
Department of Intimidation?

D.I.M.A. At Work



DCI-A Member Trish Highfield is a Mothercraft Nurse and experienced Child Care Worker. She is also a member of the Social Justice in Early Childhood Group, ANCORW, OMEP-Australia and the St Kieran's Parish Social Justice Group. In the previous edition of *Australian Children's Rights News* she wrote of the appalling state of children's facilities in Immigration Detention Centres. Her home was recently "visited" by officers of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs with a warrant. She wasn't the only one.

They came at lunchtime. A dozen nondescript men and women. Five came stalking up the driveway of my suburban home like a group of council surveyors checking a right-of-way. Their leader rapped the front door. As I responded to this intrusion into my quiet day at home alone, they moved forward in unison, hands flashing identity badges and informing me they were from the Immigration Department.

Their leader waved a piece of paper which he said was a warrant to search for a group of people who had escaped from the Villawood Detention Centre. If I did not cooperate he could get the police to enforce right of entry. My remonstrations that this was confronting and very intimidating brought nothing more than the response that he was "just a public servant doing his job". He said the houses of people who've visited the Detention Centre were being searched.

When I expressed horror that the young boy and his father that I'd been visiting for the past six months may have been harmed going through the razor wire he told me none had been injured. My incredulity that anyone could escape through the high security and alarmed fences elicited a response to the effect that they hadn't gone over the razor wire. Still perplexed, I moved out on to my verandah to see more people on the driveway and in the street. My queries as to why there were so many to search my home was answered: "a lot had escaped".

The leader said he knew nothing of my advocacy work for children caged behind razor wire in D.I.M.A. centres, nor that I had made a submission to the Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on the plight of children incarcerated without proper care for their well being and development.

It became clear that this Compliance Team was not used to being confronted and questioned. When I told the leader that I was ringing Minister Phillip Ruddock's Chief of Staff and also my husband, a journalist with the ABC, there was a quick change in demeanour. He sent his junior accomplices back to the street. He agreed to enter our residence on his own and not to touch anything. His inspection was swift and perfunctory.

Which is all very well. But what of the 50 other homes across Sydney which were searched? I know of one refugee family with young children which was raided in darkness. You can only speculate what memories of horror may have been revisited by people whose experience of the midnight knock on the door could mean disappearances or torture by agents of the state.

Which brings me to Section 251 of the *Migration Act*, 1958. Discovering subsections 4 to 8 makes you wonder if we're actually living in democratic Australia. A public servant (the Secretary) is authorised to issue a warrant to search any premises, vehicles or place for a period up to 90 days with no Judicial oversight. Superficially trained junior officers of D.I.M.A. are even given the right ... "to use such reasonable force as is necessary for the exercise or his or her powers under this section".

It is curious that the houses of several other people in social justice work whom I'd encouraged to make visits to the same young man and his son were not subject to search. I conclude that this was a selective act of intimidation against an advocate who has been very active in recent months putting the children's cause before State and Federal authorities, politicians and N.G.O.s.

It's an experience which left me both shaken and saddened. That human rights and Australian values have become so devalued demands an explanation from those we elect to represent us.

There was a better time. A time when a young Vietnamese asylum seeker, an amputee, gazed down from the Quarantine Station at North Head to a beautiful, glistening Sydney Harbour. "I am sad to have to leave my country" - he told me - "but very happy to finally feel safe in your country".