



## Fabienne, ChilOut Ambassador, 2004

Fabienne, 14, is from Sydney's north shore and goes to North Sydney Girls' High. She has pen pals in both Baxter and Nauru.

### ***What Fabienne says about the politicians' reactions to the ChilOut Ambassadors***

I told the politicians that I thought our detention centres were a terrible environment for children to have to grow up in and I asked why we couldn't have an alternative to detention. Amanda Vanstone was quite defensive about the government's policy, and wasn't willing to debate the matter with us. Most of the politicians we met were lovely to us, and I was pleased to discover many of them agreed that children shouldn't be kept in detention. Some, at least, were genuinely interested in 'making the world a better place!' As for the future, I think it's important to work with them to combat the misinformation spread by some, for instance several of the comments made by Senator Vanstone!

I don't expect Amanda Vanstone to change her policy on this issue, not overnight anyway, but I hope that she has at least been reminded of the effect our detention centres have on children through the personal stories of the ChilOut Ambassadors. Also, I hope she has realised that many young Australians think keeping children in detention is wrong.

### ***Fabienne's report on the Ambassadors' trip to Canberra, 11 March 2004***

To begin, I would like to say that over the past few months I've written about four or five letters to 'the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone', which have been variously answered by 'Director, Ministerial & Executive Services Section', 'Director, Protection Program Management Section' and 'State Director, Victoria'. Far from providing reassurance, the responses I received led me to doubt whether my letters had even reached Senator Vanstone.

So when ChilOut asked if there were any young people interested "in presenting a petition to parliament and maybe meeting the Minister", I just knew this was my chance to let Amanda know exactly what I thought of her performance in office so far. As my press release stated, I wanted "to ask her why the Government doesn't seem to want to consider an alternative detention model, such as the one proposed by HREOC [the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission], or by JAS [Justice for Asylum Seekers]". I also thought I would point out the specific articles of human rights treaties Australia's mandatory detention system is breaching, and perhaps mention the negative psychological effects prolonged detention has on young children.

In the end, I didn't say all that (but will be sure to mention it in my next letter to the Minister), for two reasons. First, we only had a short time with Senator Vanstone, although of course, we were grateful for the meeting. Zahra, a ChilOut Ambassador, couldn't have put it better when she thanked the Minister for seeing us, despite her busy job "helping people". "I just wanted to remind you that there is more work to be done", she said.

Zahra, along with her friends Nahid and Sayed Reza, were the second reason it was unnecessary for me to reel off a long spiel of legalistic arguments against mandatory detention. Zahra, Nahid and Sayed Reza were refugees from Afghanistan. Nahid and Sayed Reza had spent time in immigration detention. All three could personally attest to the detrimental effects of the Government's inhumane policy.

Our breakfast with Amanda was quite emotional. Bonne talked about her lovely school friends, who also happened to be asylum seekers, detained either in Baxter or in the 'housing project', the Government's ingenious 'alternative to detention'. Zahra told the Minister about her best friend Nahid, whose TPV has almost expired. "I've lost so much already", she said, "I can't bear to lose Nahid," after which both Nahid and Joan began to cry. Sayed Reza attempted to explain the volatile situation in Afghanistan, but the Minister didn't really seem to want to hear it.

When we had all said our bit, Senator Vanstone began explaining how our immigration policy worked. She gave us the usual statistics: Australia is the third most generous industrialised country in its refugee intake; there are only 13 children in detention; and, well, Australia's mandatory detention system is just really, really effective in stopping those hordes of illegal immigrants and queue jumpers turning up on our shores, so we're going to keep it and that's that.

All the while I was thinking I could read these lines anytime on the Minister's website. However, she did give some original, rather interesting responses, which haven't been widely circulated.

In defence of her family-splitting 'residential housing projects' she claimed most of the women living in them don't really want men to be allowed to join them. If that's so, why not just create a separate, women's only enclave, and allow families to remain together?

Another interesting comment was that if the Government released asylum seekers into the community, they would immediately fall in love with an Australian, and start having lots and lots of babies, which would create lots of 'problems' and 'complicate things'. Perhaps if the immigration department sped up its processing of asylum claims, this catastrophe could be avoided.

The most illustrative view of the Government's mindset, however, came from the Minister's staffer, who had thought up a clever analogy to help explain Australia's harsh response to refugees. It went a little like this: One day, a person who lives in, say, a small, rented flat, is out walking when s/he sees a beautiful mansion. The person decides s/he would like to live in the mansion, so s/he knocks on the door [this part represents those queue jumping asylum seekers who show up uninvited on Australia's doorstep]. Now, when the owner of the mansion looks through the peep hole, s/he will either lock the door or let the person on the doorstep have a quick look around the mansion, before sending him/her home and then locking the door [this part is

representative of TPVs and refoulement]. But after having a look around the mansion, the person doesn't want to go back to his/her small, rented flat so s/he camps on the lawn. One can't blame this person for wanting to live in the beautiful mansion. But at the same time, one must surely sympathise with the owner, for if s/he let this person in, why, others would come in hordes asking to live in his/her mansion.

The not-so-subtle moral of the story is: asylum seekers are really nothing more than economic migrants. I wonder if this particular staffer is aware of the Afghan saying 'if a person shows up on your doorstep, give them food and shelter'. I suspect not.

Next on our agenda was a meeting with Stephen Smith, Shadow Minister for Immigration. He assured us that 'offshore processing centres' (read 'Nauru and Manus Island detention camps') would be closed under a Labor government, and all children would be released from detention with their families. *When* he becomes an actual Minister later this year, I hope he will follow through with these promises.

Other people we met with included Linda Kirk, Jacinta Collins, Marise Payne, Natasha Stott Despoja and of course, Andrew Bartlett and Tanya Plibersek. People we *didn't* meet with included Larry Anthony (a very busy person, I'm sure, far too busy to meet with the children he is supposed to represent) and, of course, John Howard, which was most upsetting!

Our last appointment of the morning was a meeting with the Human Rights Sub-Committee, where, as I mentioned above, we met Marise Payne and Natasha Stott Despoja, among others. As we were leaving I realised I had forgotten to deliver a very important message to Natasha, that my parents absolutely love her and want her to be the prime minister! I suppose I'll just have to write her a letter as well!

To finish, I would like to thank ChilOut for the wonderful opportunity, not only to express my views to 'our nation's decision makers', but also to meet with other young people, who, like myself believe that keeping children in detention is wrong.