

# Dehumanising Us All

Morag Fraser

David Marr and Marian Wilkinson

DARK VICTORY

Allen & Unwin, \$29.95pb, 358pp, 0 86508 939 7

Patrick Weller

DON'T TELL THE PRIME MINISTER

Scribe, \$14.95pb, 111pp, 0 908011 76 8

**D**ARK VICTORY OPENS WITH A COUP: in a deep-detailed narrative, joint — and seamless — authors David Marr and Marian Wilkinson make human beings out of the anonymous acronyms of John Howard's border protection strategy. Explicitly rejecting the gulag language of numbers, of SUNCs in SIEVs (Suspected Unauthorised Non-Citizens in Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels), they begin with people — stirring, then waving. These are men and women with names, professions, histories, family. '[Khodadad] Sarwari, a teacher, sat jammed between his wife, their three children and his brother on the boat's flimsy upper deck. The family was fleeing the Taliban. So were most of the people on the *Palapa*.'

The effect is sudden and bracing. Here are names, contexts, explanations. *These* were the kind of people Australians feared so much that they would endorse — even applaud — sending them back out to sea. These were John Howard's 'people like that'. In a dramatic and deliberate way, Marr and Wilkinson put flesh on shadows. They make asylum seekers responsive players, not passive victims or malign invaders. 'Rajab Ali Merzaee, an Afghan medical student, watched two sailors come down to the foot of the stairs. "They were two very strong men. Very lovely, very good persons."'

It is a powerful tactic, one that prompts a 'there but for the grace of God' response in any open-minded reader. But it goes further: it throws into relief the shabby manoeuvres of a ruthless election campaign and one of the most shameful episodes in Australia's political history.

Ross Hampton, media adviser to Defence Minister Peter Reith, had expressly prohibited naval personnel from giving out 'personalising or humanising images' of asylum seekers. Marr and Wilkinson supply them. They also supply humanising and personalising images of just about every other character involved in the 2001 election campaign, in Operation Relex (the military exercise devised to repel refugee arrivals and deter people smugglers) and in Australia's expedient and expensive 'Pacific Solution'. In the process, they floodlight the bad faith of that campaign and the deadly consequences of the border protection strategy.

This is investigative journalism at its finest (commissioned, significantly, not by a newspaper but by the late John Iremonger at Allen & Unwin). Marr and Wilkinson do all the necessary legwork and analysis. They travel to Indonesia,

to Oslo, to Auckland and all around Australia. They interview Arne Rinnan, captain of the *Tampa*, and some of the 478 refugees now rebuilding their lives in New Zealand, with permanent visas and family reunion rights (their fellows in Australia languish on temporary protection visas). They talk to shipowners, admirals, defence personnel, public servants, federal police and Indonesian officials. They quiz the prime minister and his departmental head, Max Moore-Wilton (who 'in the end, answered a couple of questions'). The thirty-three pages of notes and glossary, plus the six pages of acknowledgments, are a primer in investigative journalism. The index reads like a tart novella. Instance three items under 'Barrie, Chris' (Admiral, then chief of Australia's defence forces): 'gagged over Operation Relex, 135; considers whether he is a dill, 291; contradicted by Houston, 291.'

Importantly, Marr and Wilkinson do not turn this tale into a contest between goodies and baddies. For them, 'humanising and personalising' doesn't mean letting off the hook. It means journalism's business as usual: finding out who, what, when, where and what on earth made them do it. The asylum seekers are sometimes violent, very often aggressive. *Tampa* captain Arne Rinnan reads more like the man of his own estimation — a simple seaman doing what he had to do — than the international hero he was to become. Defence personnel and public servants are shown making mistakes in their haste to provide required information. Culpable, but not necessarily conspiratorial. Shipping line owner Wilh Wilhelmsen is a businessman, not a philanthropist. *Dark Victory* has a few rhetorical indulgences. Philip Ruddock, for example, is 'whey faced and stubborn', Peter Reith, 'a skirmisher of daring'. Vivid, but unnecessary. This tale needs no varnish. Outside characterisations are more telling. In Indonesia, Ruddock, given to lecturing, is nicknamed the 'Minister with No Ears'.

So, no crude polarising — no 'them and us'. Individual rationales, motivation, cause and effect are all shrewdly analysed. Players get their dues. Humans make mistakes. But, that said, what Marr and Wilkinson uncover, step by step in an inexorable narrative, is a scandal. Dark victory, indeed.

As the story unfolds, compounds and ramifies, what is revealed makes a damning list: abuse of process, disregard for human dignity, for the law, for safety of life at sea, censorship inimical to democracy, a cowed and muzzled press, a military compromised, the Office of National Assessments misused, the public service exploited for blatantly political ends during and after an election campaign, regional relations strained and manipulated to effect the 'Pacific Solution'. And no redress. No correction. No alteration to the record. The children are still overboard. SIEV X still sank in Indonesian waters. The prime minister still hasn't been told. The major players — Howard, Ruddock, Reith, Moore-Wilton, Alexander Downer and Jane Halton, convenor of the People Smuggling Taskforce, remain in power, have been promoted (Halton to Secretary of Health) or have moved into profitable afterlives (Reith very rapidly to a defence consultancy with Tenix, Moore-Wilton to become CEO of the recently privatised Sydney Airport).

THAT BALD REFUSAL to admit fault, correct the record or reform the process is deeply corrosive of public trust. In his brief, admirable analysis of the ‘Children Overboard’ episode, *Don’t Tell the Prime Minister*, Griffith University public sector expert Patrick Weller cuts through all the prevarication and obfuscation. ‘Perhaps we need a change of attitude,’ he concludes. And then, using the knowledge proper to a Professor of Politics and Public Policy, he invokes the man from whom John Howard got his middle name, Winston Churchill. It is a telling rhetorical ploy. Churchill, says Weller, ‘was always partisan, blithely opportunistic, and often cynical. But he was prepared to take responsibility. When told of the loss of Singapore and the weakness of its defences, he is said to have commented: “I did not know, I was not told, I should have asked.”’

‘That’s accountability,’ remarks Weller. His *Don’t Tell the Prime Minister* is an informed, fair and revealing analysis of just how the ‘children overboard’ episode developed in the way it did. He advances this basic proposition: ‘The Australian public was told a story that was untrue. That story was not corrected before the election, even though a wide range of people in and around the government knew it was untrue. If everyone acted properly and professionally, and we were still not told, something is seriously wrong with our system of government.’

It seems so obvious that you expect voters and public servants to be out demonstrating in the streets. There *is* something seriously wrong with our system of government. People *are* demonstrating, but now in desperation and about issues that seem to be out of their control and beyond the scrutiny of democratic process. Nothing in the conduct of government business — certainly nothing about the current carriage of war business — gives one confidence that anything has changed since the 2001 election.

Weller traces the decades of public service culture shift that have aided and abetted the current situation. Again, he uses history with effect: ‘The British once had a way with unsuccessful admirals. They shot them on the quarter-deck ...’ Governments now, he suggests, are less dramatic, but they have their ways of intimidating: ‘When the Howard government won office in 1996, it fired six departmental secretaries. Even if it believed that one or two of the casualties may have been politically connected, others clearly were not ... But they went anyway.’ Unsurprisingly, apprehension spread throughout the public service. Apprehensive people are not likely to contradict or annoy their ministers. The truth can be very annoying.

Over recent decades, Weller also notes, the number of ministerial advisers has grown. These are the free radicals of the political system — scarcely accountable, even to Senate committees. Weller comments that, as prime minister, John Howard has the largest office in Australian prime ministerial history, dedicated to providing him with information. And yet he was able and willing to remain ignorant of what most around him knew. Howard, as Marr and Wilkinson repeatedly remark, is a canny man and a consummate politician. Were he a statesman, he would, like Churchill, have asked.

With these two books and Peter Mares’s admirable *Borderline* now in the public domain, it is impossible to say we haven’t been told. Or that we don’t understand the long-term consequences of the Howard government’s radical exercise in political opportunism and expediency. Kim Beazley, perhaps the loneliest figure in *Dark Victory*, has had to live with the failure of Labor’s ‘means to end’ method of campaigning. Peter Costello must still be calculating the cost of the ‘Pacific Solution’ — but don’t expect him to make the bill public. And for sailors, once justifiably proud of Australia’s record of saving people in danger at sea, Captain Arne Rinnan has a message as ominous as a foghorn: ‘It’s a terrible thing to be out there in a broken down boat. I’m afraid now there might be fewer rescues.’

But Rinnan’s coda to *Dark Victory* and to the whole *Tampa* and asylum-seeker episode also sounds another note, one anticipated by Marr and Wilkinson in their opening chapters. The unwritten laws of the sea (as with much else that is important in life), they observe, ‘operate not by force of law but by good sense and civilised expectation’. Arne Rinnan understood civilised expectation: ‘It’s the unwritten law of the sea to rescue people in distress. I would do it again and I hope all my seafaring colleagues would do the same.’

Amen to that.