

Bonne, ChilOut Ambassador, 2004

Bonne from Port Augusta, South Australia, also wrote a more comprehensive report on her visit to Canberra with the other seven ChilOut Ambassadors. Here is that report.

11 March 2004

She sat there, emotionless to the pleas and tears of ours, we wept at the wounds of those, who suffer from the effects of Australia's immigration policy.

She maybe unemotional, but she was ready...ready to attack those who stood in the way and questioned how she could ever justify detention.

Canberra...my mother gave me strict instructions not to dye my hair bright pink before I left. "Canberra is big, with lots of people that have suits and just, don't...don't dye your hair." As Krystal said 'Yuppyville.'

I met with Hannah and Joan at Melbourne airport. Hannah was from Victoria and Joan was from Tasmania. They write to detainees on Nauru, Hannah writes also to some in Baxter and well, both are just as passionate about helping asylum seekers.

When we arrived at Canberra, Rae met us with a sign reading, 'ChilOut'. We talked and gossiped like old friends, looking at our surroundings.

The embassies of other nations flashed before my eyes as Hannah, Joan, Rae and myself flew past in the taxi. Canberra was so neat and tidy. Very professional, but good enough for a home.

Rae and Gerry were kind enough to lend over a room for me to share with Fabienne. Not to mention a room each for Hannah and Joan and then made sure we were at the places we were supposed to be on time and ready.

Once at Rae and Gerry's house, after the introductions and shown around the place, the three of us retreated in the room I was going to share with Fabienne. Hannah and I sat watching Joan quickly type a letter on the computer to Amanda Vanstone.

We all spoke of our towns and schools, what they were like and our families.

It wasn't long until we were at the restaurant. It was different the food was Turkish, but it tasted good.

Once inside, I met everyone. Alanna, Dianne and Mary, ChilOut organisers, then the rest of the ambassadors, Krystal, Sayed, Fabienne, Nahid and Zahra. Sylvana came too, from the UNCHR.

We all talked, ate food and took photos. Then after, we received bags with some bits and pieces, a t-shirt which everyone would wear the next day. I was allowed to wear another t-shirt I had and we all spoke about what we were going to say.

But Parliament, that was the big day. It also was the day before a year, when I first met those 10 teenagers from Baxter. If anyone had told me, 'Bonne in just a year, you will be going to Parliament in an effort to help these teenagers and many more children you will soon be-friend,' I don't think I would seriously believe it. I didn't even believe it when I was there in Canberra.

I was so nervous. Standing at the back entrance of Parliament at 7:30 am with my big white t-shirt, that had been written all over in Persian and Arabic. The names of my friends and some of their family, on the back in big letters reads 'Freedom' and then in Persian, 'Azardi' and a giant butterfly sits in the front of my shirt, to me symbolized how I feel about my friends, and that you should never keep a butterfly in a jar.

Gerry and I were the first there. It was cold enough and we watched the hot air balloons float by. Then Krystal arrived, followed by Sayed and Dianne. Soon enough, our whole group was there.

We were constantly being told to move by security, move here, and move there. As we were walking by a TV camera was filming us. I smiled and gave the peace sign; I guessed 'metal fingers' might not be appropriate.

Well, I'll have you know, I had plenty of butterflies in my stomach when Dianne put me on the phone to ABC radio.

The ABC interview was easy and relaxed. It really eased the anxiety I had caused myself. I just didn't know what to say, how to say, but I was just relieved. The guy on the phone asked me simple questions and they were all easy enough.

When entering the Parliament, we had to sign in. Get tags, go through the security that kind of stuff. We were all told we all always had to have an escort everywhere we went or we would be thrown out.

Soon after, we (Krystal, Hannah, Joan, Sayed, Fabienne, Zahra, Nahid, myself, along with Dianne, Mary and Alanna) were sitting in a small office around a table. Minister Vanstone walked in and sat down, followed by what I think was a 'spokesman'.

On the table, were orange juice, tea and glasses, and then there were these rolls. Like pastry, covered in icing sugar and in the middle filled with bits of chocolate.

Minister Vanstone told us to help ourselves as anything that didn't get eaten would be "finished by the boys".

She was casual, straight out, and bluntly reminded me of someone. If she wasn't the face of the immigration policy, I suppose I would probably get along with her ways fine.

We sat down (in the order as I said above), I begun my little story. I was so lost for words, I just didn't know what to do. I think I said something like,

"Hi, I am Bonne. I am 15 and from Port Augusta. I have friends that are at Baxter or housing. I am here just to try and help them. They have taught me lots of their language, as this t-shirt has all their names because I didn't know when I'd see them again for maybe six-weeks." The Minister asked where I had gone. I replied, "With the Christmas holidays, I only rely on excursions to see them. Thank you for giving out some bridging visas."

She then turned her attention to Nahid. The poor love, beautiful and sweet as any thing told her unfortunate tale. A refugee from Afghanistan, spending eight months in detention and now, plagued by the fear of her TPV running out within six months.

All eyes turned to Zahra, who was crying. The tears streamed down her face; a face that before was so bright and happy. Zahra was unable to speak and Nahid, then too, began to cry.

I held Nahid's hand. I reached over and touched Zahra's hand. I let go from her and held on to Nahid.

Please stop crying, I thought, please, just stop suffering.

The circle continued of our stories, I concentrated on Nahid. I then looked up to see Sayed speaking his story, so true but unbelievable and then I saw Joan. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Damn table, I thought. I wanted to reach out to her too, but instead I held Nahid's hand and she gave me a quick squeeze.

Soon enough, Minister Vanstone began to speak. All her stories and tales of the policies, stories that detention is because of people smugglers. Hannah mentioned, "A country who locks up children, for a means of border protection has something seriously flawed with its policy."

She began to say that those in detention are not important, Australia takes 12 000 refugees in offshore programs. They come here, they have money to pay smugglers then tough luck they are not important whatsoever.

How? I thought, How could anyone say that? If someone begins a series of 'slag-offs' about asylum seekers like that, I immediately think of the children.

I thought of that woman, who at this point had turned evil, walking up to my little friends pointing to them, crushing them and saying something like, "Hey you are not important." To some it was now almost four years! To suffer as a child, that age in detention.

And that was her way of justifying the system.

"Excuse me Minister," I asked her, "How? How can you say that? To an eight-year-old, a seven year old, a four ye..." I stumbled on my words and just slowed down.

I spoke to her softly, not in a tone to fight, but she took it the wrong way and snapped at me saying that she didn't want a one on one debate with me, that she gave up her time and didn't want a debate. I said under her voice, "No, no I understand that, but..."

She turned and began talking about how Australia is so kind and her 'spokesperson' started up a story of people sleeping on your lawn.

Didn't want a fight, or a debate. I hoped no one was upset at me for upsetting the Minister. I just wanted her to see and understand there are people there. I just wanted to know if she could really follow through with how she justified detention.

Nahid made me feel more relieved, she still had hold of my hand. I was glad though; her and Zahra seemed not to be crying any more.

The meeting finished. We posed for photos and I apologised to the Minister. "Sorry, I wasn't in for a debate," I said.

She said it was ok, that I had my opinion and she had hers. I then made sure I handed her the booklet I had typed up before to give to the politicians and took a picture of her and Sayed.

We all then met with the Shadow Immigration Minister Stephen Smith. He told how the children should be released from detention and if his party won the election, fathers would go through the 'graduating stages' so then they would be qualified to live with their children and family in the Housing Project.

All these promises, how fake/real would they be if and when Mark Latham's party gets power? These promises, these stories...these people.

They are not animals; they need protection and definitely not a 'graduation' whilst in detention.

He then disappeared to some other meeting and we left also, to meet with Senator Linda Kirk.

She was lovely. She sat with us, listened and spoke to us gently. She asked about our encounter with Minister Vanstone. She laughed and said she thought she might say something like that.

We then met with the Shadow Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Jacinta Collins. As I explained about the housing and the depression surrounding the families, she was quiet and seemed to feel depressed also at the plight of asylum seekers.

Krystal began a story, sadly about losing her stepfather, but compared it to how fathers are unable to live in housing and expressing the added trauma that children would already suffer.

When I met Krystal, and she began to talk, I could feel her fire inside. She had this amazing amount of energy, which equalled with her compassion of helping others. Along

with her saying, "Freedom is not a right that's given by anyone, freedom is from birth," she was willing to give herself up "to live behind wire, just so another child can be free". My stomach began rumbling uncontrollably, which I thought seemed a little embarrassing, but laughed it off. Senator Collins told us she knows how we feel, it happens to her too.

We left to meet with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Larry Anthony. We sat down in this big room at a big table and these big comfortable chairs. There was also morning tea there, only biscuits, but for me it was more appetising than what Amanda Vanstone had served.

A man arrived and apologised, Minister Anthony was unable to be here and he himself will take notes that will be given to the Minister.

We all started one by one our stories and parts to say. Sayed expressed the feelings of people and children on a TPV, "Three years," he said, "without your family, your wife or children. Not three days or three weeks, three years."

I spoke about how the youth is, maybe, just un-knowing. There are children behind that wire, that's a home for them. People just don't understand. "The youth must even have some information there, to begin to learn and understand what is different. We can benefit. I have learnt bits of Dari, Persian and Arabic," I said, then standing to show my t-shirt, Zahra beckoned me turn around show the back of it also. *We are just falling apart*, I felt.

Somewhere along the way, we all stopped. Some went to the toilet but Joan, Krystal and I found ourselves outside John Howard's office. Alanna took a picture of us, being feral in front of the sign that read The Hon John Howard MP.

Just then, the door opened. We pounced at this man and said, "John Howard". It wasn't him, it was another man who smiled at us, but no doubt thought we were somewhat queer.

We then made our way to the Human Rights Sub-Committee. Even though, through some parts, different people had to leave to go and vote, then vice-versa. The group's chairperson was Senator Marise Payne, but everyone knows Natasha Stot Despoja. And she was there, too.

I began at the front. Introduced myself, handed a copy of the booklet I had to them and began.

"As far as human rights goes...well, look I have friends in detention and I have seen them the way the public does. I have seen friends, just by chance, on TV, screaming. It's not good. It's not a place for anyone.

At school, they come like any other student. They live for now and I know them for who they are..." I said. I can't remember if that was fully what I said, of how I finished it. I just knew they had to do something.

It was a Human Rights Committee, the situations placed before asylum seekers can be somewhat appalling and atrocious.

Fabienne spoke after me. Fabienne is a very nice girl and polite. Dianne said at tea, the night before, Fabienne had said something on the radio, which was just perfect. Fabienne was asked something like, "What's so bad about detention?" She replied and at the end added, "It's just wrong."

After we had finished, some members seemed a little upset at the stories.

I asked them for a photo, they were a little bit uneasy, but I reassured them by saying, "Look if you weren't pretty, I wouldn't ask for your photo." They then told me I could stay as long as I wanted.

One member escorted us to 'The Trough', which is just a really flash, done-up cafeteria. Andrew Bartlett paid for all our lunches and we sat at this huge table. I handed him one of my booklets.

Krystal, Nahid and Zahra sat across from me, then Hannah at one side and Sayed on the other.

Zahra and I really acted our ages pulling faces at each other. We all just had a good laugh.

Tanya Plibersek sat across from Sayed. They began to talk, she was just, so 'devoured' by Sayed's words and his story. She listened to him intently.

I looked over to see Senator Bartlett reading through my hand out, then I turned back my attention to pulling faces at Zahra and then together we all wondered what it was Krystal was just going to eat.

She herself didn't know, was it sushi? Or was it a chicken roll?

Then soon enough, we were all seated at the press conference. There were these journalists, photographers and a video camera. I was then getting nervous, *What was I supposed to say...again?*

We began the filming I was so freaked out. I just said slowly my name and age and that I was here to help and represent my friends at Baxter or the housing project.

We went down the line, each of us telling our story. After speaking, I relaxed more as the others took their turns. Everyone spoke with raw emotion and said what was so true.

Hannah saying the sad facts, of how she has watched her pen pal slowly deteriorate. Sayed retold his story, with his line, "We do not come here for fun; we don't come here for a picnic. We are not terrorists, we run from them."

I can hear Zahra's voice, how she was saying, "The Taliban are hungry for blood." Again the poor girl broke down and cried.

Ms Plibersek herself also cried. Some journalists sat quietly and some looked on.

Krystal spoke of how the school 'supported' her. Not very well for her at all. She received detentions for collecting signatures and was also threatened with suspension.

I spoke of how I felt, somewhat I recall saying, " I just collected the signatures through my class. Some of it was good and easy, people were willing to sign it. Others thought asylum seekers have no right to be here. I heard that we should drown them all," upon saying that I hear a little gasp, I am sure of it and I turn look at the journalists on my left and begin again, "I am sad when I hear that, because I always think of the little children and on that day I thought of my friend...she was just born into detention, that's her life."

I shook my head and Dianne asked me to stand and explain my shirt.

I did so; looking toward the camera pulling my shirt so, by any chance the all names would be visible.

"My shirt, I made with some of my friends before school holidays started. That was for six-weeks and I only rely on excursions so I didn't know when I'd see any of my friends again.

Then when I learnt I would be going away I got all of their names.

Here is the butterfly," I said running my fingers over the fabric paint. I looked towards who I think was Dianne and a journalist, "This is because how I feel about my friends. To me they mean so much and are so delicate, like for you if you have a butterfly." I looked back at the camera and stared into the lens, "And you should never keep a butterfly in a jar. If any of my friends should be listening," I raised my voice a little louder and clear, "Du Sed Deram."

The camera went off and every one began to get up. Over the bustle, a woman called to me, "Can I get a translation?" I called back, "I love you."

Dianne showed me to a man from *The Advertiser* and I spoke with him for a little bit. Everyone was moving and bustling about, but a photographer caught us and got us together.

He stood up on the window shelf, and just kept clicking this camera.

After that had finished, we were getting all over things together, putting tags back on and Sayed said, "Phillip Ruddock." I looked up and said loudly, "PHILLIP RUDDOCK".

Unbelievably, he looked up, waved and gave this big smile towards us. I grabbed my bag, for the camera, but Mr Ruddock had ducked through the door.

"Where did he just go?" Joan said. The door was marked with the word 'Exit'. She went over and pushed it open, and yes, it was an exit and Phillip Ruddock was nowhere to be seen.

The press started to leave and we began to move on, we were going to watch 'question time' in Parliament.

All these people had begun arriving to watch it also. Lots of school groups, little kids, teenagers, tourists.

We all had to put ALL our belongings in a big bucket. Cameras, mobile phones, bags, drinks, papers, everything you had. You were only allowed in with just yourself. The bucket was then handed over to security.

I started saying, uh, nice things about John Howard in Farsi to Sayed, and when Mary asked what I had said, Sayed began to interpret. "Nakon, nakon," I told him (don't do that). We both smiled and I gave Mary a cheeky grin.

We went through, another security and a woman gave us strict instructions, "Don't talk, no talking. Don't move around, okay? If any more than two of you stand up at once, don't okay? It will be taken as a protest and you all will be thrown out."

We all walked in and sat down. You could look down and see everyone in the Parliament. John Howard, Mark Latham, that treasurer, Alexander Downer, all those people on TV were just down there. Even Phillip Ruddock had re-appeared.

I covered my mouth I couldn't believe it. I sat there in **awe** looking at those little politicians. They were just like children, fighting, fighting, fighting and when one party thought one member had made a good comment, they all chime out a, 'ooooe.' Much like the sound in cricket, when you know, Australia does something.

Relaxed more and Joan asked to get up, she wanted to get a piece of paper that was given to you when you come in.

The paper shows where everyone in Parliament sits.

Joan was allowed and as she walked past me, I whispered, "protestor, protestor". She brought us back each a paper, and I had a look at it.

How boring would it be to be down there, I thought. It was good, but they just continually fight and bicker.

Tanya Plibersek was sitting there. She turned around to look up at us, along with two other women. They gave us big smiles and waved.

A security guard soon informed us, we must go. We stood up and John Howard looked on at us.

He sat there with his beady eyes and bald head. Sayed waved to him, while I smiled and blew John Howard a kiss.

Thanks a lot Johnny, I said to myself, *thanks for the cut and paste letter*. It was now proven, I don't know if he read his mail but he didn't reply himself. All the effort I put to send something to him, Joan took one look at it and said, "Hey I got that letter too."

Once we had our belongings, we went outside to the front entrance of Parliament. You can look up the hill, and following along this giant road was the war memorial. There was

this platform you could stand on, covered in an Aboriginal painting, even though it was not elevated, around the platform was running water.

There was like a bridge across to it, not that it looked like one.

Dianne again put me on the phone to ABC radio. It was another man and he was going to record it and play it again later. I went through okay with the interview, I doxxed Larry Anthony in for not coming to our meeting and included in how Hannah and Joan had seen him jogging that morning.

Then we got our certificates and moved away from the Parliament, across the road to just a lawn area.

It felt like we were there forever, but not long enough. "I don't want to say bye," Zahra said. "We won't say bye then," I told her, "we'll just say catch ya later." Nahid asked if I go through Sydney, but since I don't she said, "If you ever come to there, I will get you and you can come to my house." Sayed asked if we would all write, of course was my reply.

It was time for us to go. I hugged everyone, but Hannah and Joan. Fabienne, Zahra, Sayed and Nahid got into, I think was, Alanna's car. Krystal went with either, Dianne or with her grandparents.

Hannah, Joan and I jumped into Mary's car to head to the airport. The security guards were starting to walk towards us. They looked angry, so I waved and blew them a kiss too!

After checking in, the four of us sat at an airport café. We spoke of the day and Mary congratulated me, "Good job on Amanda Vanstone, now we know she can handle the pressure."

"Oh, gee, I didn't want a fight," I smiled, and then walked off with Hannah to the pay phone.

When we returned, Joan and Mary were waiting for us. A man stopped Joan and got the ChilOut website from the back of her t-shirt. Mary said how the people sitting behind us over heard and commended us. They said they'd also heard it on the radio. So that was maybe Fabienne speaking or me.

We arrived in Melbourne. Hannah was greeted by her parents, as she left I told her any time she was heading through Port Augusta to see her pen pal again, to let me know. She wished both Joan and I good luck.

It was now just Joan and me. "I felt a little sad, when I was coming back," she said. "Really? So did I," I replied. My plane was called to board. "Bye," I said and hugged her. "See you," she replied. Joan had another hour to wait.

I got on the plane and sat down. I was feeling a little sad it was just so strange. Just yesterday, I was meeting everyone and it was just...now I was alone.

A woman sat next to me, "Oh, I love your shirt, did you make it?" she asked. She was like the first woman I met on the flight to Melbourne. I smiled at her and explained.

"Wow," she said and gave me her attention.

It was only an hour's flight and I found myself walking through the open airport runway. It's true how they say Adelaide airport is disgusting.

The noise of the all aeroplane engines were so loud and the wind whipped through the path where passengers were supposed to walk. I wriggled a little in my shirt, I'd never worn it out before, it is so special to me. I felt so strange, weird, maybe alone.

When I finally walked into the airport terminal, I took a deep breath.
Holy Shit, I thought, *Holy Shit, I did not just do that.*