

TELEVISION

The fear detective

ANDREW HAMILTON | NOVEMBER 13, 2008

A Well Founded Fear.
November Films. SBS
Television, Wednesday 19
November, 8:30 pm, [website](#).

At the beginning of *A Well Founded Fear* we hear Mr Howard declaring after Tampa, 'We decide who will come to Australia and under what circumstances they will come'. His declaration is received with applause from his Liberal Party audience.



The cameras then leave Australia with Phil Glendenning, the Director of the Edmund Rice Centre. They dwell on his stay in Afghanistan and Syria to track down some of those whom Australia had decided would not come here. They show in the faces of simple people the costs in human life, opportunity and dignity of Australia's decision. They also show the brutal cajolery that was the Australian way of implementing Mr Howard's promise.

The narrative thread that holds the documentary together is the search in difficult places for the returned asylum seekers. Visually it is sometimes tests the viewers' credulity, emphasising the desire for secrecy of the people whom they seek, while at the same time filming conspicuous Westerners going in search of them. But the documentary is powerful because it allows ordinary people of extraordinary spirit to tell their stories. For the viewer their magnanimity in the face of barbarous treatment tempers into compassion the rage and shame that are the natural response to such stories.

The documentary is also blessed in Phil Glendenning. He is the ordinary gruff Australian bloke abroad, a Merv Hughes or an Ian Chappell, not naturally articulate but enduring and not to be fobbed off with smooth talk. He mostly listens. His silent listening is the moral centre of the documentary. His few comments on the significance for Australians of what he hears are the more telling for their sparseness.

The documentary does not pursue the way in which Mr Howard's declaration was translated into Australian law and its administration. It simply shows how human beings experienced these things and the cost to them of the arbitrary exercise of power. But the larger picture also bears reflection.

Those despatched to Syria were from a tribe persecuted in Kuwait and denied citizenship. They arrived with necessarily false passports before Tampa,

were detained in Port Hedland, and their claim for protection was denied. The task of the Immigration Department was to cajole them to leave Australia. This was difficult because they were effectively stateless. It offered them the alternatives of living indefinitely in the harsh detention they had already experienced or an opportunity to leave Australia. According to those interviewed in the documentary, Department officers tried to persuade them to leave on the false passports with which they had come. Others were given Australian travel documents that allowed them to enter Syria on a visa that expired on arrival. They were thus illegal and subject to arrest and beating if found without papers. They still live in that daily fear.

Those returned to Afghanistan arrived after Tampa and were detained on Nauru. Their claims were adjudicated by the Australian officials under an arbitrary and flawed process that was not reviewable by Australian courts. They were Hazaras, persecuted in Afghanistan. The interpreters supplied by the Department were from the ethnic group that persecuted them. Their claims were rejected.

Because the Government had decided that they would never be allowed to come to Australia, the Department officers were able to offer them the alternatives of perpetual detention on Nauru or a return to Afghanistan, then declared to be safe. Subject to such cajolery in an environment where they had no way of testing the veracity of those advising them, and where their psychological health was anyway under siege, they agreed to return to Afghanistan. Some were killed. So were members of their family, including young children. Others fled to Pakistan.

That is what it means in practice to decide who comes to your country and under what circumstances. The documentary is not finally about blaming people. It is about a well-founded fear. The refugees had a well-founded fear of persecution, but it was not recognised. Mr Howard exploited a badly-founded fear among Australians that they would be overrun by refugees. Both Australians and refugees, it is clear, were entitled to have a well-founded fear that the policies of the Australian Government and their administration by our public servants would be shamefully corrupted.



Andrew Hamilton is Eureka Street's consulting editor. He also teaches at the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne.

Recent Articles by this Author

MULTICULTURALISM

Lakemba and Werribee lessons for the media



Young people should expect and demand respect however they dress. They need to be realistic not only about people who show no restraint in indulging their sexual urges, but also media treatment that is designed to titillate audiences and confirm prejudices.

SPIRITUALITY

Deflecting the war on sentiment



Symbolic gestures such as the apology to the Stolen Generations are often seen as a substitute for practical action. But sentiment provides important pathways into understanding the human impact of government policy-making.

EUOLOGY**Eureka Street loses two friends**

The Australian Catholic Church and public life are the poorer for the passing of John Button and Archbishop Frank Little earlier this week. They both knew much about winning, but more about losing, and treated all they met with great respect.

POLITICS**John Howard rewards excellence: what kind?**

Before the Budget, Mr Howard defended tax cuts for wealthy Australians. He said that excellence should be rewarded. Where does excellence begin, and what kind should be rewarded.

COMMUNITY**Indonesia: Earthquake and good relations**

It is a pity we need disasters to respond honorably to our world. The earthquake around Yogyakarta put into the right perspective Australian relationships with Indonesia. It put human beings first.

EDITORIAL**Virtue regained amid market bloodshed**

More people read *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* than *Paradiso* and *Paradise Regained*. Perhaps that is why the financial crisis and attempts to resolve it have been received so sullenly: sin and punishment sell better than virtue and reward.

BOOK FORUM**Ghost of design rattles Darwinian orthodoxy**

Intelligent Design inhabits the shell-pocked no-man's land between science and religion. Steve Fuller argues that it should be taught as an option because science depends on religion. But his version of religion will set pious teeth on edge.

THEOLOGY**The 'me first' election**

In the election campaign the peoples' choice and their sovereignty often seemed to be defined simply as an arbitrary power to choose, with self-interest the only motivation. In the first week of the campaign, tax cuts trumped tax cuts.

RELIGION**Da Vinci, Christmas, Piss Christ and Gene therapy: a response**

When first invited to respond to Scott Stephens' stimulating exploration of connections between faith and culture, I groaned. I had resolved to never again even think of *The Da Vinci Code*.

FEATURES**Refugee policy still broken after Rau scandal fix**

Australia's treatment of refugees has been out of the headlines for some months, perhaps due to changes in the Department after the Cornelia Rau scandal. But despite some improvements, Australian refugee policy remains destructive.

SPIRITUALITY**Fresh insights in old books**

Literary festivals introduce us to new writing. They rarely celebrate the old, for nothing is older than an old book. The works of St Augustine challenge our instinctive assumption that new wisdom supersedes old wisdom.

THEOLOGY**The human cost of ideology**

All ideologies, including religions, can rot. They can neglect the view of the human world on which they are based and focus simply on implementing the consequences of their ideas. When this happens the costs in human misery are great.

APPLICATION

How do believers deal with violence in their Scriptures?



Muslim and Christian Scriptures both seem to endorse violence. This poses shared difficulties for interpreters of each faith. They need to explain how the Koran and the Bible can be described as the Word of God.

RELIGION

Bishop Robinson confrontation leaves unfinished business



The Australian Catholic Bishops argue that Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's book on sexual abuse questions the authority of the Church to teach definitively. But Bishop Robinson is right when he calls for reflection on the factors within Catholic culture that foster abuse.

MEDIA

Henson nudes not 'revolting', but demand reflection



The controversy surrounding art photographer Bill Henson's images of nude pubescent children reveals how strongly in our culture runs anxiety about child abuse. As a media event his art has been confused with the commercial exploitation of children.

COLUMNS

Ecumenical roads no longer lead to Rome



Contrary to what Catholics would once have said, ecumenism does not seek the return of other churches to Rome. The priority for each church is to reflect seriously on what Christ demands of it and its members.

POLITICS

Military power no way to uphold human dignity



Suicide bombing, kidnapping and rocket attacks are morally indefensible. They commonly demean the humanity of those who indulge in them and those who suffer them. *From 25 July 2006.*

POLITICS

Military power no way to uphold human dignity



Suicide bombing, kidnapping and rocket attacks are morally indefensible. They commonly demean the humanity of those who indulge in them and those who suffer them. The response to acts of violence is morally more complex.

THEOLOGY

Lessons from case of Poland's collaborator archbishop



Harsh persecution polarises communities and corrupts them from within. It is the seedbed not only of heroic witness to faith, but also of cowardice and of vindictiveness.

COLUMNS

Politicians need capacity to imagine heaven



It is surprising how little the political parties have to offer in the lead up to the Federal Election. They do not present themselves as nation builders with visions of a prosperous and happy society, but as technicians with a bare promise that we will be better off financially.

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