

Voice of Shakthi Thursday 12 April 2001

It was not very long ago that the Federal Minister for Immigration, Mr Phillip Ruddock, was described as a "small L Liberal". The human face of a political [party](#) which lived up to its name, honoured its traditions of fighting for a liberal democratic Australia and did away with the country's infamous White Australia policy.

But judging by his shrill cries these days in relation to migrants and people seeking refuge from intolerable conditions in their homelands, his double-speak on Aboriginal issues and the Reconciliation process, it appears that Mr Ruddock is increasingly in danger of losing the plot, if he has not done so already.

For a man who insists on wearing his [Amnesty International](#) badge with pride, Mr Ruddock's recent statements seems completely at odds with the aims of an organisation which seeks to protect the rights of the oppressed.

The "boat people" he holds at detention centres in remote regions of Australia, in conditions worse than any jail in a Third World country are, according to Mr Ruddock, nothing more than queue jumpers, criminal elements and affluent people trying to subvert the immigration laws of this country. This is in spite of his own admission that more than 80 per cent of these so-called queue jumpers have legitimate claims of being genuine refugees.

Detainees who dare to speak or demonstrate against these injustices are tear-gassed, water bombed or physically and sexually harassed by the goons he employs in these detention centres. Not a word of sympathy for the frustration, the long delays in processing asylum claims by his Departmental officials, the isolation and the psychological trauma who have risked their lives to seek refuge in this country.

The fate which awaits other inmates who protest against these injustices is even worse. Witness the recent case of Sri Lankan national Suranga Tennekoon who was locked up in a prison even though Police investigations found he was innocent of any crime except that of overstaying his visa. Only the timely intervention of concerned people and the refusal by the Victorian State government to toe Mr Ruddock's hardline saw him released last week from Port Phillip Detention Centre. But Suranga Tennekeoon still remains under Immigration Department control and his future in Australia is yet to be decided.

But Mr Ruddock's hardline stance does not end there. It was only two weeks ago that a Pakistani national, Sharaz Kayani, a citizen of this country, doused himself in flames at the Parliament compound in Canberra in protest at current immigration laws which

says that while he is welcome to stay in this country, his family cannot join him because one of his children is disabled.

The drastic cuts to family reunion categories under the Federal Government's immigration policy is very clear. While it is happy to capitalise on the skills of migrants, they are not considered worthy enough to be allowed to enjoy the fruits of their skills with their families. When you consider that many people migrate to find a better life for their near and dear ones, the Government's stance is nothing less than ludicrous.

At the same time, in the name of protecting the human rights of its citizens, the Government rants and raves over a white Australian couple who is locked up in a jail in [Laos](#) for alleged involvement in a jewellery scam.

Reporting on the Kayani affair, last Saturday's Age [newspaper](#) commented that "Once the liberal face of a restrictive policy framed with one eye on the Hanson vote, Ruddock now risks being seen as a tired stalwart of an indefensible system crying out for a minister with the energy to reform it."

The tragedy is, our alternative Government, the Australian Labour Party, has yet to provide us with any indication that their policies are far more compassionate than Mr Ruddock's on any of these issues either. Given their past record of imposing an income support waiting period for migrants, which the Liberal Government gleefully extended, we have no reason to hope that things will get rosier for people seeking a [new home](#) in Australia under a Labour administration.

Except for people from the good old Mother country and New Zealand of course, who still constitute the largest number of visa over-stayers in this country.