APPENDIX 2

The Australian feature story: full written text

*Wait in Fright* by Andrew McClennell and Mike Seccombe

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**Para 1** The story of Moses in the bullrushes is one, which would be known, at least dimly, to most Australians.

**Para 2** When Moses was an infant, his parents placed him in a basket, leaving it the reeds of the River Nile. They did it so the story goes, to protect him from a pharaoh's decree that all male Hebrew children be slain at birth. With biblical irony, the great prophet of the Jewish and Christian faiths was found adrift by the pharaoh's daughter and raised in the royal court. The bible makes it clear that Moses' parents took this action out of desperate love.

**Para 3** Yet when some boat people, fleeing their own persecution, allegedly did something similar off northern Australia, they were condemned for behaving in a way which was alien to the Christian culture and its Judeo-Christian basis.

**Para 4** The point is that the moral of the story very much depends on the way it is told. Sympathy and compassion can be encouraged or denied according to the way events are related.

**Para 5** When one of the Government's most senior advisors on immigration, Neville Roach, resigned this week, he cited the way the Government was telling the story of boat people as a principal reason for leaving.

**Para 6** The labelling of asylum seekers - emotively and incorrectly - as queue jumpers, illegals, criminals and even potential terrorists - by numerous members of the Government, including the Prime Minister, John Howard, was worse, he said, than the policy of detention itself, harsh though that was.

**Para 7** He deplored the way the Government has attempted to create a sense of crisis about the asylum seeker problem, to create fears of an "impending flood" of arrivals. Australia faces a minor problem by world standards. While it processed 8000 asylum applications in 2000, Britain processed 50,000, Germany 100,000, the U.S. and Canada 420,000. We have about 2000 people in detention, of whom 447 are Afghans. Even worse than the terminology used, says Roach, was the way the Government had sent the message that these people were fundamentally different from us, less civilised, and presented a threat to the fabric of Australian society. Roach argues that this threat to the social fabric comes from the language of vilification, which suggested the Australian government was not simply controlling population flow, but protecting Australian civilisation from alien values.

**Para 8** It was deliberately conveyed, he says, in "constant statements to the effect of 'We don't want people like this in this country. People who throw their children overboard.'"
Para 9 Roach, of Indian descent, was one of the first beneficiaries, in 1961, of the abandonment of the White Australia policy, and considers the growth of Australia since into a relatively harmonious multicultural society to be a "modern social miracle". His expertise as an adviser to government was not in policy to do with asylum seekers, but in policy to attract business migrants, and broad multiculturalism.

Para 10 But he was aghast as popular prejudice grew to encompass not just those unauthorised arrivals by boat and those in detention, but of Australian citizens of Islamic faith, Middle Eastern or South Asian appearance.

Para 11 It touched his own life recently when his wife was putting the garbage into a bin outside their home, by a woman who suggested "people like you" more normally just threw rubbish in the streets. That's how pervasive the negative stereotyping had been: a woman going about her business outside her comfortable home of Sydney's North Shore, 40 years an Australian, married to a man who ran IBM in this country for 15 years and was now chairman of Fujitsu, was assumed to be uncivilised.

Para 12 And when you ask Roach for suggestions on how the damage done to Australia by the asylum seeker controversy might be undone, his first suggestion is "abandon the rhetoric of division".

Para 13 "Even if they don't change the policy, that at least could stop, " he says.

Para 14 He has little hope that will happen so long as politicians see electoral advantage in it.

Para 15 During the federal election, the issue worked for the Liberals.

Para 16 Now the protests by detainees against their treatment at Woomera detention centre in South Australia is seeing a replay of the issue in that state's election campaign.

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Para 17 We saw yesterday the Minister [Phillip Ruddock] and [South Australia’s Services Minister] Dean Brown talking,” Roach notes.

Para 18 “Dean Brown looking very solemn and saying how appalled he was. And it was very emotive and you had to remember there was an election around the corner.”

Para 19 Brown found it “barbaric and totally unacceptable within our community” that 60 odd people in Woomera had sewn their lips together as a protest, including allegedly, one or two children whose parents inserted the stiches.

Para 20 Only later did a spokesman for the Immigration Minister concede that far from sewing their mouths shut, most of the protestors including all the children had a single stitch inserted at the corner of their mouths. And the “children” referred to were the same age as Australian kids who pierce lips, tongues, eyebrows and navels to dubious aesthetic effect, with their approval.
Para 21 That is not to suggest that the lip sewing episode, like the hunger strike by more than 200 Woomera residents, is not an indicator of a problem in Australia’s migration and detention system. But does it point to barbarism on the part of the inmates or the system?

Para 22 The mounting evidence, which the government never publicises, is that it is the latter. In March last year, long before the Tampa hove into view, the Commonwealth Ombudsman John Taylor, reported that long periods in detention could lead to mental illness in detainees. Evidence from counsellor case studies file notes written by former counsellor at Woomera, Wayne Lynch, obtained by the Herald, tell the story of the state of mind of the people there.

Para 23 “I have just seen [detainee] and will recommend to Woomera medical officer that he be admitted to Woomera hospital,” one of the files dated early last year says.

Para 24 “Upon visiting him, he was lying in the foetal position, crying, and found it difficult to communicate with me. He is clinically depressed, has not presented for meals today (and on previous days) and is unable to mange activities of daily life.”

Para 25 “Details emerge of another man: “[Name deleted] presented for counselling one week ago, stating he is feeling very stressed, manifested by insomnia, a nervous tremor in his hands and grief for his family [back in Iran].”

Para 26 One of the saddest stories, reflected in the case notes, is that of Mohammed Dawood, a man the Herald reported on in March last year. A Palestinian, Dawood became so disturbed after his stay in detention that, the Herald understands, Ruddock allowed him to be released into the community for treatment.

Para 27 When the Herald reported on him, he was effectively in solitary confinement under observation in the Maribyrong detention centre in Melbourne to stop him from harming himself.

Para 28 At one stage, he “broke a florescent tube and started eating the glass,” Ruddock’s spokesman told the Herald last year.

Para 30 According to Lynch’s case notes of October 2000 at Woomera; “his current psychological problems began about five weeks ago when, as a consequence of having been advised his visa had not been granted, he began displaying signs of his very labile emotional behaviour - crying and irrational one minute and calm and rational the next.”

Para 31 Dawood said he wanted to kill himself, and made several attempts.

Para 32 The Herald revealed in December that 12 people from Woomera had been referred to psychiatric hospitals this financial year.

Para 33 Dr Bernice Pfitzner, who worked at Woomera for nine months and is a South Australian Liberal MP, expressed concern on how the Government was handling people at the centre, saying they were going mad after six months there, in the absence of information about their applications.
Para 34 She claimed that in the past six months acts of self harm had been occurring almost daily as people were fed up with spending so long in the centre. They were not being given refugee status and not being sent home either (this derives particularly from the fact that Australia cannot return failed asylum seekers to Iraq or Afghanistan).

Para 35 Some of them have been here for two years and they’re still in limbo, [told] nothing about whether they can stay or go home, she said. “It would be a relief to some of them to know they are refused.”

Para 36 In December, the Herald reported that Australia was holding 497 people who had been in detention for more than a year. Of those, 66 had been detained for between 24 and 36 months, and 19 had been held for more than three years.

Para 37 Ruddock rightly blames court appeals for some detainees being kept for such a long period and also blames detainees for not volunteering to go home, but they are a minority of cases.

Para 38 The usual claim from the Department of Immigration is that 80 percent of the cases are decided within 14 weeks. But at times, particularly after large inflows of boat people such as at the end of 1999 and again at the end of last year, this has slowed dramatically.

Para 39 Woomera opened in November 1999 and yet its first releases were not until June 2000, after the mass breakouts and protest at three detention centres. This meant that many people had been in detention for seven months. A similar situation is emerging with the 238 Afghans at Woomera. Of those 222 have been there for between five and 12 months, and 16 for more than a year.

Para 40 The Immigration Department has refused “for operational reasons” to tell the Herald how many Afghans now in Woomera have had ‘primary decisions’ – that is, initial assessments about refugee status – made about them, but primary decision making on Afghans stopped on November 19.

Para 41 Chris Conybeare was secretary of the Department of Immigration from 1990 to 1996 and was in charge when the Port Headland centre was set up, to deal with the previous wave of boat people mostly from Cambodia and China.

Para 42 He supports, in general, the policy of detention of asylum seekers but warns: “they’re not criminals and they are entitled to respect. It may be there are some trouble makers among them but to deal with them in the broad brush crude way is a sure fire way to increasing the problems of managing them”.

Para 43 He blames the increasing problems in Australia’s detention centres on what he terms a “conveniently slack” approach to management. “Let’s just say there’s not much care being taken to avoid provocation,” he says.

Para 44 Detention centres do not have to be made unnecessarily unpleasant; the fact of detention is enough, he says. He also criticises the “provocative and aggressive” way in which the government communicated the cessation of processing of the claims of Afghans.
Para 45 Conybeare is one of those who supports the “exploration” of some alternatives to the razor wire solution, such as concessional treatment for women and children.

Para 46 Yesterday, in a significant shift in Opposition policy on the issue, Labor leader Simon Creane endorsed exactly that approach, but Conybeare sees little chance of the government going the same way.

Para 47 The government has painted itself into a difficult corner,” he said.

Para 48 But if Howard felt cornered yesterday, it didn’t show. He would not be “intimidated” by headlines or criticism, he said, and argued that in making conditions more humane for asylum seekers through any type of release “you’re going to encourage more people to come to this country.”

Para 49 Really? Australia is the only country that has a policy of mandatory non-reviewable detention of asylum seekers.

Para 50 Many countries detain people for a period if they arrive without documentation but then release them into the community while they are being processed. There are no indications that a more humane approach has exacerbated the problem of asylum seekers. Indeed quite the opposite.

Para 51 Sweden, for example, had a detention regime similar to Australia’s in the early 90s, and suffered many of the same problems; attempted break outs, hunger strikes, self-harm among detainees and public controversy. After an inquiry in 1997, the country changed its approach. People seeking asylum spend just a couple of weeks in detention upon arrival and are then released into supervised custody of family or community centres.

Para 52 No child can be held in detention for more than three days, or six days in extreme circumstances. Not only did the violence stop and protests, the incidence of racially motivated violence in the general community fell. That’s what can happen when you look for solutions, rather than election issues.