



Depths of detention centre secrecy revealed

OPINION

By Michael Bradley

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Transfield's social media policy seemingly prevents detention centre staff from even being followed on Twitter by refugees. It's ridiculous, but it's a symptom of the state of affairs the Government has imposed, writes Michael Bradley.

"We have zero tolerance," Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the other day.

He was referring to the widespread allegations of sexual and physical abuse of asylum seekers held in detention on Manus Island and Nauru.

He was kidding of course, as both the current Government and the previous Labor government have tolerated this kind of thing for several years now and given no indication of either remorse or a genuine intention to do anything about it.

What both sides of politics do have zero tolerance for, however, is the risk that we should learn about the crimes that have allegedly taken place in the detention centres. And they have taken the most extraordinary measures to minimise that risk.

Of course, the news keeps leaking out, from people who have worked in the centres as well as official sources such as the Moss review and the Human Rights Commission report.

The Government's response to each revelation has consistently focused on shooting the messenger. This was exemplified most graphically by Scott Morrison's panic over revelations coming out of Nauru and his classic bait-and-switch play of highlighting allegations that Save the Children staff had been inciting the detainees to make up stories of abuse, then kicking 10 of the staff off the island with no due process. That's all turned out to be total rubbish, but his aim was achieved.

The Government's passion for secrecy over what happens on the islands naturally extends to its agents.

Most of the billions of dollars we are spending on keeping asylum seekers in detention go to the private companies who run the camps. One of these is Transfield Services Limited.

This week, Transfield's Social Media Policy, which it contractually imposes on all its employees working in the detention centres, leaked out. It comprises three pretty fascinating pages of corporate insanity. You really should read the whole thing to appreciate its majesty, but in essence it says that employees may be summarily dismissed if they do any of these things:

- Say anything to anyone by any means about anything to do with the centres at Nauru or Manus or the treatment of detainees there;
- Post, send or provide access to any material regarding "Incompatible Organisations" - meaning anyone who is critical of offshore processing or the Department's policies or actions;
- Do anything that may embarrass Transfield or "injure its relationship with the Department";
- Correspond with a current or former detainee by social media (including email);
- Give a current or former detainee their email address or access to their social media such as Facebook or Twitter;
- Assist anyone else to communicate with detainees;
- Promote, support or join an Incompatible Organisation; and,
- Attend public rallies calling for the closure of offshore processing centres.

So, for example, Transfield employees can be sacked if a former detainee, even one who has achieved refugee status and become an Australian resident, follows them on Twitter. And they can't be members of GetUp! or Amnesty or the Greens or the Uniting Church, among the many organisations that have criticised offshore detention.

This policy was drafted by a human being. What's interesting isn't the document itself, which defeats any attempt at satire because of its inherent ridiculousness. Nor the fact that it is legally enforceable. The real point of interest is the state of affairs that enabled Transfield to think that its Social Media Policy is an entirely acceptable thing to impose on its employees.

If Transfield was providing security at ASIO HQ, or emptying the bins at the Defence Department or supplying the catering at Pine Gap, then it would be unexceptional that it imposed extreme secrecy measures on its staff.



PHOTO: The Government's passion for secrecy over what happens at detention centres naturally extends to its agents. (AAP Image: Department of Immigration)

But it's not. Transfield is running camps that house people who have committed no crime or illegal act. They have sought asylum in Australia, as they are legally entitled to do. Australia is in turn legally entitled to detain them while it considers their claims, and it has chosen to hold them on Manus and Nauru.

Assume that this is morally just fine, as most Australians apparently believe. Nevertheless, these are not terrorists or enemy combatants or pirates or people smugglers or even welfare cheats or people who haven't returned their library books on time. According to the Government and Opposition, they are just a practical problem - the residue of the time before we stopped the boats.

The operations on Manus and Nauru are not military or national security operations. They are immigration operations. What, in these circumstances, justifies secrecy? Why are we, the people in whose names this is being done and who are paying for it, not entitled to know absolutely everything about what is being done to the detainees on Manus and Nauru?

Surely we are, there can be no valid argument against that.

However, secrecy is what we have, at the most extreme level. Transfield's policy directly threatens its employees with prosecution under the Crimes Act if they disclose anything about the operations on Manus or Nauru.

In saying this, and crafting its idiotic policy, Transfield is doing the bidding of its master: the Commonwealth of Australia. Our Government is doing everything in its power, by law, media manipulation, bullying or otherwise, to prevent us from knowing anything about these matters. In that context, lunacy like Transfield's becomes easy to contemplate.

And, still, the news leaks out.

We now know that, according to people who have worked there, the islands have been the scene of rape, assault, sexual degradation and every other kind of abuse imaginable, as well as the murder of Reza Barati. We also know that these allegations have been known to the Immigration Department and its hirelings for a long time, and that both major parties have been complicit in doing nothing about it. We have no grounds for comfort that it is not still happening.

We should not be surprised by any of this. Subjecting human beings to the conditions that persist on Manus and Nauru will inevitably result in exactly what has been happening, and it has.

Keeping it secret - preventing us, the people, from knowing what is being done by our servants on the assumption that we'd rather not know - ensures that nothing will stop it from continuing and that nobody will be held to account.

Note to every member of the Commonwealth Parliament: what is happening today on Manus Island and Nauru - this will be your legacy.

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Topics: government-and-politics, federal-government, immigration

Comments (97)

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HPH:

10 Apr 2015 2:16:29pm

I've read somewhere that our government is spending nearly 800,000 dollars per year per asylum seeker in detention kamps.

Where is all this money going to?

We can see the living conditions of asylum seekers in TV news reports. Surely it has to cost no more than \$50 a day to feed and shelter each person under these horrible living conditions.

Where is all this money going to?

Alert moderator

A pocketful of wry:

10 Apr 2015 2:48:47pm

Blindfolds and ear-muffs don't come cheap when you need to outfit an entire government department and all their contractors you know.

Alert moderator