immediately followed the sinking?” “Where did the SIEV X sink?” “Intelligence and response—What was known, when was it known and how was the information used?” “What was the disruption program and was it linked to the SIEV X?” “In what context did the events occur?” “Where might responsibility lie for the sinking?” A final essay question, at the end of the six-week study, asks: “was the sinking of SIEV X preventable?”

For the media and political establishment these questions are now well and truly off limits. A comment appearing in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* on October 20 entitled “Zealots hijack tragedy” said the case study was “part of a trendy campaign to hijack the Year 11 modern history curriculum” and an example of “conspiratorial claptrap drifting into NSW classrooms.”

In the face of this ideological dragnet, the defensive character of the remarks of 24-year-old PhD student Don Mclurcan, who initiated the SIEV X case study project in 2005, was not surprising.

“It is understandable” he said “that some people now hearing about this Case Study will assume it is the work of a left-wing group who want to lay blame for the sinking of the

SIEV X upon the Australian Government. I want to state for the record that the people who developed this Case Study take *no* position in terms of the questions investigated in this study, particularly those relating to responsibility, *nor* do these materials imply a predetermined answer on the issue of whether or not the sinking and subsequent loss of life was preventable.”

While the SIEV X reader certainly allows students to independently assess the evidence and reach their own conclusions, the documents undoubtedly demonstrate the contradictions and lies of the federal government concerning the SIEV X tragedy. If the SIEV X case study prepared by Mclurcan and others is “political propaganda”, then so too are the numerous sources cited within it, including: the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Reuters, the Senate Committee report “A Certain Maritime Incident”, and the submissions and contributions of former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin, Australian newspaper journalist Cameron Stewart and then-“Dateline” presenter Jana Wendt—to name just a handful who questioned, at one stage or another, the official government line.

In launching the study, Mclurcan stressed the importance of history, recalling that in 1997 his own teacher provided a case study filled with source materials on the 1963 assassination of American president John F. Kennedy. “What the study of the J.F. K. assassination did for me was develop an appreciation that information from all sides of a story has motives, rationale and can often be conflicting. But most importantly it engendered a passion for history.

“I believe it is important for 16 and 17 year olds to know about events that have occurred in their lifetime, even more so those issues that divide parts of the nation.”

There was, he added, a “significant void of case study materials” offered in schools. “As I am aware, the only case study currently suggested by the NSW Board of Studies relating to Australia is titled: ‘Bodyline Bowling and the 1932-33 Anglo Australian test series’”.

Among the school students who attended the launch was 16-year-old Mahmoud, an Afghani refugee whose presence was particularly poignant. Mahmoud’s own refugee boat sank en route to Australia just over two years ago, after which he was detained by authorities on the small island of Nauru under the Howard government’s “Pacific Solution”. He spoke quietly from the podium, reciting a poem and telling his listeners simply, “there is nothing more outrageous or frightening than facing death, and that is what happened to me.”

In drawing the launch to a close, Professor Molony, who spent much of his academic life teaching Italian history, made a pointed reference to the fate of Mussolini and his fascist henchmen at the end of World War II, “History will

judge the people who treat other human beings inhumanely.”

Three copies of the SIEV X Case Study were then placed in envelopes by Mclurcan, Molony and Mahmoud, one addressed to federal minister for education Julie Bishop, another to the inspector of history at the NSW Board of Studies Jenny Lawless, and a final copy to John Gore, chief education officer for the teaching of “Human Society and its Environment” in NSW schools.

The October 19 launch capped a week of events commemorating the SIEV X tragedy. On Sunday October 15, more than 2000 people assembled along the shores of Canberra’s Lake Burley Griffin where a monument—some 200 white totem poles, each decorated by a student and named after a SIEV X victim—was briefly erected. Efforts by refugee advocate groups and schools to lobby for a permanent memorial were blocked, with the government insisting the poles could be displayed for one day only.

WSWS spoke to high school students who attended the launch. Anna, from Radcliffe College in Canberra, responded to Education Minister Bishop’s comments about the study “I think it is very poor on the minister’s part. Sitting here today has made me want to go away and read it, and I think from a secondary student’s point of view, it will be very appropriate to study in the future.”

“Knowledge about it [the SIEV X tragedy] hasn’t been very open. I think possibly they [the government] are hiding something. I think the reason for their outcry is that they think something might come out. And students might get the wrong perception and not be on their side and they may be getting blamed for it.”

Another Radcliffe college student added: “I think like Don said, this really does just present the facts, and heaps of them are contradictory. It’s not biased. It does let students make up their own minds, which I think is crucial.”



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