
TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

REFUGEE REVIEW

TUESDAY 27 JUNE 2006

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY: ANNA FARAGO

INTERVIEWEE: PAMELA CURR

1 MS FARAGO: Hi, my name's Anna Farago. A-n-n-a F-a-r-a-g-o.

2 I'm conducting an interview with Pamela Curr. P-a-m-e-l-a
3 C-u-r-r. We're doing the interview in Brunswick in
4 Victoria, Melbourne and the date is June the 27th 2006.
5 Pamela, maybe could you describe how you first got
6 involved in asylum seeker issues and how you learnt of
7 conditions in detention centres?

8 MS CURR: Yes, it goes back quite a way. I'd always been
9 concerned about the idea of the mandatory detention centre
10 up in Port Hedland in the early 90's but it was a long way
11 away and I didn't seem - feel I could do much about it.
12 Then as time went on when there was change of government
13 in '96 and Howard Government came in there was a steady
14 tightening of things, which really came to a head around
15 2000, 2001. I was asked to go to Maribyrnong by a lawyer
16 in W.A. with a lawyer here to get some affidavits for
17 people who'd been, Iranians, who'd been transferred from
18 Port Hedland to the Maribyrnong detention centre and that
19 was the first time I'd been into a detention centre. And
20 shortly around that time also there was the first busloads
21 coming out Woomera and the first bus was mainly young men
22 who were dumped in a sleazy backpackers hotel somewhere in
23 the city and with very - no resources on a Saturday, and
24 then the third bus that came in carried women and children
25 and they were taken to an abandoned childcare centre in
26 the Northern Suburbs. A friend of mine who was working
27 with the Good Shepherd heard about it and heard that there
28 was a great need for support people because they were just
29 basically going to be dumped there. So, we arrived at
30 eight o'clock in the morning to this place where there
31 were all these absolutely jubilant, happy, joyous people,

1 mainly Iraqis, who had arrived there half an hour before
2 and they were just high on freedom and there were some
3 slabs of white sliced bread and jam and tea bags, it was
4 all pretty low key, being flung about. And they'd been
5 travelling for 19 hours and they had travelled with a
6 cheese sandwich. This was the departure fare from Woomera
7 and they described to me then what happened. These people
8 came around on a Thursday afternoon, they were DIMIA
9 people - Immigration and they called them Mr and Mrs Visa,
10 and they would walk around knocking on doors and telling
11 people they had ten minutes to get to this designated
12 space with their belongings. And the children would run
13 around after them calling out, who's next, who's next, is
14 it me, and they would just go around knocking on the Donga
15 doors and people of course were alert to it because it had
16 just started to happen, and basically, the friends that I
17 made one of the young girls, teenage daughter, she worked
18 in the kitchen. So, she kind of had an inkling, the word
19 used to go out from the kitchen how many cheese sandwiches
20 had been made and wrapped. So, they knew that's how many
21 visas and they were lucky they were the chosen ones and
22 they arrived in Melbourne. There was no accommodation set
23 up for them, government hadn't put anything in sight.
24 Immigration had met them and gave them their visas and set
25 up bank accounts and actually got them enrolled for
26 Centrelink but after that they're on they were own and I
27 drove a mother and her two children to a house out the
28 back of Broadmeadows that another woman and her son were
29 staying in and this was temporary accommodation. When I
30 went into the house there were mattresses on the floor.
31 There weren't enough cups or plates for them to all eat

1 simultaneously. I can remember I was quite shocked that
2 they actually had to take it in turns to drink and that's
3 the way it was. So, that's how it started and once you
4 make friends with people and you see yourself in them, in
5 that situation and you walk in their shoes as you try to
6 find accommodation and get them linked up, you can't turn
7 away.

8 MS FARAGO: And maybe you could describe some of the accounts
9 that these people had given to you at the time of what
10 they experienced in Woomera?

11 MS CURR: That was the early days in Woomera, things were very
12 rough. There were people in tents and there were people
13 in Dongas, there was no air conditioning. It was tough
14 times, women had to line up to get sanitary pads, women
15 had to line up to get the pill and of course, they were so
16 embarrassed, many women didn't. There was no privacy it
17 was pretty rough. The friend that I made had been a child
18 psychologist in Iraq in a school and so she and a few
19 others set up a kind of school program but it was all very
20 ad hoc. There was no education program in place. They'd
21 also been held incommunicado for some months. Now, people
22 had spent different amounts of time but I think we forget
23 that when they were taken to Woomera they were not allowed
24 to make a phone call to their family, they had no access
25 to newspaper, radio or television. They were literally
26 locked away. And they, initially they were very
27 distraught and then what happened was they had that walk
28 out, pushed over the fences and walked into Woomera
29 Township. Now, the people I was with had been involved in
30 that, they'd walked in and they sat down in the middle of
31 the road in Woomera overnight and they said it was

1 freezing cold. They weren't allowed to eat or drink.
2 Some, a few locals, rolled oranges and apples to them but
3 the guards kicked them out of the way and then the guards
4 allowed the children to have something to eat but they
5 stood over the parents to make sure the parents didn't
6 taste it. They had a rough time; they weren't in
7 detention for very long. See they'd been in six or seven
8 months and I think that was the difference. They were
9 still recovering from their voyage over, which had been
10 very traumatic, some more than others. I remember the
11 Iraqi family, the mother and the two daughters, telling me
12 how they were in this boat coming down from Indonesia.
13 They'd been on the water for four or five days and it was
14 pretty ghastly and everybody was sea sick and then it was
15 about three o'clock in the morning before the light came
16 that a boat was coming up alongside, and they were really
17 terrified because they thought it was pirates and people
18 were crying and weeping and very distressed. And then at
19 about 4.30 the light came up and the boat was right
20 alongside and they looked out and they saw these white men
21 in short pants and long socks and she said everybody
22 laughed and started to pray and they knew that they were
23 in Australia, and I said how did you know, she said
24 because we'd heard about the strange custom of men wearing
25 short pants and long white socks. So, they knew they were
26 in Australia.

27 MS FARAGO: Okay and so where had they actually arrived on
28 shore before they were taken to Woomera, the family?

29 MS CURR: They were picked up and taken to Christmas Island and
30 then they were flown from Christmas Island to Woomera.

31 MS FARAGO: And have they described to you when they first

1 arrived at Woomera, did they know that they were going to
2 a detention centre?

3 MS CURR: No, they were very, it was all very unclear. They
4 were shocked when they got to Woomera because they
5 believed that Australia was a place that would you know,
6 believed in freedom and respected human rights. So, they
7 were really shocked when they got to Woomera, yeah.

8 MS FARAGO: And were the family allowed to stay together while
9 they were in Woomera?

10 MS CURR: It was a mother and her two teenage children and she
11 was absolutely adamant that they stayed together, yes.
12 Yes, she was a strong women, her husband was actually in
13 Abu Ghraib. He'd been imprisoned by Saddam Hussein and
14 naturally they were sheer so they'd suffered under Saddam
15 Hussein.

16 MS FARAGO: Maybe you could talk about other stories that
17 you've heard from Woomera and describe how different
18 people experience Woomera in different ways?

19 MS CURR: Yes, those were the early days and they were harsh
20 but they weren't so long. What happened then is I got to
21 know people and I used to get phone calls from people as
22 they start to develop trust and you know, telling me about
23 things that were happening and then through 2002 and 2003
24 things got really bad in Woomera as people had been in
25 detention for two years, two and a half years and they
26 were starting to lose hope, many were becoming mentally
27 ill, there were children who were becoming deeply
28 distressed. You might remember the Afghani unaccompanied
29 minors threatened a mass suicide and they were taken
30 seriously because they were adamant that's what they were
31 going to do if they didn't get out and they were released

1 into foster homes. Some of them were re-detained when
2 they turned 18. There were instances of, well there was a
3 particular little girl who because extremely ill and the
4 state child authorities in South Australia recommended
5 that she be released from detention with her family and so
6 did a number of psychiatrists. And that wasn't listened
7 to and then they were transferred to Maribyrnong because
8 they were told, they said that if this child stayed in
9 Woomera it was likely that she would die. She was pulling
10 out her hair and scratching her skin, she was incontinent
11 and she was deeply distressed and I came across that
12 family in Maribyrnong. Perhaps, we could talk about that
13 later.

14 The other issue that perhaps hasn't been talked
15 about was the use of isolation. In Woomera it was very
16 arbitrary. It wasn't documented in the same way that it
17 was in Baxter but people were put in isolation and I
18 remember one man who spent 13 days in the isolation cell
19 and I rang the doctor every day for 13 days and begged him
20 to go and see him because there was a regulation in the
21 beginning, that if a person was put in isolation they had
22 to be seen by a medical officer every 24 hours. That
23 subsequently changed so that it could be a medical staff
24 or I forget the terminology but it basically included
25 nurses as well and the doctor there said he did not
26 believe in the isolation unit. He disapproved of it and
27 so he would have nothing to do with it which meant that no
28 one in isolation was visited by him. But what he did do
29 was he was also the superintendent at Woomera base
30 hospital, when things got too bad and when people were
31 really cracking he could transfer them and the department

1 couldn't stop him because he had the right to transfer who
2 he deemed fit or necessary or unwell enough, into the
3 Woomera base hospital and so that's what he did, and that
4 was a kind of a circuit breaker. The department, when
5 they moved to Baxter, broke that nexus in that they
6 contracted health care out to private contractors and they
7 were independent of the hospital and they didn't have the
8 same right.

9 But the other thing that happened in Woomera was the
10 use of strip searching and this is not widely discussed
11 because the men feel very embarrassed and ashamed. But
12 when I used to talk to them they'd say things like they've
13 taken my spirit or they've stolen something from me and
14 there were a lot of illusions and then slowly some of them
15 started to tell me what was happening, and after the fires
16 in Woomera there was a period where the strip searching
17 went on fairly constantly. It's something that's been
18 happening through the detention centres, all of them, at
19 various times and it hasn't had a lot to do with events,
20 it's had to do with the determination of the staff at the
21 time. It's a way to break people really and there was one
22 man in particular, a young whom I met at Tullamarine for
23 20 minutes on his way through. Now, he was from North
24 Africa where rape is often a method of torture and he was
25 asked to - they were all lined up and had to go into a
26 room that was screened off and had to strip and, sorry,
27 the microphone is dislodged I'm very sorry about that, I
28 hope you can get that out.

29 MS FARAGO: That's all right, that's fine keep going.

30 MS CURR: He was asked to strip down and he took everything off
31 except his underpants and then he couldn't do it. So,

1 they locked the - closed the door and they left him in the
2 room and they came back he was in that room for eight
3 hours. They came back every hour and said are you ready
4 to take them off now and he said no and he told me that in
5 that time he decided that even if he was going to be
6 killed he was not going to remove his underpants. He just
7 couldn't do it and at the end of eight hours they came in,
8 they patted him down and they let him go and three days
9 later he signed to be a voluntary deportation or removal
10 as the department calls it.

11 Now, they couldn't actually send him back to his
12 country of origin, they deported him to Syria. At that
13 time the Australian Government had some sort of a deal
14 with Syria and they could deport anybody to Syria and he
15 was - I met him as he came through Tullamarine on his way
16 off to Syria where he was sent on an eight week temporary
17 document. At the end of eight weeks he was going to be
18 illegal in Syria, he had no passport and no forwarding
19 documents. So, the Australian Government was using this
20 mechanism to get rid of people but they knew that those
21 people had no legal status when their short term document
22 was up. So, really Australia has participated in the
23 people smuggling business.

24 Things were really bad and I hope that eventually
25 that period of time will be documented because what I
26 heard happened was families were made to lie down on the
27 floor for hours on end, that there was a lot of
28 handcuffing, that no meals were served, no drinks were
29 given. There was a lot of real punishment of people and
30 people who had nothing to do with the lighting of the
31 fires.

1 MS FARAGO: So, the events or the descriptions that you've just
2 given relate to the fires, maybe explain why the isolation
3 was used, were they kicking out certain people?

4 MS CURR: Isolation was used before and after the fires, it
5 didn't have a great deal to do with it, isolation was used
6 for anybody who misbehaved but I believe that it was also
7 used as a way, a means of control. Let's not forget there
8 were a large number of people there and they had to have
9 them fearful and controlled and the way they did that was
10 by selecting certain people and punishing them. As a way
11 of pointing out that if you do this, this is what will
12 happen to you and I know some of the people who spent a
13 lot of time in isolation and who were punished and they're
14 many of the mildest, gentlest people. It's very hard to
15 imagine why that would've happened. So, yeah, no, the
16 punishment was quite arbitrary really.

17 MS FARAGO: Right, yes, okay. Maybe you could describe
18 differences that you've heard between experiences
19 detainees had in Woomera and those that were at Curtain
20 for example?

21 MS CURR: Yes, sure. The experiences that I've got is not just
22 from the detainees they were also at times staff would
23 ring, there weren't many. There was a nurse who was very
24 disturbed by what she'd seen at Woomera and she would ring
25 me from, I think she lived in Queensland, she would ring
26 me and tell me things, I think as a way of relieving
27 things. [A portion of this interview has been removed for
28 legal reasons] When the Freedom Bus went around they
29 persisted and persisted they were not allowed to visit at
30 Curtain but what happened was a select group of people
31 were taken to a nearby air base and the Freedom Bus, two

1 representatives were allowed to meet them and exchange
2 gifts.

3 MS FARAGO: Could you just explain what the Freedom Bus was?

4 MS CURR: The Freedom Bus was a bus of people of all ages and
5 stages who drove around Australia to all the detention
6 centres and I think that was in the year 2000, 2001.
7 Really a remarkable enterprise they went to Woomera they
8 went across to Perth and up to Curtin and Port Hedland
9 and they were allowed to see people but not in Curtin.
10 In Port Hedland they threw messages and food parcels and
11 biscuits and all sorts of things backwards and forwards
12 across the fence. And I met people who say they made
13 friendships with people at that time that have endured
14 till today, [a portion of this interview has been removed
15 for legal reasons].

16 I have heard some nice things that, you know, just
17 occasional things such as the Afghani people in Curtin
18 managed to grow an orange trees from pips, orange pips.
19 Really, quite remarkable and when the trees were just less
20 than a metre high, they were just growing, the Immigration
21 staff went in and dug them all up because they said they
22 were hiding weapons under them.

23 They also, in Curtin people were kept in isolation
24 for a very long time, there is some footage of Afghani's
25 quite disturbed and distressed and being dragged out by
26 their feet with their heads bumping on the road as they
27 collapsed out of Curtin. Terrible things happened. That
28 footage that came out of Curtin was a miracle. What
29 happened was these Afghani men had been locked up in these
30 rooms for months and they were going mad. They were
31 banging their heads against the wall, they were bleeding.

1 The guards went and opened the doors and they had this
2 thing about videoing everything and what happened was some
3 of the men collapsed and there was one man, they thought
4 he'd died actually and his friends were frantically trying
5 to resuscitate him. And somehow the video camera got
6 bumped and the cassette fell out and one of the very
7 enterprising detainees picked it up and threw it high over
8 the fence into the other compound where somebody picked it
9 up and they hid it. They hid it for about six months and
10 the DIMIA staff and the guards worked the camp over. They
11 took up floor boards, they dug, they looked everywhere
12 they did not find that video cassette and I don't know to
13 this day how it got out but it got out and Channel 9
14 showed it. It's very rare for us to get an insight into
15 to what happened at Curtain.

16 [A portion of this interview has been removed for
17 legal reasons] I don't think this has ever been addressed
18 but there is on record a Federal Court case, it's
19 available online, where the judge states very clearly that
20 he recognises that the complainant, that the detainees,
21 asylum seekers, had filed, after the RIT hearing, they had
22 filed in the Federal Court 13 days later, there's a 28 day
23 period, you've got to file otherwise you can't. He had
24 put the documents into the DIMIA office, there was a
25 little box on the DIMIA door at Curtain, it had been
26 stamped and yet those documents didn't reach the Federal
27 Court until the 35th day. Now, the judge went through the
28 process and said, I acknowledge that in this case this man
29 has done everything in his power to comply with the court
30 and to file the documents in time and that he has been
31 prevented from doing so by agents of the Immigration

1 Department but under the legislation I have not the power
2 to hear the case because it was filed out of time.

3 Now, it's there in black and white. I've had staff
4 tell me that they know that papers were shredded in the
5 Immigration office. Detainees would sign things and they
6 were shredded and I've had detainees tell me that they
7 were told they couldn't file because they had to pay
8 \$1,000 to lodge and they didn't have \$1,000, [a portion of
9 this interview has been removed for legal reasons].

10 MS FARAGO: Okay, with you described the office of DIMIA within
11 the detention centre at Curtain, could you explain how
12 that process maybe provided advice or not advice for the
13 detainees? Was there someone always present in those
14 offices or was it - - -?

15 MS CURR: I couldn't tell you exactly how it worked but I can
16 tell you that Immigration were in no way there to provide
17 advice or to offer support or to facilitate. They were
18 there to deter and deny right through that process and I
19 believe even today the aim of the Immigration Department
20 is not to discover or to prove or to recognise that a
21 person is a refugee it is rather to deny, to deter a
22 person from pursuing a refugee claim.

23 MS FARAGO: That leads me maybe to ask you about what
24 facilities you know of that existed in Woomera and Curtain
25 that former detainees or detainees have described, what
26 was it really like for someone to live in a place like
27 Woomera or Curtain?

28 MS CURR: I don't have a very clear picture of Curtain because
29 I only have it in bits and pieces from people who were
30 very distressed. It depended which compound you were in
31 and it depended whether you took it quietly and kept your

1 head down and didn't get noticed and if you didn't you
2 were singled out and you were punished as an example to
3 the others. So, the experience is very much on the sort
4 of people they were and for some of the Iraqis many of
5 them were professional people, they were middle class,
6 probably a bit like us. If they're getting a raw deal
7 they're not going to take it quietly they complained, they
8 were articulate. They demanded better treatment and so
9 they suffered accordingly. In some ways the Afghani's,
10 particularly the Hazaras, their method of survival in
11 Afghanistan was around keeping their heads down because
12 they were so persecuted and in some ways it was less
13 difficult for them but not always I mean, if you look at
14 the Bakhtiari family. Now, they're clearly - they were
15 singled out for punishment, I mean there was Ali
16 Bakhtiari, recognised as a refugee. His wife follows
17 later with the children and because of this thing about no
18 family reunion, absolutely no capacity, they were kept
19 locked up in Woomera. When you think about it Immigration
20 knew they knew that Ali Bakhtiari was living in Sydney and
21 he's spending his money trying to find his family in camps
22 in Pakistan and Immigration didn't tell them. You know,
23 really, one day it's got to come out.

24 But the other thing is about just the basic
25 conditions like trying to get information to your lawyer.
26 Let's not forget there were no lawyers allowed in until
27 Jeremy Moore pursued and pursued it until he got into
28 Woomera, sending faxes, a dollar a page. People didn't
29 have any money how could they send faxes, you know. The
30 phones, I mean right till this day the phones are so
31 minimal in number that in those days you could ring for

1 four days before you got onto your person. The phone
2 would be continually engaged because there'd be one phone
3 per compound.

4 MS FARAGO: So, have you had the experience of trying to call
5 and talk to someone who was in detention?

6 MS CURR: Yes, many times.

7 MS FARAGO: Maybe describe how that happened or not?

8 MS CURR: Well, you ring Baxter, let's say you ring Baxter and
9 you have to know in the old days you had to know their
10 number, you couldn't just ask for them by name, you had to
11 know the compound and quite often they'd just say there's
12 no phone or there busy can't get through, that's it
13 finish. So, you just keep ringing and ringing and
14 ringing. We shouldn't forget about the numbers, that was
15 the other thing that everybody had a number, and of course
16 it really came out in Woomera when they had this kind of
17 show Christmas thing where they brought Father Christmas
18 out and they were giving each child a present and they had
19 the media there to make it look all very jolly. And they
20 called the kids by number and the kids would come up and
21 suddenly the Immigration staff thought, this doesn't look
22 good. So, they stopped it and they just gave the presents
23 out at random but you know it's like somebody help up a
24 mirror.

25 MS FARAGO: We've talked about Curtain and Woomera maybe talk a
26 little bit about Port Hedland and how you were involved in
27 that detention centre?

28 MS CURR: Port Hedland, I became involved when I met the
29 Iranians who'd been transferred down here. We also forget
30 it was time when people could be arbitrarily transferred
31 at a moment's notice. It was another method of really

1 unsettling people, making them nervous. A lot of the
2 stuff in the camps I believe was designed to get people to
3 sign to go back. The government thought yeah, we'll force
4 them out. They didn't realise how, you know, little trust
5 the people had about going home. They would've gone home,
6 I mean, in some ways surely it stands out that if people
7 are prepared to endure these appalling conditions they
8 must have something really to fear or they'd just say,
9 blow this, and leave.

10 But one of the things they used to do and they did
11 it a lot in Port Hedland was they call people up to the
12 office by loudspeaker. The person would go up to the
13 office and then he wouldn't come back and then they would,
14 guards, would go into his room and pack the belongings
15 into a black plastic bag. Now, in the beginnings of
16 course, nobody quite knew what was happening but as time
17 went on they knew. Black plastic bag was a sign that
18 somebody was either being deported or transferred. So, of
19 course later on as we got more organised they would ring
20 us and we eventually formed NADA the National Anti-
21 Deportation Alliance and we had various ways, and
22 eventually we got quite good at blocking. But in those
23 early days people would be called up and my three friends
24 were called up it was May, and May in Melbourne can be
25 quite cool. These guys had on cotton shorts and t-shirts.
26 They were taken out of their beds at five o'clock in the
27 morning by guards. They had nothing on their feet, they
28 were put in a plane and flown to Perth and then put in
29 another plane and flown to Melbourne. I remember they
30 told how cold it was to walk through Melbourne Airport
31 with a t-shirt and shorts on. I mean, there was no

1 dignity allowed for these people and how they felt,
2 dressed like sleeping clothes, walking through an airport
3 without their possessions. That was the other thing they
4 used to do, was they used to transfer them, leave their
5 possessions behind and then they would spend months trying
6 to get their possessions back and when they did all the
7 valuable things would be gone. Because some of these had
8 bought radios, they worked in detention, a dollar and
9 hour, saved up and bought a radio. They'd been given
10 things later on people started to give them computers and
11 television sets and things, these things always went
12 missing, always. So, in Port Hedland people were often
13 transferred up there or out of there at a moment's notice.

14 So, you know, when you think about it you're
15 together with a group of people, friends in a place that's
16 very inhospitable and you've got no control over your life
17 and at a moment's notice you can just be pulled up and
18 dragged out. I've got lists of names in my book of people
19 who were just arbitrarily dragged - sent off to another
20 detention centre and they'd ring up and they'd give me the
21 names and numbers, and then we try and find them, because
22 of course the other great worry was that they'd been
23 deported, removed.

24 The other thing that happened up there was there
25 were a couple of big removals. I've been told this and
26 I'm not quite sure but there was a group of Palestinians,
27 about 17 or 18 Palestinians, who were flown out of Port
28 Hedland. Now, I was told that they were told they were
29 accepted to Canada and that they parted for a few they
30 were pretty happy and they went very willingly on the
31 plane and then they didn't go to Canada, they were taken

1 to Syria and I know that 15 of them were detained by the
2 Syrian officials for about 13 weeks and then released. We
3 don't know what happened to them in the end.

4 There were others, there was a deportation of a
5 Palestinian man, he got to Dubai and the Dubai officials
6 refused to allow him to continue the journey because they
7 looked at his documents and they said these are false you
8 must have other documents, the Australian Government would
9 not let you leave the country with such shoddy, false
10 documents and he had no other documents. They searched
11 him, couldn't find them and they sent him back to
12 Australia.

13 Now, what had happened and this did happen a few
14 times, the Australian Government said to Palestinians, if
15 you get a passport or a travel document we will send you
16 home and these guys were desperate to get out of
17 detention. So - and the Australian Government knew for 30
18 or 40 American dollars you can buy anything in the Middle
19 East. These guys would be buying documents just to get
20 themselves out of detention and the Australian Government
21 was pressuring them to do it and that's what they did and
22 this guy who bounced back I don't know what happened to
23 him in the end.

24 The other thing that happened in Port Hedland was
25 some pretty serious health stuff. The medical facilities
26 were appalling, there was a man Mohammed Salai(?) who died
27 on the table in Perth. Now, he'd been sick for months and
28 they just ignored him. He got steadily more depressed and
29 lost weight and eventually they took him to Perth and he
30 required some abdominal surgery but the anaesthetist said
31 he was so depressed that he would not give him an

1 anaesthetic. So, they had to find a way to reduce his
2 depression quickly, and I heard about this and it's
3 documented, the psychiatrists had a terrible choice to
4 make. The way to reduce depression is through shock
5 therapy, electric ECT, Electro-convulsive Therapy and this
6 man had been tortured with electricity and they had to
7 make a decision and they did that and he was operated on
8 and he died on the table.

9 There was another boy, a boy, 12, who developed an
10 eye infection was badly treated. He didn't get good
11 treatment and it continued it got worse and it got worse
12 and he lost the sight in one eye. He is now released and
13 he's practically blind. At one stage I was rung one night
14 because this boy's father was so distraught that he was
15 unable to get the proper care for his child. He'd been
16 prescribed these drops and the Immigration staff just
17 couldn't be bothered getting them and he knew that his son
18 was deteriorating and he couldn't see, he couldn't
19 breathe, he was in pain, and the father went into the
20 kitchen and wrapped the electric cord from the kettle
21 around his neck and tried to hang himself. Well, he
22 wasn't very successful and one of the other detainees
23 stopped him and rang me and said look, he's just
24 desperate.

25 There was something in Port Hedland, the medical
26 facilities were appalling, the doctor's god knows where
27 they came from and you know, there was just neglect
28 really. I mean, it's not peculiar to Port Hedland, it
29 happened in other places. And, you know, we after what
30 there were 11 deaths of varying, either suicides or
31 others, in detention so you know. You think it's a place

1 with so called 24 hour medical care they didn't do too
2 well, did they.

3 MS FARAGO: Now, you've actually had first hand experience
4 visiting Maribyrnong. Maybe you could just describe when
5 you first went to Maribyrnong, what you saw and we'll talk
6 maybe about how it's changed but initially maybe describe
7 in detail what you saw and what you felt when you were
8 there?

9 MS CURR: Well, in the beginning there weren't the electric
10 fences and you know, not electricity in Maribyrnong, that
11 was in Baxter, but the razor wire and all the gates and
12 the airlocks and all that rubbish it was pretty easy
13 actually. In fact, what, in 2001 some activists drove a
14 truck in their put a ladder up against the wall and
15 climbed on the roof. You can't imagine that happening now
16 but when you went in you had to produce ID, driver's
17 license, give your details, have these bracelets put on,
18 you had to fill out forms every time same thing,
19 relationship, all this rubbish and you have to put friend,
20 you can't put anything else.

21 One night I was there with this elderly man and he
22 had a young student staying in the house and she'd been
23 taken into detention for breaching her student visa and he
24 wrote 'house parent' and the guard said 'Well, you're not
25 getting in mate'. They're very rough and ready and I said
26 to him just put friend and he said, why, I'm the house
27 parent, I said, no, but you have to put friend. So, he
28 filled it in and he was allowed in but I know others not
29 allowed in.

30 So, you went through scanning machine and all this
31 rubbish. You're not allowed to take anything in, no food,

1 no pens, no paper, no nothing. Of course, we delight in
2 thwarting those things. You're not allowed - really it's
3 like prison visiting I imagine.

4 MS FARAGO: So, when you are going to visit someone in
5 particular, do you go and find them yourself or where do
6 you actually go?

7 MS CURR: You go into a visit centre there's a room and the
8 person is called out and if the guards feel a bit anti, if
9 you've been a bit you know, haven't been friendly at the
10 desk they take a long time to call them out. Things have
11 changed a lot now, see the numbers were very big then,
12 there was some, a particular guard who often ran the visit
13 centre and she delighted in making things as unpleasant
14 for people as possible. They have all sorts of rules such
15 as, if you take food it be only be taken in clear
16 containers, chocolate can't be taken because it can't be
17 wrapped in foil. Look, just a multitude, like you know,
18 they change the rules too. One week you can four pieces
19 of fruit, the next week you can only have five you know,
20 this sort of constant shuffling and changing of the rules
21 I mean, I think for the detainees it must drive them
22 crazy. I mean, we only go in there for an hour and a half
23 and you leave that place and you feel so angry you want to
24 just kick the walls because they're rude, they're
25 obnoxious, they're obstructive and there's all this
26 pettiness you know.

27 MS FARAGO: Are you able to have private conversations or is
28 that - - -?

29 MS CURR: Yes, but you sitting in a big room with glass walls
30 or you could go out into the courtyard but that's all over
31 now. The guards sort of mooch around too you know, and

1 make a point of smoking out there near you and stuff like
2 that. So, you know, you're very much under surveillance.

3 MS FARAGO: You described a courtyard and you said it's no
4 longer there anymore?

5 MS CURR: They've been doing alterations, I haven't been but
6 I've heard recently that the courtyard's gone. There so
7 called visit centre was supposed to be enlarged but that
8 doesn't seem to have happened. Maribyrnong is one of the
9 smallest and the most - they're closed. There's no open
10 space see, after Viliami jumped off the basketball pole
11 they locked that outside area, no one was allowed to go.
12 I remember we, when you think about it's so petty.

13 We spent 12 months advocating for access to the
14 outside area and they would do things like say, yes all
15 right, we're going to open up the outside area. So, they
16 would take one detainee with two guards outside for half
17 and hour and they were stand out there with him. How
18 jolly was that. You know, it really is mind boggling to
19 think of the small petty ways that they can make life
20 difficult and miserable. I remember one night after
21 visits on a Sunday night I came home and I got a phone
22 call from one of the Iranians and he said look, after you
23 left, you know, there's been all this discussion about how
24 the centres are not really punishment. Ruddock's great
25 line was they're just a convenience really, what did he
26 call it, I just forgotten the phrase but anyway he was at
27 great pains to point out it wasn't because Ruddock's a
28 lawyer and he does know that constitutionally it's illegal
29 to lock people up without a trial and without due process.
30 So, this guy rang me and he said look, they've given us a
31 list of 25 occupations, pass times, hobbies he said, that

1 we could have and we've been asked to tick the boxes and
2 you see whether you wanted very much or just a little bit
3 or whatever. And so, he went, he said now, there's this
4 one called pottery he said, no, poetry is that making
5 pots? No, I said poetry and you know, the Iranians are
6 very good at poetry. Then he went through and there's
7 rock and roll dancing and one of the wags had said only if
8 we get partners and all these yoga, cooking et cetera, et
9 cetera. And then one of the Pakistani guys who spoke very
10 good English said there was a space at the bottom for
11 suggestions so, he put in three suggestions and one was
12 pole vaulting, the other one was tunnelling and the third
13 one was abseiling. So, they do have a sense of humour.

14 But you know, the other thing about Maribyrnong
15 you've got four people, sometimes five, sleeping in a
16 space that is three metres, the beds what was is 3 metres
17 by 2 metres. I've seen photographs of the rooms because
18 the guys are not, they take pictures and gave them to us.
19 Double bunks, a tiny space between the two which often a
20 mattress was put on the floor, a space for one chair. No
21 doors so that at night if they hung blankets up they were
22 ripped down because the lights are left on in the hallway
23 and if the guys go to sleep and pull the blankets over
24 their heads so that they can sleep, the guards come in.
25 It depends sometimes each hour, sometimes they don't, pull
26 the blankets down and shine a torch in their faces.

27 See, we forget even now talking to you we forget the
28 many ways and this is what they did with families too.
29 Out in Woomera and Port Hedland they would do these night
30 checks three, four, five times a night. Imagine having
31 little children they crash into the Donga and demand the

1 tag you know, they all have these tags and of course the
2 kids used to lose and then they'd get into trouble and
3 shine torches in their faces. So, night after night you
4 would have broken sleep. That sort of thing, it demounts
5 to torture, really.

6 MS FARAGO: Yes, so we were talking about Maribyrnong and
7 the changes. Maybe describe the type of people that
8 you know that are currently in Maribyrnong and those
9 that were previously in Maribyrnong, has it changed the
10 sort of - - -?

11 MS CURR: Very much, very much. There was a time when there
12 were quite a lot of asylum seekers there. There was a
13 time when there were people living there for two and three
14 years. You could imagine living in those tiny as one man
15 said, you know, there's no place in this detention centre
16 there's no place where you can even cry on your own, you
17 know. The shed, it's just so crowded, but certainly it's
18 changed now. The people who are going through are often
19 overstayers, the numbers are much smaller. See, there's
20 often 40, 50 in Maribyrnong now, there as time when it'd
21 go up to 90 you know, and it's a place I think it was
22 designed for 76. So, you know, it was very crowded.
23 There were quite a lot of detainees they'd be transferred
24 down out of other centres and there was that constant sort
25 of, movement and roynalling of people around the detention
26 centres, very unsettling stuff.

27 There were times when there were little kids, women
28 and children in there. I think of an Afghan, a young
29 Afghan women, with three children she actually had the
30 third baby here, her husband had been killed, disappeared
31 in Afghanistan and she was there for two years and she

1 went back, went back to nothing. God knows if she's still
2 alive.

3 There was an Iraqi family there and I know we
4 advocated from May through till October to try and get
5 those two little girls, 13 and 8, into school. Now, how
6 hard was that. There's a school not three kilometres
7 away, and the State Government didn't bother about it. We
8 tried everything, State Government, Federal Government,
9 Immigration Department, those kids didn't go to school for
10 months. Just appalling stuff they wouldn't get away with
11 it now because you know, more people are aware but they
12 got away with a lot because Australian's hearts and minds
13 were turned against these people and they didn't think of
14 them as human beings. They didn't think of them as
15 parents, as children, they didn't think what it would be
16 like to have their children denied the right to go to
17 school. Denied the right to go out and have a laugh, have
18 a bit of fun.

19 MS FARAGO: I think towards the end of the interview we'll talk
20 about the current situation and maybe get you to comment
21 on that. I know you were very involved, having heard from
22 some asylum seekers about their concern for someone they'd
23 met in Baxter?

24 MS CURR: Yes.

25 MS FARAGO: And that turned out to be Cornelia Rau. Could you
26 maybe in detail describe how you heard of Cornelia Rau?

27 MS CURR: On the 29th of November 2004, I had a phone call from
28 a detainee and the following day from a visitor and they
29 told me about this young women who was in Baxter, who they
30 said had mental problems or was sick. There was something
31 wrong with her, she shouldn't be there. What had happened

1 was the detainee had got back in the van after going to
2 the dentist, I think it was in Port Pirie and found this
3 young woman there, and he thought she was new so, he was
4 talking to her about what it was like in Baxter and what
5 would happen, trying to be helpful. And then he said,
6 she's strange, and as it turned out we thought that she
7 had just arrived in Baxter in the 29th of November in the
8 back of the van but that wasn't so. She'd actually been
9 in the family compound and then she'd been put over in to
10 management because she didn't behave according to them.

11 Now, the people described to me is that she's acting
12 very strangely, she talks to herself, she cries a lot,
13 she's very unhappy, she walks into people's rooms and just
14 walks around as though she's not in someone's space, she
15 takes her clothes off. Strange, she just takes her
16 clothes off for no reason and they thought that she was
17 very unwell. In fact, a woman detainee I spoke to said to
18 me you know, she didn't cause any harm but it was very
19 strange for us to see a woman take her clothes off, but
20 she didn't hurt us, you know.

21 Anyway, that was November, December I was told that
22 she was a German citizen. That's what they thought she
23 was, a German citizen. So, initially I rang the German
24 Embassy a number of times. I rang - there's a distressed
25 nationals desk in Melbourne and that apparently is the
26 area to ring and I asked them if they were aware of her,
27 whether they would go and visit, that she clearly needed
28 their support and I really ran into a brick wall you know.
29 They were polite but non-committal.

30 Eventually, someone did acknowledge they knew about
31 her and that they were looking into it and I said but look

1 she's really ill and then I went away on holidays to
2 Mullumbimby and I got a call. I'd sort of, kept an eye on
3 it and one of the local rural Australians for refugees
4 said look, I think she's gone. We asked Immigration where
5 she was because we couldn't find her and the detainees
6 didn't know where she was and so someone from Immigration
7 one of the guards said, no she's gone. Which was a lie,
8 she hadn't gone at all and she popped up again. I
9 remember on Boxing Day and by that stage I'd rang a German
10 journalist I knew and I said look, this is what's
11 happening and he said he had connections with the Embassy.
12 I said you ring them and see if you can get anything out
13 of them and that's what he did and they said yes they knew
14 about it but they didn't think she was German and they
15 didn't know who she was. And then I rang her because all
16 we knew that her name was Anna. She told the - some guys
17 that she was 19, she told others she was 25 and they
18 didn't seem to question it a great deal and she said her
19 name was Anna Smit or Anna Brotmeyer(?). Now, when I rang
20 her I spoke to her, she was - she faded in and out, she
21 seemed unable to follow the thoughts but she told me that
22 she was in 1986 which made her 17, 18 the age of my
23 daughter and then she told me a whole lot of different
24 dates and places and she also told me her name was Anna
25 Brotmeyer which was the first time I'd heard.

26 So, I rang Immigration and I said look, I have this
27 information can't you do something about her out of
28 detention, she's clearly mentally unwell. Look, they
29 weren't interested. I contacted IDAG, the Immigration
30 Detention Advisory Group, HERIOC, the Ombudsman, every
31 body you could name. Peter McGauran's office, Vanstone's

1 office, everybody and nobody would do anything.

2 I came back from holidays she was still there and
3 she wasn't - she was deteriorating. I was hearing a lot
4 of stuff about her by this stage she's in red one, she's
5 eating dirt, she's distressed, the guards are having to
6 physically push her back into the room. As one guy told
7 me she's not getting her rights, I mean, I think this is
8 terrible he said when you're in red one you go on this
9 regime and you're allowed out of your room for two hours a
10 day and she was only getting half an hour a day and he
11 said she's not getting her rights. Then the guys were
12 telling that the guards were watching her showering
13 because there were cameras in the room. There was just a
14 whole lot of really awful stuff going on and that's when I
15 went to Andrea Jackson and asked her, I had also put some
16 stuff through the German internet, backpackers,
17 travellers. I'd sent a thing to Germany to the
18 newspapers. I really tried everything and then I went to
19 Andrea Jackson and asked her if she would put an article
20 and then on the Friday Chris Rau rang me and said, Anna's
21 my sister, Cornelia.

22 MS FARAGO: Pamela you were talking about how Cornelia Rau's
23 sister got in touch with you after her story came out?

24 MS CURR: Yes, and that really had the - opened up the
25 detention centres in a way that many terrible things
26 before hadn't, there was something about blonde, blue eyed
27 Cornelia, ex-Qantas Air hostess, you know if you were
28 writing it as a spin doctor you couldn't have better. The
29 fact that she had been and she was an Australian resident,
30 the fact the she was detained in a detention centre and
31 lets face it, it was legal. It was all legal and she was

1 sick, she'd first of all been detained in prison and then
2 detention centres under our immigration system really
3 shone a light into detention centres.

4 One of the Sri Lankian detainees said to me, you
5 know, Cornelia was an angel for us but she doesn't know
6 it. Because even the things - the terrible things that
7 have happened to children, nobody - Australian public have
8 distanced themselves. They have created a them and us and
9 they don't see that they're people like us but Cornelia
10 changed that and then there was the subsequent - the
11 Palmer enquiry. Now, Cornelia came out in the first week
12 of February, we shouldn't forget that at that stage even
13 with all the shock of locking up mentally ill people
14 etcetera, and the disclosures that came out around
15 Cornelia, that a Adelaide barrister Clare O'Connor had to
16 go to court in order to get mental health treatment for
17 her clients, and it was only when the - in the court case
18 in April that eventually immigration relented and allowed
19 these people to be transferred into the Glenside Hospital
20 in Adelaide.

21 After the Palmer report there were a lot of
22 recommendations concerning the mental health care of
23 detainees, and the department - the Immigration Department
24 stated that they would - that the culture - they
25 identified a culture that needed changing, culture. No
26 human beings were responsible, it was the culture. If we
27 look a year later, lets have a look and see what's
28 happened. Immigration promised that they would reform
29 their cultural, they made agreements about detainees
30 getting better health care, better mental health care and
31 what have we seen in that time.

1 The Glenside ward became, there were at one stage I
2 think, 15, 16 patients in their all from Baxter Detention
3 Centre. There was a special ward the Rural and Remote
4 Board. The guards who initially were on their doors and
5 beside their beds lolling around, were pushed further and
6 further back by staff so that it really opened up and it
7 became a proper mental health facility where people were
8 being treated with an aim to helping them get better.
9 Quite a lot of detainees were released on a variety of
10 visas into the community and it looked for a time as
11 though the department was acknowledging that it was no
12 longer acceptable to keep people locked up when it was
13 affecting them and making them sick and that when
14 psychiatrists and doctors made recommendations that
15 persons needed to be removed from the detention centre for
16 the sake of their health that that was the right and
17 proper thing to do.

18 Most recently what we've seen, which I think is very
19 disturbing, is that almost all the patients except one
20 were removed from Glenside and transferred back to
21 detention a number of them at the, expressly against the
22 treating doctors advice. [A portion of this interview has
23 been removed for legal reasons] They were transferred
24 back to detention, one man only lasted 48 hours before he
25 was then sent 1,400 kilometres north to Queensland to a
26 private psychiatric facility. The others have been
27 transferred from Villawood and there they are up to the
28 Toowong Private Hospital, which is now the hospital of
29 choice for the mentally ill in our detention centres.

30 [A portion of this interview has been removed for
31 legal reasons] The big issue for the government is that

1 when you lock people up for years and years and they do
2 not know when they're going to get out they go mad, they
3 become ill, they become depressed, psychotic and they
4 become extremely ill.

5 It is an issue for the government because they know
6 that by continuing this system that they're making people
7 sick. And then you look at the government legally they
8 have the right to do it because they have sought that
9 right all the way to the High Court where it has been
10 granted by the High Court judges who have said that it is
11 quite legal to detain a person in an Immigration Detention
12 Centre in Australia for the term of their natural life. I
13 think that is shocking but that is what we have in place,
14 it's legal, it's not moral.

15 MS FARAGO: Yes, as a ex-nurse I guess there's for you this
16 sense of duty of care and the government's duty of care
17 and yes, maybe you could just speak about how you think
18 professionally coming from the background - - - ?

19 MS CURR: Well, as an ex-nurse I am really shocked at the
20 collaboration that has occurred at times between health
21 personnel and the Immigration Department. Now that's an
22 easy thing for me to say now, I don't know whether I would
23 always have felt like that but it seems to me as though we
24 are losing our moral compass. We are losing the ability
25 to detect what is ethical and what is not ethical and I
26 say that knowing some of the things that have happened.
27 In one instance I know that the way in which we got a
28 young boy out of the Port Hedland Detention Centre when he
29 was going blind and was not getting the correct care and
30 was going to go blind was because one gutsy eye specialist
31 stood up and said publicly what he believed was happening

1 and said that the child would go blind unless he was
2 removed from that centre at least to a city detention
3 centre where he could get the specialist care he needed.

4 For that - he said it on Channel 9, a Channel 9
5 director rang me afterwards and said I'm just telling you
6 the letter that we received where the Immigration
7 department wrote to Channel 9 and said that this doctor
8 was unethical because he had betrayed his patient's trust,
9 how dare they. Now that's what you see when you see gutsy
10 people standing up. I've seen it most recently with a
11 women who came from Nauru. She had been sent down here on
12 two occasions. She had a lot of health problems and
13 because on the second occasion the doctor said you cannot
14 send her back to Nauru she will come back again and she
15 will be even worse, she cannot get the care she needs and
16 he stood by his words and he went public, the Immigration
17 Department backed off. So you see brave people standing
18 up to them but then on the other hand you see other
19 instances.

20 Most recently in Brisbane, an Afghan family and a
21 nine year old child have been held incommunicado in secret
22 in Brisbane. When they were in a public hospital in
23 Brisbane and an Amnesty representative and a member of the
24 Afghan community went to see the family and to offer them
25 support, two guards blocked their way. The superintendent
26 of the hospital complained to the Immigration Department
27 about the disturbance of having people, community
28 visitors, going to see people and guards and as a result
29 of that a third guard was installed around the bed of a
30 nine year old child and then the family were removed from
31 the hospital. Not because medically it was time to go but

1 because the hospital found it all a bit confronting and
2 that child then went back subsequently and had surgery and
3 they all participated, nobody would break the silence.
4 They all participated in collaborating with the
5 Immigration Department. Now I'm not saying they're bad
6 people, what I'm saying is that they have no moral compass
7 and they allow themselves to be bullied.

8 On another instance, there was a man in the Baxter
9 Detention Centre, a young man, who became very ill for
10 five days. On the fifth day, the detainees got very angry
11 because no doctor had been called to see him and they
12 believed he was critically ill. They made a protest where
13 they sat outside his room and they said they wouldn't go
14 to bed and they wouldn't leave until a doctor came. So in
15 come the guards all toggged up in their riot gear to have a
16 good old time and one of them took a good look at the man
17 in his room lying in the bed and realised how critically
18 ill he was. So the riot thing was called off. They
19 removed the man, took him out to the medical centre, he
20 was swiftly removed to the Port Augusta Hospital where he
21 was taken to theatre and operated on and had his appendix
22 removed but it was too late it had burst releasing puss
23 into his abdomen and his peritoneal cavity.

24 So he was then flown to Perth, to Adelaide, to the
25 Royal Adelaide Hospital where he was put into intensive
26 care and put on heavy doses of intravenous drugs and he
27 was a very sick man for 48 hours. But he was young and he
28 was resistant and he survived. I spoke to the surgical
29 registrar at the Adelaide Hospital who told me that he was
30 so angry that this man had been allowed to sit in that
31 condition in the Baxter Detention Centre, he said he

1 could've died and he's only 28. [A portion of this
2 interview has been removed for legal reasons].

3 MS FARAGO: Another very controversial issue that's come out of
4 detention centres is the fact that children have been
5 detained. You might want to talk about incidents or
6 experiences of those that you've met, or you've talked to
7 about how children have had to endure detention.

8 MS CURR: I think the detention of children is really one of
9 the worst things that we have seen happen. Coming on the
10 back of the Bringing Them Home Report which was released
11 in 1999 where we see what we did to another group of
12 children of the other, the other the undeserving other,
13 namely Indigenous people where we scooped up these
14 children took them away from their families and put them
15 in institutions many places where they were brutally
16 treated. Then to think that we've done it again now it's
17 not Indigenous children, now it is refugee children. They
18 too have - what there must be something in the national
19 psyche that, you know, we profess to love families to love
20 children and yet we can do this.

21 If you think what we did to the children in Woomera,
22 in the early days the way in which they were treated. I
23 remember mothers telling me that they had to wake their
24 babies at seven o'clock in the morning and take them to
25 the dining room in order to get them breakfast. Unless
26 they took the babies to the dining room they couldn't feed
27 them because they weren't allowed to take food back from
28 the dining room for their children. They had to
29 physically take them. It was cold out there in the
30 desert, it's cold in the early morning and their babies
31 hadn't slept through the night, they'd been woken up with

1 these checks and lights and torches and then dragged out
2 there in the morning. I mean the food for the children
3 was appalling. They weren't used to the diet that we were
4 giving them. There were all sorts of issues around milk
5 and about you know, basic things for babies and then you
6 come along to some of the really appalling things that
7 happened. Such as the unaccompanied minors in Woomera.

8 A little girl in Woomera who became so desperately
9 ill that she was ripping the skin off her body, pulling
10 her hair out and was suicidal. After 18 months, the
11 family was transferred to Maribyrnong extensively to get
12 medical care for this child. They were in Maribyrnong for
13 three weeks and on a Sunday the family went in for Sunday
14 lunch into the dining room, the mother and the father and
15 the youngest child sat down and realised the girl wasn't
16 with them. The father - they were so acutely aware of the
17 need of this child, the father got up and raced out of the
18 room and went into their bedroom and into the bathroom
19 where he found the little who is 11, shower curtain around
20 her neck and a bottle of shampoo in her hand trying to
21 commit suicide, jumping.

22 The father grabbed her in his arms, raced into the
23 dining room weeping, distressed. The guards grabbed the
24 child and called an ambulance, the mother and the child
25 then were taken. I went to visit that night and I was
26 there at seven o'clock to see my Iranian friends and they
27 said look, come and talk to this man he's very, very upset
28 and they told me what had happened and at seven o'clock at
29 night, this had happened at two o'clock in the afternoon,
30 he had not heard from his wife or from the hospital or
31 from anyone about his child whether she was dead or alive

1 and he was sitting there pulling his hands round and
2 round, hyperventilating, he was in a terrible state.

3 So I went home and I rang the hospital. I took a
4 punt and thought it would probably be the Western General.
5 I rang the Western General casualty and I, because I'm
6 used to hospitals you know how to get through and I spoke
7 to the sister in charge in casualty. I said look, could
8 you connect me to the mother of the child and she said no
9 and I said okay I can understand that but I said what I
10 want you to do is I want you to dial the detention centre
11 and give the mother the phone so she can speak to her
12 husband and let him know how the child is. The nurse said
13 to me you don't know what it's like, I can't do that
14 they're all over us, we can't do anything. I said who,
15 she said the guards, they won't let us do anything. Now
16 she wouldn't tell me how the child was but I knew the
17 child was alive by the fact that, you know, they were
18 still talking about her.

19 They wouldn't allow husband to know and do you know
20 that the child was then taken off to the Austin Hospital
21 at one o'clock in the morning and the mother was returned
22 to the detention centre. So the father didn't hear until
23 two o'clock in the morning that his child was still alive.
24 Then the next day there was a whole lot of - I can't
25 remember how long it took for the mother to get back to
26 the hospital, but the father was not allowed near the
27 hospital for some time a week or so and then they were
28 eventually all admitted to the hospital, to the Austin,
29 but the pointless, senseless cruelty of it. How much
30 would it have cost somebody to say look, your daughters
31 okay, your wife's with her, she will be back later. No,

1 none of that was offered and I saw it, I was there that
2 night. They have no soul.

3 MS FARAGO: It's this real kind of issue with just basic
4 communication isn't it, you know. It seems that within
5 the detention centres there's this right or maybe I
6 shouldn't go into it, but the way that people have the
7 right to communicate to people in their care is different
8 from just basic human rights of finding out where you're
9 at.

10 MS CURR: No, well and I suppose we should remember that in the
11 early days the guards in the detention centres were ACM
12 staff and they were rotated through the prisons to the
13 detention centres, prisons, to the detention centre and
14 they resented the refugees because the refugees don't
15 think of themselves as prisoners. They believe that their
16 human beings and they've got human rights and they say we
17 are not criminals we've done nothing wrong and so of
18 course the guards resented that because they weren't
19 coward. They resented and they stood up to the guards and
20 that's why I think there was so much trouble.

21 MS FARAGO: Pam, we might just change tact here a little bit
22 and could you explain what your current role is and how
23 you're now hearing about detention from people that you
24 deal with professionally in your current role?

25 MS CURR: I'm campaign co-ordinator with the Asylum Seeker
26 Resource Centre. We are the largest agency offering
27 services to Temporary Protection Visa holders and Bridging
28 Visa holders. People who get permanent protection we
29 assist them for six months while we're getting them into
30 mainstream services. Our centres operates on a wing and a
31 prayer, 96 percent of our funding comes from philanthropy,

1 donations and fundraising. We get a small four percent
2 grant from the State Government. We have around 11 paid
3 staff, some full time some not and we have over 600
4 volunteers. Technically, it shouldn't work but it does
5 through good will it works.

6 We've taken the view that while we're providing
7 services and we do, we provide medical services five days
8 a week, counselling, psychiatric, we have food bank, we
9 have lunch everyday, we have a drop in centre, we have
10 legal services. While we're providing those services, we
11 also see that we must challenge the oppressive system that
12 requires people to live under this regime. So that's - my
13 role is to educate the community, to lobby government, to
14 work with the media, to expose, to advocate on behalf of
15 and to campaign. To look at the discriminatory systems,
16 the oppressive systems and to campaign against them and so
17 we've been involved in campaigning against mandatory
18 detention. We were campaigning for permanent protection
19 for the Iraqis, we had an Iraqi campaign. We campaigned
20 against Temporary Protection Visas, we would campaign for
21 work rights, for Bridging Visa holders. There's a whole
22 range of campaigns and then there are the smaller things
23 that happen and I've been involved in advocating for
24 people and using that experience to look at the systems
25 that are imposed on people.

26 For instance, in February 2005 Cornelia was released
27 from detention and she was clearly mentally ill. At the
28 same time there was a young man, a 19 year old boy from a
29 minority group, from the Middle East, who had been
30 tortured and he was in detention at the same time as
31 Cornelia. It took us heavy advocacy work from the end of

1 April until the first week of June before we could get him
2 out. This boy had been tortured in a way that his hands
3 were misshapen, his back was crooked. Anyone spending
4 anytime with him could tell that he was in an extremely
5 fearful state and yet every day guards and Immigration
6 staff walked past him and ignored him. He was in his room
7 rocking backwards and forwards for months, feed by another
8 family who left in March and he really was in a terrible
9 state. It's I think - it demonstrates the lack of
10 accountable, the lack of humanity that they could just
11 ignore this boy and just turn off and let him. He was
12 getting thinner and thinner and once more, it wasn't as
13 though they, you know, didn't acknowledge that he'd been
14 tortured.

15 In his case notes when he was refused refugee
16 status, they acknowledged that he'd been tortured. We've
17 moved to the stage now where once torture used to regarded
18 as a prima-facie reason for acknowledging that somebody
19 was in need of protection, but no longer. Many of the
20 people in our detention centres have been tortured and of
21 course having this treatment on top of that is what makes
22 them so mentally unwell. So that boy - that was I worked
23 with Sister Jan Keo(?) from (indistinct) from Canberra
24 together we lobbied. The detainees also helped us, we had
25 some young fellows and they're very adept with IT and they
26 took photographs of this boy's hand and they took, with
27 his permission, and we sent those to the politicians and
28 of course the undercurrent was if you don't do something
29 we will have to go to media, we'll have no choice.

30 That's in some ways the way we work is trying to
31 encourage the government to do the right thing. But we're

1 also saying to them and it did work for a while because
2 they were in such a bad light following Cornelia, they
3 were inclined to do the right thing but most recently
4 there was a couple in Baxter and the wife was four weeks
5 off giving birth to her child and I was saying can't you
6 release them from detention so she doesn't have her baby
7 in the detention centre and they said there is a ruling
8 for children and families but not for unborn children. So
9 I said what you're going to take her to the Port Augusta
10 Hospital and she's going to have her baby and the next day
11 you're going to wheel her to a plane and send her to some
12 city around Australia, surely you can do better than that.
13 Now you would think that is logical but it took us weeks
14 and weeks before we could that couple out of detention.

15 There have been other cases, everyday I hear the
16 justification from Howard's cohorts about asylum seekers
17 coming here by boat or by coming by plane unannounced that
18 we're blocking real refugees from seeking asylum in
19 Australia and they bring up the Darfur situation. See all
20 these people in Darfur are suffering and they don't have
21 the same opportunity. Well the government did have an
22 opportunity, an 18 year old boy from Darfur who had
23 escaped a massacre in Teena(?) a massacre which is
24 documented. They only have to Google it and they can see
25 pictures, movies of the Janjaweed and the militia, fire
26 bombing the houses and shooting people. This boy escaped
27 that. He arrived in Australia by a miracle and what did
28 they do, they took him out to Baxter and put him in an
29 isolation compound for six days by himself. Eighteen
30 years old, left him there and when he cracked they went
31 and interviewed him and refused him a visa. From Darfur,

1 a place where there's an acknowledged genocide in
2 progress, but not acknowledged by the Australian
3 Immigration officials they're too thick.

4 The judgment we've read, the officer clearly
5 couldn't discriminate between the two conflicts in Sudan.
6 There is a conflict in the South in which there's a
7 tentative peace process in place and then there is the
8 conflict in Darfur to which the world has no answer. The
9 UN is begging for people to go in and nobody is doing
10 anything and hundreds of thousands of people are dying and
11 yet Immigration said it's quite safe to go back to Sudan
12 he could live somewhere else. They couldn't even Google
13 his name, his name and designates his tribe it's listed on
14 the Amnesty site. You can just Google it and they say
15 this particular tribe are at risk, most at risk. You
16 know, the Immigration Department are staffed by idiots
17 you'd have to think sometimes or they are so filled with
18 the need to deter and deny that they just overlook the
19 reality.

20 When these politicians say yes we're denying people
21 from Darfur, I say well you had your opportunity and
22 you've denied him. Anyway, again we campaigned and
23 because of Cornelia and because, you know, we said it's
24 not going to look good everyone knows there's a genocide
25 in Darfur. The one teenager who managed to knock on our
26 door and ask for our help and we turn him away, they knew
27 it wouldn't look good in the media and they released him.
28 But, you know, this is what my work involves and there are
29 other people around in other agencies doing this work.
30 Some of it's behind closed doors, a lot of it actually,
31 sometimes it makes me very frustrated, I wish that we

1 could say we could paint the public picture but the fact
2 is, the Immigration Department have really got us. They
3 know that the most important thing is the client, the
4 detainee, the asylum seeker, the individual's rights and
5 what you can achieve for them and often if you go public
6 the Immigration Department is a highly vindictive group
7 and they will slice people off. So we have to go behind
8 closed doors and we have to shut up. Sometimes about
9 things that we really would rather not but we have no
10 choice.

11 MS FARAGO: I'm interested to hear - I think now we've talked
12 quite a bit about what happened to asylum seekers while
13 they were in detention, are you in your organisation
14 seeing a lot of ex-detainees and how detention has
15 affected them and how is that manifesting now, now that
16 they're in the community?

17 MS CURR: This is the next issue for us and we certainly are
18 seeing it and we've been endeavouring to get some research
19 projects, we're making contacts with universities and with
20 faculties to get people, we need data. We know what's
21 happening but in order to achieve change, you know, we're
22 talking to hardhearted you've got to produce the research
23 data and that's what we're doing. We produced a report
24 'Dumped at the gate' where we detailed the experiences,
25 you know, post Cornelia, many of the long term detained
26 were released from Baxter. They weren't released in one
27 group, they came out in dribs and drabs often with no
28 notice, you know, they're called up in a hour and they're
29 out the gate an hour later. Now at Port Augusta they've
30 organised themselves. There was a time when people would
31 be literally dumped at the gate and it's, you know, four,

1 five kilometres from the nearest town out there in the
2 desert. It's happened at Maribyrnong too but people pick
3 them up, they get into a motel overnight, Immigration pay
4 for that now and the next morning Immigration put them on
5 the bus to Adelaide and then they are either flown to the
6 capital city of their choice or they stay in Adelaide.

7 But what happens is that they come out the gate with
8 their bags and if they have no money they're given \$220
9 and that's to tide them over until they're linked up with
10 Centrelink. What we found is that when we've met people
11 at the airport, at Tullamarine, Immigration come along and
12 sign off on their visa it takes five minutes and then
13 they're on their own. Immigration tell them to go to
14 Centrelink, they don't know where Centrelink office is, go
15 to Medicare, get a tax file number but they literally have
16 to do this on their own. The first night out, unless
17 they've got friends, they've got nowhere to stay. We've
18 had a situation where a Chinese man came out six o'clock
19 at night in Tullamarine, I had my mobile turned off, the
20 Immigration Department officer rang me wanting to know
21 what to do with him because he didn't speak English and
22 had to no friends and knew nobody in Melbourne and so she
23 put him into a motel for \$80 in Elizabeth Street and got
24 me at eight o'clock in the morning and I said well bring
25 him down to us at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and
26 that's what she did. Because she has no resources or
27 facilities or is to do anything more than that.

28 Then we got a Chinese community speaker in and we
29 got him to Medicare, tax file number, Centrelink and then
30 he had no where to stay. The Brigandines are fantastic,
31 they have a convent at Ardeer and they have some houses,

1 they had a spare bed so we got him a place to stay, we got
2 him some English classes. But we're not funded and the
3 community is having to pick up the government's
4 responsibility because they set in place a system that
5 basically is denying asylum seekers the equal rights. The
6 other thing that's a real problems is that they are put on
7 to this discriminatory special benefits. Now it's 89
8 percent of what you or I would get if we were unemployed
9 but it's got a whole pile of discriminatory mechanisms
10 attached to it, for instance they lose dollar for dollar
11 for every dollar they earn. Now somebody who's just come
12 out detention who has been locked up for four or five
13 years, six or seven, they're not used to working, they've
14 never lived in this country, they don't know their way,
15 the best way into employment is to get them into part time
16 employment.

17 But for instance we had a young man who earned \$120
18 a few weeks ago. He was thrilled, he'd enjoyed the work,
19 he got \$90 in the hand, he lost \$120 off his special
20 benefit so he's actually worse off for working. Unless
21 they can get full time work it's not in their interests.
22 Housing, housing in Melbourne is hard if you're an
23 Australian. I've got a young niece who is looking for a
24 place and has been looking for three or four weeks, she's
25 Australian, she's got references, she can't find a place.
26 These young fellows they can't find places to stay. I've
27 been out with families looking, some of the rat holes.
28 They can't afford more than \$160, \$170 a week and then
29 they've got to convince an agent when they've got no
30 references, never lived here, no job, to let them rent a
31 place. It is so hard and then they get into a place like

1 these young boys that I'm going to see this afternoon,
2 they're sleeping on the floor with one blanket each.
3 We've got some mattresses, I mean, the hearts of
4 Australians their are many with good hearts and you've
5 only got to put out a cry and out it comes, mattresses
6 television sets, washing machines but of course that takes
7 a mechanism to get the stuff there and that's what we do
8 at the ASRC. It's about getting people resourced
9 physically but then the mental state.

10 One of things - people come out of those compounds
11 in Baxter, they get lost. You send them somewhere they
12 just can't get lost all the time. Imagine living in this
13 little space, you could only see the sky and you can't
14 find your way. Of course, English is not their first
15 language so it's hard and then I've had people say to me
16 look, in the daytime I know it's not true but at night
17 when I got to bed I keep dreaming that Immigration are
18 coming to get me, they're going to take me, and it's very
19 hard they can't sleep, they have nightmares because they
20 feel that at anytime, particularly on the Temporary
21 Protection Visa it's got no permanency and of course the
22 other thing is family reunion. Men say you go to the
23 supermarket and who do you see, you see mothers and
24 children and I think of my children. It's very hard for
25 them.

26 MS FARAGO: Maybe you'd like to finish up with a special person
27 or message?

28 MS CURR: Yes, I actually have a poem but I can't find it
29 written by a father who had to take his baby back to
30 Baxter in the days and went to the hospital and picked up
31 his wife and child and took them into the Baxter compound

1 but I guess as things stand now we've still got a big
2 fight on our hands. Look what the governments trying to
3 do at the moment, reintroduce Pacific Solution 2. The
4 Australian Government has got people posted very untidily
5 all around the world. At the moment we've got - we're
6 paying IOM to warehouse people in Indonesia. We've just
7 moved the three West Papuans who were up on Horn Island
8 they've been sent to Papua New Guinea, we've paid Papua
9 New Guinea to take them. The family, well we'll leave the
10 family for the moment. There are two men still on Nauru
11 from Pacific Solution 1.

12 The Temporary Protection Visa is still in existence
13 denying people family reunion, denying them the
14 opportunity to really make a life for themselves. The
15 Bridging Visas, the denial of the right to work, we
16 haven't talked a lot about it but at our centre one of
17 major groups are people on BVE. No right to work, no
18 right to Centrelink and they get locked up if they're
19 found working. So of course they're coming into us for
20 food bank and medical and all those things and some people
21 have been living like this for years. I believe that our
22 Migration Act needs an overhaul. The 1958 Migration Act
23 is a bastardry, piece of bastardy really. It's been
24 amended and changed always for the worse. I believe that
25 we need a Royal Commission into what has happened over the
26 last six years because there have been so many instances
27 of cruelty, of oppression, of denial of rights that it is
28 undermining us as a society and unless we face up to it
29 and unless we address it, god help us in the future.

30 We look at reconciliation and the Indigenous issue,
31 we were moving forward to a stage where we were

1 acknowledging and we were wanting to change the way
2 Indigenous people were able to live in this country, to
3 assist them, to walk beside them and we've stopped and now
4 we've started on another group. At a time when more than
5 ever we need human beings and where we need to be able to
6 work together to develop means of trusting each other, of
7 acknowledging the differences and not wanting to punish
8 people for being different but acknowledging the
9 differences and the richness that it brings to our lives.
10 I mean, my journey with the asylum seekers of course many
11 of them have come from Middle Eastern communities of which
12 I'm not familiar with and it's opened my eyes to many of
13 the misconceptions and I see the richness that they can
14 give us. That capacity for family, for pulling together,
15 for sharing which we as an individualistic Western nation
16 are forgetting how to do.

17 There are many ways in which they can enrich our
18 culture, so I guess I'm hoping that in the future
19 Australians wake up and force their government, because
20 let's face it real change doesn't come from government it
21 comes from the people and from the hearts of good people
22 that we wake up and we change what we're doing now.

23 MS FARAGO: Thank you, thanks very much.

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