

Australian senate inquiry masks responsibility for Nauru refugee camp abuses

Max Newman**7 September 2015**

Amid the horrors facing asylum seekers across Europe, an Australian Senate inquiry, led by Labor and the Greens, has sought to cover up the responsibility of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments for the appalling treatment of refugees in the Australian-run detention centre on the remote Pacific island of Nauru.

The inquiry was designed to head off the mounting popular opposition in Australia to the inhuman conditions in what are officially dubbed “offshore processing facilities” on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. These camps were reopened in 2012 by the previous minority Labor government, which was kept in office by the Greens.

The Australian Human Rights Commission’s *Forgotten Children* report, tabled in February, had already provided damning evidence of the degrading conditions facing asylum seekers, as had the present Abbott Liberal-National government’s own Moss Review of allegations of sexual abuse and harassment in the Nauru camp, released in April.

Despite producing a mass of evidence of systematic abuses, including sexual assaults, torture and degrading living conditions, the senate inquiry’s report did not oppose the continued forced imprisonment of refugees, which has been bipartisan Labor-Liberal policy since a Labor government imposed the “mandatory detention” of all asylum seekers in 1992.

Instead, the report’s recommendations focused on simply appealing for “transparency” by the immigration department and the creation of an “open centre model” for the continued detention of refugees on Nauru.

Significantly the bulk of the inquiry’s evidence came from former employees of the detention centre who courageously defied the draconian Border Protection

Act, which could see them jailed for up to two years for revealing any details of the appalling situation.

A former Wilson security staff member, turned whistleblower, Jon Nichols pointed to evidence of water-boarding torture carried out by Australian Emergency Response Team (ERT) personnel. He stated that he had heard “ERT boast and brag about how they have water-boarded people” and witnessed “ERT exit [tents] and later seen asylum seekers come out of the tents covered in water and coughing.”

Nichols testified that security guards utilised a torture technique known as “zipping.” This involved tying a detainee to a metal bed frame before throwing the bed into the air, causing pain and injury as the bed struck the floor. In another instance, a disclosed incident report from December 2013 said four security guards were witnessed tying up an eight-year-old boy. When a social worker, who witnessed the incident, approached them, they said it was “just a joke.”

Released last Monday, the final report provides further evidence that the former Labor government orchestrated the violent suppression of a riot inside the detention centre in July 2013. Leaked video footage, broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” program, showed three security guards joking about using violence against refugees, claiming to act on the orders of local police. One guard stated: “I’m pretty sure he said shoot that guy. I’m fairly confident he gave me that order.”

A number of submissions to the inquiry objected to the dehumanising practices on the island, such as staff referring to detainees by their boat numbers, rather than their names. One ex-Salvation Army employee condemned a “culture of silence and cover up and a lack of accountability.”

One ex-staff member said serving in the camp was

like working in a prison, except that the detainees had no idea how long they would be imprisoned or where they would be released. The average waiting time for processing refugee status applications was 402 days, and the majority of those eventually “resettled” were thrust into the Nauruan community without any support, often suffering victimisation.

Refugees were imprisoned in three separate Regional Processing Centres, packed into 10m x 12m vinyl marquees, mostly without air-conditioning, that housed 22 people at a time. Former employees described the heat in these places as “intense” and “persistent.” With no access to running water in the marquees, detainees received little relief from the oppressive heat.

Submissions to the inquiry noted that the marquees were covered in dark mould. It was so thick that “people would actually write things on the outside of the tent in the mould,” one former employee noted. The mould was also linked to persistent eye infections and skin diseases suffered by the refugees.

Children regularly suffered from a myriad of medical conditions borne from the tropical environment of the camp. Testimonies in the report revealed complaints from parents unable to access water at night when their children suffered vomiting and diarrhoea.

Former employees testified to witnessing children wearing footwear with holes cut in them by their parents, because they were not issued with new shoes as their children grew. The replacement of beds, urine-stained sheets and undergarments were all treated as a low priority, with many residents waiting months to receive the required items.

One ex-employee described encountering mouldy food, rotten fruit and stale bread being served many times in the refugee mess halls.

The report’s findings mirror those of another senate committee inquiry launched last year into the murder of Iranian refugee Reza Berati in February 2014 amid the repression of a riot inside the Manus Island camp. That report also called for more “transparency,” while supporting the entire “border protection” framework of refugee detention.

Both reports show the hypocrisy of the Greens’ position on refugees. Greens Senator Sarah Hansen-Young, who was deputy chair of the latest inquiry, also issued a 43-page addendum containing a further five recommendations from the Greens, including that the

“Nauru regional processing centre be closed.” However, the Greens added that if the facility continued, its management “should be undertaken by the government itself or contracted only to qualified and professional welfare and social workers from a not-for-profit organisation.”

This call typifies the cosmetic changes proposed by the Greens, having been complicit in the reopening of the Nauru and Manus camps through their crucial parliamentary support for the previous Labor government. They fully subscribe to the underlying “border protection” regime, whereby the military, intelligence and police apparatuses block the entry of some of the most destitute and impoverished people in the world, and indefinitely detain without trial any who succeed in arriving on Australia’s shores.

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