

Message to the *Rally to Welcome Refugees* from Thomas Keneally
Sunday, June 23rd 2002, Circular Quay, Sydney.

I am disappointed I cannot be there today to add my voice to yours. Like you, I consider the compulsory detention of asylum seekers a tumour on the body politic of the Commonwealth of Australia. It demeans our traditions of compassion; it mocks any hope we ever had of being a moral force in our region and in the world at large; and it causes the most inexcusable and most acute suffering to those who are detained in the sun-struck gulags of our nation. It presents a test we are failing. The wheels of our Molloch of a system are grinding to dust the souls of brave and decent men, women and children.

Like you, too, I lament the success of certain false propositions about this matter of detention of asylum seekers. These are propositions implanted in the minds of citizens by the present government, and – I am sad to say - allowed to remain there by the policy timidity of the Labor Party. There are many, many such propositions. I would like to mention three in particular. First is the proposition that the only alternative to the present system is to “let just anyone in.” We here today do not stand against proper processing. We would applaud such a thing. But the idea that the only option we have is to detain people for years behind razor wire is repugnant, and its repugnant nature is shown by the fact that other liberal democracies have avoided adopting it.

A second false proposition is that detainees are queue-jumpers. Where is this queue? At what geographic point is it sited? Outside which Australian embassy? Outside the door of which Australian immigration official? Can we reasonably expect people in far and less happy places than this place of ours, people terrified for their lives, subject to tyranny and immediate and direct persecution, to know about or spend a moment’s thought on the idea of Mr. Ruddock’s fictional queue? And should we base a national response to an international crisis of refugee-ism upon such a fantasy?

Human freedom is not a bus, which people will enter in order. It is not a David Jones sale where polite people like Mr. Ruddock do not jostle. It is a preciously embraced, once-in-a-lifetime bid for liberty and the light. And those who bravely seize that moment – how do we applaud their human endurance, their courageous desperation? Like the gendarmes in the music hall song, we lock ‘em up. Indefinitely. Not by the day. Not by the week. Not by the month. But by the year!

A third fake proposition is that the asylum seekers have done something illegal. The Australian people have not been informed what the international law on this matter is - international law that applies to all of us: that anyone is entitled by law to claim political asylum, and that the claim, however presented and voiced, is thoroughly legal.

So, our concerns here today:

I, like you, am concerned that the process of detention is administered by the Australian subsidiary of an American company whose expertise is the

management of prisons. It is a company which lacks a policy on families and on children.

I, like you, am horrified that when a UN inspection team declares our detention system the worst of its kind that they had seen, we deny the validity of these independent arbiters, call them wrong-headed, and reject their comments as an interference with Australian sovereignty.

And I, like you, accuse the Australian government of illegal imprisonment of asylum seekers, and - in cases involving the use of isolation cells and detention - of cruel and unusual methods.

Recently I sat amongst a group of young detainees in Villawood. The shortest time any of them had been in detention was twenty months. The Commonwealth of Australia has stolen their youth and yet laughs at the term "collective depression" when the UN inspectors present it as what we know it to be - a quite reasonable, sensible, factual description of the terrible state to which the Commonwealth of Australia has reduced these people. We have achieved, or the government has achieved in our name, a terrible thing: the image of the tyrants and killers from which the asylum seekers fled has been supplanted in the imaginations of the detention seekers by the image of another tyrannous system – our detention centre system with all its uncertainty, inconsistency, degradation and mental torture. And the face of whatever tyrant asylum-seekers have fled from has been replaced by the visage of the man who is so responsible for promoting and sustaining their present torment – an Australian, Phillip Ruddock.

We are confident that if our fellow citizens were permitted to know the reality, they would cry *en masse* for an end to this evil system.

Oh but, say the apologists, we cannot let the children go – they would be separated from their parents! We say, Don't let only the children go. After proper processing, and with proper guarantees of the kind which operate in other societies, in liberal democracies from the Arctic region southwards, even with us standing surety, let the families go. Pull down the razor wire which disgraces our beloved earth!

One day your grandchildren will look back upon this era with incredulity, and ask how Australians let this system flourish. And at least you will be able to say what sadly I cannot, being absent today. You can say, I was there, I was at Circular Quay the day we dislodged another strand of that evil wire. I was there the day we gave the asylum seekers an added fragment of hope. I was there the day we tried to alert our Australian brothers and sisters of the viciousness being perpetrated here, in *our* Commonwealth. Pull down the wire!

Pull down the wire. Let free the souls of the refugees.