



## Fear of the known

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Anne Delaney hopes her controversial documentary will make many viewers ashamed of being Australian. Or at least make them feel so embarrassed about the Kafkaesque treatment of asylum-seeking refugees under John Howard's so-called Pacific Solution that they put pressure on the Rudd Government to reopen the files of those who risked their lives to appear in her film.

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*A Well-Founded Fear* has already made front-page news. Immigration Minister Chris Evans demanded answers after learning of the documentary's claim that up to 20 asylum seekers rejected by Australia were killed after being sent back to Afghanistan to face the Taliban.

"If we're going to make these life-and-death decisions," Delaney says, "we have to get them right."

The film follows the travels of Phil Glendenning, who is the director of Sydney-based social justice body the Edmund Rice Centre. For six years, the passionate but soberly spoken Glendenning has travelled to some of the world's most dangerous hotspots on the trail of would-be refugees who were rejected by Australia. So far, his team has confirmed the fate of more than 250 returnees in 22 countries, including Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Columbia. Some rejected by Australia have been allowed asylum in New Zealand, Britain, the US or Canada.

Glendenning's crusade was inspired by a simple question: how do the Australian authorities know they made the right decision when ruling particular asylum seekers could be returned safely to their country of origin if they never checked what happened to them afterwards?

Delaney realised there was an important film to be made soon after being introduced to Glendenning in 2006. By then, Glendenning had presented his early findings to the Howard government, which had rejected them as baseless and inaccurate.

To prove Glendenning's allegations one way or the other, Delaney's film crew would have to accompany him as he met returnees he had tracked down - in places such as Kabul in Afghanistan, Tehran in Iran and Damascus in Syria.

The film was commissioned by SBS while Howard was still prime minister, a decision Delaney describes as "brave, given the political climate". But the Rudd Government had been elected by the time filming started last December (the delays were caused by Taliban offensives or the reluctance of the returnees to be interviewed on camera). Eventually, the delay worked in Delaney's favour.

"Their attitudes towards going public clearly changed," she says. "I think they had just got so desperate. These people really wanted their story told. They wanted the Australian public to know what had happened to them."

Glendenning says the film accurately reflects his work. Some 400 Afghans who were detained on Nauru were told by our immigration officials it was safe to go home. Of those his team have tracked down, "95 per cent are now living in danger", he

says.

The cruellest irony is that those who believed the Australian Government live in fear, while "those who remained in Nauru and did not believe what Australian officials told them are now living in Sydney or Melbourne".

"I stood with one man in Kabul who knows that if he hadn't believed the words of the Australian Government, his children would still be alive today."

Does Glendenning feel ashamed of what was done in Australia's name?

"Yes. I feel the Australian people were sold considerably short. Not only were these [refugees] lied to, the Australian people were lied to by a government that decided to exploit vulnerable people for its own political advancement."

But weren't we all complicit? Shouldn't we have asked more questions? Put the Pacific Solution under greater scrutiny?

"I think that's right," Glendenning says. "But it goes primarily to leadership. These people jumped into fishing boats with their pots and pans. They weren't terrorists. Terrorists travel first class."

Arguably the film's most shocking revelation is the plight of the biduns born in Kuwait who arrived in Australia without passports because they are officially stateless. To be rejected, they needed travel documents - otherwise, they couldn't be sent to a country willing to accept them. The film claims some were allowed to leave Nauru on documents Australian officials knew to be false.

Others were issued with six-month visas to Syria, a country with an appalling human rights record, described by President George Bush as one of the four rogue states in his "Axis of Evil". Once the visas ran out, they were liable for arrest.

"Why Syria?" Delaney asks. "Some questions need to be asked."

***A Well-Founded Fear*** airs on SBS on Wednesday at 8.30pm.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/11/17/1226770329274.html>