



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

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CHILDREN IN DETENTION CENTRES

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (7.33 p.m.): There are 500 children seeking asylum in detention centres under the control of Australian authorities. Some of these children are there without their parents, some have been in detention centres for more than two years and some have a father who has already been granted refugee status. These children are being exposed to an unacceptable environment, to people being traumatised, suiciding, attempting suicide and self-mutilation. The many traumatic events in their young lives, prior to seeking refuge on our shores, are now being compounded by the everyday horrors they are witnessing in our detention centres, leaving these children profoundly distressed. Yesterday, an alliance of medical authorities raised the alarming conclusion that these psychologically damaged children will suffer long-term damage. There are reports that children in detention are regularly hurting themselves and that some are attempting to take their own lives.

There is no doubt that if these children were in such an environment in the general community State Community Services would intervene and place them in their care. Philip Ruddock responds to the plight of these vulnerable children in an appalling manner. Amongst his inane responses are, 'It is the parents fault that they are in this situation ... responsible parents should not allow their children to witness such incidences ... incidences of children self harming are simply acts of attention seeking ... these children are not in a dangerous environment but may be facing some difficulties.' The heartless and shameless Philip Ruddock has the gall to continue to wear an amnesty badge. Imagine a proper youth suicide prevention policy if it ignored attempts at suicide by saying that they are attention seeking.

Queensland child protection policies are based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child ratified by Australia 12 years ago. The basic tenet of this convention is that the best interests of the child are paramount. Many human rights aspects in this convention are being contravened by Australia's policy of detaining children. Detention should be a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time, and all children should have equal access to services such as health and education. Philip Ruddock refuses to accept that there are alternatives to mandatory detention for children, alternatives to these horrific places which are akin to concentration camps where children have a number and not a name.

Ruddock's recalcitrant position is a national disgrace. There are alternatives that stop short of imprisoning children which would meet Ruddock's stated concern of keeping track of asylum seekers. But this is not his major concern. Detention for Ruddock is based on his government's policy of deterrence. Ruddock should release all children and young adults to community service departments, to non-government organisations, to individual families or, ideally, to open detention in the presence of their parents.

Australia has a right to protect its own borders. However, Australia must also respect international law. We have an obligation to respect the human rights of both citizens and non-citizens, our children and other people's children. Australia should not choose which human rights will apply and to whom. Children seeking refuge are refugees because they need protection and not because of the way they entered Australia.

HREOC will soon present a damning report about children in detention at Woomera. This report will underline why the Howard Government has been increasingly reluctant to be scrutinised by UN

bodies. Undoubtedly, Australia's proud history of contribution to international human rights has been tarnished by its treatment of refugees.

Australians pride themselves on favouring a fair go for all and, in particular, the protection of children from all forms of harm, exploitation or abuse. There is nothing fair in locking up 500 children without charge or review by a court because they arrive without a visa, the vast majority of whom are later found to be refugees. There is nothing fair about treating those who are fleeing terror as terrorists and in the process demonising them. There is nothing fair about treating children in a way that will cause them long-term harm. We all should be ashamed of Australia's treatment of children in our detention centres. I certainly am.
