

of Africa is now its worst economic basket case – not for lack of resources, but because of gross injustice, authoritarian rule, corruption, wilful abuse of power, favouritism, racism, negligence and sheer incompetence. Moreover, giving to save lives in Zimbabwe has at times been impossible, because the aid agencies have been shut out by Mugabe and his henchmen.



Peter Singer

In many other places, charitable aid by itself is of limited use. Aid can feed the political economy of war, thus elongating conflicts and possibly doing more harm than good. Lives may be saved, but only for a few days, months or years, in the absence of the creation by political reform of a more secure and just environment – something which giving by itself cannot do. There could be nothing more cruel than saving a child in order to condemn it to a life of slavery, of warfare fed by an economy of aid, of repeated illness and near death experiences because of a complete absence of broader institutional development and political progress toward justice. The nightmare scenario here is that the affluent of the rich countries get their moral kicks from having a monthly credit card debit to Oxfam, and lapse into political quietism regarding global justice. The global poor are kept alive but with little prospect of a life well lived.

To avoid such a scenario, the global charity which Singer persuasively argues for must be understood as only one piece in the larger puzzle of the solution to global poverty, one built around global institutional reform.

The road to global institutional reform is long and hard, but not futile. Singer does not gainsay efforts in this direction; what he does say – and he is indisputably right about this – is that such long-term efforts will not help the child who is drowning in the pond *today*. The burden of his argument is that, in the right hands, our charitable giving can make a significant and sustainable difference to that child and her peers. As we incrementally adopt global institutional reform, the path which promises the surest long-term solution to global poverty, one hopes in the meantime – for the sake of today's children – that Singer is right.

Slow burn of realisation

Jonathon Otis

Margot O'Neill

BLIND CONSCIENCE

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MORAL PANICS, which Stanley Cohen, in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), said involve any group of people who are defined as a threat to societal values and interests, were grist to John Howard's mill during refugee debates. Applying the classic analysis, his governments were 'moral entrepreneurs' who employed scare tactics whenever a perceived threat arose. Asylum seekers and their supporters were 'folk devils', outsiders and deviants responsible for the problems placing our values and principles in jeopardy.

Stereotypes negate complexity, supplant individual attributes and essentially dehumanise us. Are refugee advocates simply an amorphous group of naïve do-gooders, obstreperous students and pungent radicals? In *Blind Conscience*, Margot O'Neill attempts to dismantle such typecasting by focusing on the ranks of a 'new wave of refugee advocacy', many of whom 'abandoned holidays, nice restaurants and weekend rest', 'became obsessed' and sometimes 'discovered a new purpose'.

Seasoned professionals and neophytes populate the book, an assemblage of compassionate Australians emboldened by injustice but not usually given to overt protest. They come to know asylum seekers personally, witness suffering firsthand and develop a terrible appreciation of mandatory detention's deleterious consequences. O'Neill recounts their fraught struggles to mitigate the effects of pernicious immigration policies and to generate media scrutiny, confident that public exposure will force change.

Biographical snapshots and telling details highlight individual ethical concerns, revealing the experience, often a crystallising moment of awareness, which impels activism. This affecting testimony affords valuable insights, particularly given the Howard government's efforts to marginalise advocates by impeaching their motives.

Books about these immigration controversies abound, notably David Marr and Marian Wilkinson's seminal *Dark Victory* (2003) and Peter Mares's thorough *Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (2001). In this genre, investigative journalists (O'Neill is a veteran) are overrepresented, an antidotal response to the Fourth Estate's failure to call a negligent government to account. Her angle, the behind-the-scenes activities of refugee advocates, is worthwhile.

O'Neill's own path in writing the book is interesting. Initially suspicious of 'dramatic claims by frantic activists', her turning point is the painful story of a two-year-old Port

Hedland detainee in sharp decline. Anger, shame, even fear grip her as the slow burn of realisation registers: this is 'deliberate cruelty to powerless people' in 'fair go' Australia. Using the advocates' own words, O'Neill conveys their outrage when confronted with mounting evidence of lives fracturing and politicians detached from this grim reality. They rail against political inertia and public apathy, their exasperation palpable.

Incongruously, the first advocate O'Neill depicts is 'the personification of the ageing revolutionary', a veteran anti-war protester and communist who is partial to radical direct action. We are privy to the 'Rebel Four', Liberal Party backbenchers led by Petro Georgiou, who skilfully negotiate with Howard to reduce the harshness of mandatory detention.

Childcare worker Trish Highfield is spurred to act by children behind razor wire in Port Hedland. Julian Burnside, a barrister and lifelong Liberal, represents the family of an eleven-year-old detainee who attempts to hang herself. This haunts and motivates Burnside. His refugee advocacy expands, death threats ensue, colleagues and friends shun him, and his life changes irrevocably. Burnside and Highfield eventually invite refugees into their homes.

O'Neill paints sharp portraits of people compelled to protest by an overwhelming need to disassociate themselves from odious refugee policies. Surprising is their frequent shock at finding evidence which contradicts their belief in Australia as an egalitarian haven. Artist Kate Durham declares, 'I will never recover the love I had for my country'.

Bearing witness transforms advocates. The ignominy and depredations of life in detention can edify. Anton Chekhov said, 'People must never be humiliated – that is the main thing.'

Notwithstanding its unity of purpose, the refugee movement constitutes a broad church, and *Blind Conscience* becomes a study in contrasts. Strategies conflict, goals differ, personalities clash. There are fascinating accounts of inept attempts to assist detainees, including efforts to escape. Some advocates are naïve, counter-productive and ultimately prejudicial.

Refugee narratives are often more compelling than those of their advocates. Aamer Sultan, the book's most inspirational figure, whilst held in Villawood collaborates with research psychologist Zachary Steel to document the mental health problems of fellow detainees. Of detention he says, 'We don't know anything about our fate, but we are sharing the moment of trying to survive'. Intelligent and selfless, Sultan seems indefatigable. It is sobering to learn that he later became clinically depressed. The book concludes with advocate updates. Reading Sultan's is heart-rending: 'Something seems to stand between me and happiness at this point in my life.'

The chapter entitled 'Why, Mr Ruddock?' is a highlight. O'Neill interviews the Amnesty International pin-wearing 'Liberal Party hero', who sits on the human rights subcommittee which impugned his policies. He acknowledges his duty to defend them, but eschews any obligation to be

articulate. This is no Nixonian apologia. O'Neill's pertinent questions range from detention centre conditions to Hansonism to personal responsibility. Ruddock's master class in obfuscation displays his vast repertoire: rhetorical questions, combative sarcasm, semantics, unrepentant victim-blaming, forgetfulness.

Has Ruddock always answered questions this way? Satirists often take up the slack when the media falls asleep at the wheel. In *The Howard Miracle* (2003), John Clarke describes a mock interview with Ruddock as one 'in which we get lost in a fog and have to radio for help'. O'Neill's excellent interview confirms this astute assessment.

Ruddock's superciliousness bespeaks a politician beyond reflection, impervious to criticism or the force of expert medical opinion. Asked if mandatory detention harmed children, an established fact, he says 'Well I don't know. I know it's asserted.' To reprise Robert Manne's question in *In Denial* (2001) about Aboriginal child removal: 'Why has so much energy been expended in the attempt to deny ... that a really terrible injustice occurred?'

Ruddock regrets only his reference to a detained child as 'it', which was reminiscent of Howard's repugnant shorthand 'stock'. O'Neill reveals in Ruddock a conscience iced by pragmatism and policy tunnel vision.

For context, O'Neill offers an essentially chronological, sometimes statistically dense and cursory account of the political events and climate in which the stories unfold. She uses journalistic, documentary voice-over language and the directness of testimony, garnished by the odd polemical flourish. Sympathetically narrating the facts, she occasionally emotes, a vexing intrusion. Her confidence in the stories' own power wanes. This is most evident in the distracting tendency, albeit infrequent, to allude to the Holocaust, which also taints the Ruddock interview. I must confess that when Highfield asks a father how he protects his child in Port Hedland and he answers 'I just talked to him, talked to him, talked to him. I take him to another place with my words', I considered the similarity to Robert Benigni's character in his film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) before silently rebuking myself, for no legitimate point of comparison exists. It is an unhelpful and gratuitous inclination, best resisted.

O'Neill wishes to honour her subjects, and does. The book is tributary in another sense, for its contribution to the debate and unofficial historical record flows naturally into that larger sea of published works on immigration issues during the Howard years.

Mandatory detention required asylum seekers to languish in de facto asylums, ostensibly for our protection. John Berger wrote, 'We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.' *Blind Conscience* is about vigilance, rejection of a popular, politically engineered exercise in unknowing, and the perseverance of an alert minority. It reminds those who still need prompting that national shame is not ephemeral. In doing so, it resoundingly affirms the importance of mandatory attention over wilful moral impoverishment.