

Jessie Taylor

Culture Shock: Australian Youth Responding to Refugees

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At 23, Jessie Taylor has a background of activism and advocacy, particularly on behalf of refugees in the community and in detention. She is on the board of The Justice Project, with Julian Burnside QC, The Hon Malcolm Fraser and Hugh Evans (Young Australian of the Year 2004). Since early 2004 Jessie has been the Director of the Local Response team of the Oaktree Foundation. Jessie has published a number of articles on her experiences with refugees, their stories, and her observations, following visits to the Baxter and Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centres over the past three years. As well as weekly visits to Maribyrnong, Jessie has taken around 130 visitors through the gates of the centres and into face-to-face contact with the realities of detention.

She is a regular speaker to School, Church and Community groups, on various topics relating to Human Rights and Refugee Policy. She has co-ordinated public awareness events and letter-writing campaigns (both to politicians and detainees), liaised between asylum seekers and their lawyers, supported asylum seekers during RRT and Federal Court proceedings, and assisted detainees to understand correspondence, procedure and the law on refugees in Australia. Jessie has been selected as the Castan Centre Global Intern for the Australian Delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva for 2006.

Abstract

Jessie will speak of her experiences visiting detainees at Baxter and Maribyrnong. She will speak of the challenges of bringing the refugee issue into the consciousness of her generation of young Australians. Among her observations and stories will be an examination of the complexities and difficulties involved in advocacy and the inevitable personal bonds formed.

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From a distance, the Baxter Detention Centre looks like an oasis. Against a backdrop of desert, it reflects the grey-green of the gum trees that fringe the centre's perimeter. As you draw closer to it, you will see a huge piece of white graffiti, spray-painted on the road, a remnant from protests past. As you drive over it, the words 'SHAME AUSTRALIA' will disappear under your wheels. You're almost there.

We were a motley crew who went to visit. A handful of law students, two young school teachers, a girl with six part-time jobs, and a recent recipient of a temporary protection visa, Bahram, who had until recently been detained at Maribyrnong Detention Centre in Melbourne's inner-western suburbs where many of the group are regular visitors. The thread that we all have in common is that somehow, somewhere along the line, we have been sewn into the lives of some people living in detention, and in some small way, we will never quite be the same again. We were on a mission to visit a friend who had been relocated to Baxter from Maribyrnong. We had arrived in Port Augusta late on a Monday night. After a fitful night's sleep we were ready to seek out Baxter and embark on the first of our visits.

On the day of our visit, it was a beautiful sunny day with bright blue sky and cotton-wool clouds. Leaving town, we drove north over a long, sweeping bridge that curves above the sparkling ocean. Just after the bridge, we took a left, and promptly drove over what seemed to be the threshold of civilisation. At first, we were driving down a nondescript suburban street – house, house, tree, car, house – then suddenly, there was nothing. Nothing in front of us except a long, narrow road, snaking its way through the dusty red desert that stretched out as far as the eye could see. The bright, noisy chatter subsided. For the next 20 minutes the car was almost silent.

As we arrived at the front of the detention centre, the huge metal gates squealed open to allow a truck to enter. We watched – lost and small as children observing the secret business of grown-ups – as the gates clanged shut, swallowing the truck between the two massive steel barriers marking the entrance. Somebody commented on what it must be like for detainees to be driven through those gates, not knowing where they are, what awaits them, or when they'll be coming out again. We tried to imagine what it would be like to arrive here, to be dumped and forgotten in the middle of nowhere. It really is the middle of nowhere.

On that beautiful Tuesday morning, we emerged from the car, feeling very, very far beyond our comfort zones. It was, for all of us, our first visit to the infamous place where Cornelia Rau was, in the words of her sister Christine, 'locked up in isolation... treated like a caged animal'. What were we thinking, spending a week of our holidays in a place like this?

We went through the rigorous security checks, had our IDs checked, our bags locked away, our jackets X-rayed and our bodies metal-detected (twice), before being funnelled through various cages and locked doors and, finally, spat out into the Visits Centre. Baxter's Visits Centre is portable classroom chic: fluorescent lighting, plastic tables and chairs, and a kitchenette. We wandered outside to a grassy area with metal tables and chairs in a strange sort of mock-picnic area set-up, with a brightly coloured set of children's play equipment stuck awkwardly in the middle of it. We sat on some plastic chairs for a while, staring at our shoes and wondering what to do with ourselves, until we heard the click of the doors opening, and the detainees emerged into the courtyard. The next few hours, indeed the next few days, are hard to describe. We heard stories, we witnessed the obvious physical and mental deterioration of our friends, and we were all infused with the sense of black despair and hopelessness that sits like a heavy fug over the entire place.

Many of the people we met just shook their heads in disbelief, saying 'what am I doing here?' and, 'I don't understand' and, 'this wasn't supposed to happen'... We met a heavily pregnant woman who chain-smoked and drank far, far too much coffee. Her whole body trembled and shook violently, betraying her extreme anxiety and depression. Two weeks after we saw her, she was moved to a psychiatric ward. I hope her baby will be OK. A Cambodian man performed a card trick. His sleight of hand was remarkable, and I could find no possible explanation as to how he had done it. I said, 'how did you do that?!' He walked away grinning, and threw an enigmatic glance over his shoulder to where he had left me, protesting cross-legged and befuddled on the grass. A moment passed, and another young detainee stubbed out his cigarette and walked over to me. He crouched down on the ground and mechanically explained the trick to me, his eyes mute, devoid of sparkle and magic. After 5 years in detention, there is no space in his life for mischief, silliness or laughter.

At the end of each visit, the guards hand back each detainee's ID tag, a gaudy yellow plastic card which reduces each person to a washed-out mugshot, a barcode and a Baxter ID Number. Our friends' reactions to this ritual are difficult to watch. Some dismissively throw it aside, while others clip it back onto their clothes, resigned to this plastic summary of who they are in detention. As we said goodbye on our last day, a 23-year-old man stood, in a plastic room surrounded by plastic furniture, staring at the little plastic card that bears witness to his plastic identity.

Over the course of the few days we were there, the boys we were visiting admitted that they rarely eat more than a bowl of cereal a day. They each puff through two or three packs of cigarettes and typically

crawl into bed at dawn for a few hours of blank, shallow rest. Pale and listless, they appear to enjoy neither appetite nor energy, happiness nor hope. And those are just the physical symptoms...

Thousands of pages have been written about the psychological effects of long-term detention. The suicide rate in Australia's immigration detention centres is 10 times the community average. In Australia, there is no other known situation where pre-pubescent children regularly attempt suicide. Thankfully, since the end of July 2005, there are no more children in detention centres. But let it never be forgotten that in our detention centres, children as young as seven have slashed their own throats, starved themselves, deeply cut their wrists, thrown themselves onto razor wire, hanged themselves with bed sheets, drunk cleaning products, and more. This is what our nation's system of mandatory immigration detention can do.

And yet, this is not a political issue, because the policy has had bipartisan support since its inception in 1992.

As we sat at the Visitors' Centre at Baxter, we certainly didn't talk about politics. We didn't talk about the *Migration Act*, or the legislative amendments that have deliberately disallowed our friends access to judicial review of their cases. We didn't talk about the tactics of fear, alienation and propaganda that have been employed to win votes over the past decade, at the expense of hundreds of suicidal children and damaged adults. We talked about our friends' lives. Their lives in the past, their hopes for the future, how much they miss their families. And how they really, truly fear for their lives if they are returned to their mother countries, so much so that they are willing to spend months, maybe years, in a place like Baxter, despite it making them crazy.

One month after we returned from Baxter, it was my birthday. I received a little parcel from my friend in the detention centre. Inside the envelope was a smaller envelope, and inside that envelope were some flowers. This friend had often said that he wanted to send me flowers, and, lacking all power to do so, he had found a flower patch inside Baxter, picked some beautiful, colourful flowers, put them in an envelope and posted them to me. It was a simple, beautiful gesture of love and thanks, and it broke my heart.

Statistically, most of our friends will be found to be genuine refugees. But at what cost? Why must our policy take so many years to work, strip people of their dignity and humanity, and damage so many lives in the process of trying to help them?

As with so many things in life, the experience of visiting people in immigration detention centres can be expressed on the parallel planes of the mundane and the profound. On one level, it's taking a few hours out of a Sunday morning to spend what can be a slightly awkward visit session sitting in a plastic

chair, passive smoking and crumpling up a used plastic cup, before leaving again, slightly relieved that another visit is over. On another level, that same exercise is a foray into the human face of injustice. The awkward silence is actually a massive void. It is steeped in unspeakable apology for the gulf between my life, and yours. The powerlessness of knowing that there are only so many times I can shake my head in dismay and regret for what is happening to you. The strange reality that outside of the context of your detention, we probably would never have been friends. The knowledge that hearing the explanation once again of why and how you came to be in detention in Australia won't suddenly make everything clear to me.

In this past year particularly, my understanding of the clouded mess of refugee policy has deepened quite a lot. But I don't mean it's become any less clouded or messy. Actually, as I have got to know more people, learnt about the twists and turns of their cases and become more intimately involved in their lives, things have certainly become more complex, more difficult and a lot less clear-cut. An important lesson to learn is to expect humanity – fallibility, weakness, confusion and brokenness, as well as good hearts belonging to good people. Because aren't we ALL a mixture of those things...

In attempting to broaden young Australians' engagement with this issue, there are a number of problems to be faced. The first is the lack of any material or ideological hunger – generally speaking, there doesn't seem to be a strongly focused striving for justice amongst Australian youth. The second is a simple want for exposure to the issues. People simply are not aware of what has been behind the razor wire of detention centres here and in the Pacific. There is not much less sexy than the slings and arrows of administrative law, under which a large portion of the refugee issue falls. Nobody wants to hear about our obligations under international law, or how the *Migration Act* doesn't REALLY make arriving in a leaky boat 'illegal'. But as soon as they're at a party, or a barbecue with a beer in their hand talking face-to-face with a refugee about their experiences in detention, you can bet good money that they change their tunes pretty fast. Those turn-arounds are the stuff I live for. I want to say thank you again to Bahram and Ali, for telling their stories here this morning. It is only by their willingness to speak about what has happened to them and their friends that our children and our children's children will ensure that Tampa, SIEV-X, Children Overboard and Cornelia Rau can NEVER happen again. Thank you.