Black Inc.


Detainees on Nauru could not use a telephone until given permission by the International Organisation for Migration, the multinational company engaged to run the detention centre. By the time Jafar was allowed to call his family, months after he arrived on Nauru, they had left without leaving a forwarding address. When he was sent back to Afghanistan, he had lost touch with them irretrievably. He is now living in Pakistan, at 22, with no future and no family. ‘I am very tired for my life, you know,’ he said. ‘I don’t understand what I do now.’

Hassan decided to buckle under the Australian government’s pressure to be repatriated, because ‘whatever is going to happen, it doesn’t matter, even if I get killed. … For me I am a dead person right now [in Nauru] … so there is no difference between staying here and returning to Afghanistan.’

When Habibullah’s boat, codenamed SIEV-6, was picked up by the Australian Navy, a naval officer subjected him to a mock execution: he held a gun to his head and pulled the trigger, greatly amusing his naval colleagues. Back in Pakistan, terrified of being arrested and forced back to Afghanistan where he fears he might be killed, he still has nightmares about his ordeal. But he still prefers living in freedom, even for just ‘one day or two days,’ to living ‘in camp, … in a prison.’

These three stories are not exceptional. David Corlett has travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, and even Thailand, where the Department of Immigration
has sent some middle eastern asylum seekers whom they couldn’t dispose of elsewhere, to find out what has befallen those sent back.

Corlett is passionate, but also reasonable. He concedes that ‘while returning asylum seekers who are found, through a fair, accurate and open process not to be refugees is fundamental to maintaining the integrity of refugee protection in Australia,’ but, he goes on, ‘it is impossible to justify policies that do such damage to individual human beings.’ There are three problems. The first is the difficulty of assessing claims accurately. The second is a system that treats asylum-seekers like criminals without rights and impairs their sanity. The third is the political imperative to get rid of those who don’t pass muster, sometimes at extraordinary trouble and expense, but without apparent concern for their safety.

Corlett’s grasp of the legal, political and philosophical issues is acute. He also floats some psychological hypotheses: ‘I have a theory that those who suffer most in Australia’s immigration detention regime are those who refuse to bow to the daily humiliations of the system.’ The ‘banality and inflexibility’ of the bureaucracy cannot deal with independence of thought, and it’s easy to brand such people as undesirable troublemakers. There is nothing here to comfort Australians who would like to continue to believe we belong to a compassionate society.