

Project SafeCom News and Updates

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1. George Monbiot: Frightened by Donald Trump? You don't know the half of it

Many of his staffers are from an opaque corporate misinformation network. We must understand this if we are to have any hope of fighting back against them.

The Guardian
George Monbiot
Wednesday 30 November 2016 17.00 AEDT

Yes, Donald Trump's politics are incoherent. But those who surround him know just what they want, and his lack of clarity enhances their power. To understand what is coming, we need to understand who they are. I know all too well, because I have spent the past 15 years fighting them.

Over this time, I have watched as tobacco, coal, oil, chemicals and biotech companies have poured billions of dollars into an international misinformation machine composed of thinktanks, bloggers and fake citizens' groups. Its purpose is to portray the interests of billionaires as the interests of the common people, to wage war against trade unions and beat down attempts to regulate business and tax the very rich. Now the people who helped run this machine are shaping the government.

I first encountered the machine when writing about climate change. The fury and loathing directed at climate scientists and campaigners seemed incomprehensible until I realised they were fake: the hatred had been paid for. The bloggers and institutes whipping up this anger were funded by oil and coal companies.

Among those I clashed with was Myron Ebell of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI). The CEI calls itself a thinktank, but looks to me like a corporate lobbying group. It is not transparent about its funding, but we now know it has received \$2m from ExxonMobil, more than \$4m from a group called the Donors Trust (which represents various corporations and billionaires), \$800,000 from groups set up by the tycoons Charles and David Koch, and substantial sums from coal, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies.

For years, Ebell and the CEI have attacked efforts to limit climate change, through lobbying, lawsuits and campaigns. An advertisement released by the institute had the punchline "Carbon dioxide: they call it pollution. We call it life."

It has sought to eliminate funding for environmental education, lobbied against the Endangered Species Act, harried climate scientists and campaigned in favour of mountaintop removal by coal companies. In 2004, Ebell sent a memo to one of George W Bush's staffers calling for the head of the Environmental Protection Agency to be sacked. Where is Ebell now? Oh – leading Trump's transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency.

Charles and David Koch – who for years have funded extreme pro-corporate politics – might not have been enthusiasts for Trump's candidacy, but their people were all over his campaign. Until June, Trump's campaign manager was Corey Lewandowski, who like other members of Trump's team came from a group called Americans for Prosperity (AFP).

This purports to be a grassroots campaign, but it was founded and funded by the Koch brothers. It set up the first Tea Party Facebook page and organised the first Tea Party events. With a budget of hundreds of millions of dollars, AFP has campaigned ferociously on issues that coincide with the Koch brothers' commercial interests in oil, gas, minerals, timber and chemicals.

In Michigan, it helped force through the "right to work bill", in pursuit of what AFP's local director called "taking the unions out at the knees". It has campaigned nationwide against action on climate change. It has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into unseating the politicians who won't do its bidding and replacing them with those who will.

I could fill this newspaper with the names of Trump staffers who have emerged from such groups: people such as Doug Domenech, from the Texas Public Policy Foundation, funded among others by the Koch brothers, Exxon and the Donors Trust; Barry Bennett, whose Alliance for America's Future (now called One Nation) refused to disclose its donors when challenged; and Thomas Pyle, president of the American Energy Alliance, funded by Exxon and others. This is to say nothing of Trump's own crashing conflicts of interest. Trump promised to "drain the swamp" of the lobbyists and corporate stooges working in Washington. But it looks as if the only swamps he'll drain will be real ones, as his team launches its war on the natural world.

Understandably, there has been plenty of coverage of the racists and white supremacists empowered by Trump's victory. But, gruesome as they are, they're peripheral to the policies his team will develop. It's almost comforting, though, to focus on them, for at least we know who they are and what they stand for. By contrast, to penetrate the corporate misinformation machine is to enter a world of mirrors. Spend too long trying to understand it, and the hyporeality vortex will inflict serious damage on your state of mind.

Don't imagine that other parts of the world are immune. Corporate-funded thinktanks and fake grassroots groups are now everywhere. The fake news we should be worried about is not stories invented by Macedonian teenagers about Hillary Clinton selling arms to Islamic State, but the constant feed of confected scares about unions, tax and regulation drummed up by groups that won't reveal their interests.

The less transparent they are, the more airtime they receive. The organisation Transparify runs an annual survey of thinktanks. This year's survey reveals that in the UK only four thinktanks – the Adam Smith Institute, Centre for Policy Studies, Institute of Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange – “still consider it acceptable to take money from hidden hands behind closed doors”. And these are the ones that are all over the media.

When the Institute of Economic Affairs, as it so often does, appears on the BBC to argue against regulating tobacco, shouldn't we be told that it has been funded by tobacco companies since 1963? There's a similar pattern in the US: the most vocal groups tend to be the most opaque.

As usual, the left and centre (myself included) are beating ourselves up about where we went wrong. There are plenty of answers, but one of them is that we have simply been outspent. Not by a little, but by orders of magnitude. A few billion dollars spent on persuasion buys you all the politics you want. Genuine campaigners, working in their free time, simply cannot match a professional network staffed by thousands of well-paid, unscrupulous people.

You cannot confront a power until you know what it is. Our first task in this struggle is to understand what we face. Only then can we work out what to do.

• *Twitter: @GeorgeMonbiot. A fully linked version of this column will be published at monbiot.com*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/30/donald-trump-george-monbiot-misinformation>

2. George Monbiot: The 13 impossible crises that humanity now faces

From Trump to climate change, this multiheaded crisis presages collapse. And there's no hope of exiting the 'other side' if political alternatives are shut down

The Guardian
George Monbiot
Friday 25 November 2016 18.00 AEDT

Please don't read this unless you are feeling strong. This is a list of 13 major crises that, I believe, confront us. There may be more. Please feel free to add to it or to knock it down. I'm sorry to say that it's not happy reading.

1. Donald Trump

The next occupant of the White House will be a man who appears to possess no capacity for restraint, balance or empathy, but a bottomless capacity for revenge and vindictiveness. He has been granted a clean sweep of power, with both houses and the supreme court in his pocket. He is surrounding himself with people whose judgment and knowledge of the world are, to say the least, limited. He will take charge of the world's biggest nuclear and conventional arsenals, and the most extensive surveillance and security apparatus any state has ever developed.

2. His national security adviser

In making strategic military decisions, he has a free hand, with the capacity to act even without the nominal constraint of Congress. His national security adviser, Michael T Flynn, is a dangerous extremist.

3. The rest of his team

Trump's team is partly composed of professional lobbyists hired by fossil fuel, tobacco, chemical and finance companies and assorted billionaires. Their primary political effort is to avoid regulation and taxation. These people – or rather the interests they represent – are now in charge. Aside from the implications for the living world, public health, public finance and financial stability, this is a vindication of the political model pioneered by the tobacco companies in the 1960s. It demonstrates that if you spend enough money setting up thinktanks, academic posts and fake grassroots movements, and work with the corporate media to give them a platform, you can buy all the politics you need. Democracy becomes a dead letter. Political alternatives are shut down.

4. The transatlantic backdrop

Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, Britain's attempts to disentangle itself from the European Union are confronted with a level of complexity that may be insuperable. Moreover, there may be no answer to the political fix in which the government finds itself. This is as follows: a) either it agrees to the free movement of people in exchange for access to the single market, in which case the pro-Brexit camp will have gained nothing except massive embarrassment, or b) the EU slams the shutters down. Not only is it likely to reject the terms the government proposes; but it might also try to impose an exit bill of about €60 billion for the costs incurred by our withdrawal. This would be politically impossible for the government to pay, leading to a non-negotiated rupture and the hardest imaginable Brexit.

5. Eurozone risks

The Italian banking crisis looks big. What impact this might have on the survival of the eurozone is anyone's guess.

6. ... and their global ramifications

Whether it is also sufficient to trigger another global financial crisis is again hard to judge. If such a thing were to occur, governments would not be able to mount a rescue plan of the kind they used in 2007-8. The coffers are empty.

7. Job-eating automation

Automation will destroy jobs on an unprecedented scale, and because the penetration of information technology into every part of the economy is not a passing phase but an escalating trend, it is hard to see how this employment will be replaced. No government or major political party anywhere shows any sign of comprehending the scale of this issue.

8. If Marine Le Pen wins

Marine Le Pen has a moderate to fair chance of becoming the French president in May. Whether this would be sufficient to trigger the collapse of the EU is another unknown. If this is not a sufficient crisis, there are several others lining up (especially the growing nationalist movements across central and eastern Europe in particular, but to a lesser extent almost everywhere) that could catalyse a chain reaction. I believe that when this begins, it will happen with a speed that will take almost everyone by surprise. From one month to the next, the EU could cease to exist.

9. The UN security council would look like ...

If Le Pen wins, the permanent members of the UN security council will be represented by the following people: Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Theresa May and Marine Le Pen. It would be a stretch to call that reassuring.

10. The Paris climate agreement trashed

National climate change programmes bear no connection to the commitments governments made at Paris. Even if these programmes are fully implemented (they won't be), they set us on a climate-change trajectory way beyond that envisaged by the agreement. And this is before we know what Trump will do.

11. ... and the effects on migration

One of the many impacts of climate breakdown – aside from such minor matters as the inundation of cities, the loss of food production and curtailment of water supplies – will be the mass movement of people, to an extent that dwarfs current migration. The humanitarian, political and military implications are off the scale.

12. ... with just 60 harvests left

According to the UN food and agriculture organisation, at current rates of soil loss we have 60 years of harvests left.

13. ... an accelerating extinction crisis

The extinction crisis appears, if anything, to be accelerating.

Enough already? Sorry, no. One of the peculiarities of this complex, multiheaded crisis is that there appears to be no “other side” on to which we might emerge. It is hard to imagine a realistic scenario in which governments lose the capacity for total surveillance and drone strikes; in which billionaires forget how to manipulate public opinion; in which a broken EU reconvenes; in which climate breakdown unhappens, species return from extinction and the soil comes back to the land. These are not momentary crises, but appear to presage permanent collapse.

So the key question is not how we weather them but how – if this is possible – we avert them. Can it be done? If so what would it take?

I write this not to depress you, though I know it will have that effect, but to concentrate our minds on the scale of the task.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/25/13-crises-we-face-trump-soil-loss-global-collapse>

3. George Monbiot: The case for despair is made. Now let's start to get out of the mess we're in

There is no going back, no comfort in old certainties. But reviving common ownership is one possible route to social transformation

The Guardian
George Monbiot
Wednesday 14 December 2016 07.43 AEDT

With one breath, the friends of power told us that global capitalism was a dynamic, disruptive force, the source of constant innovation and change. With the next, they told us it had brought about the end of history: permanent stability and peace. There was no attempt to resolve this contradiction. Or any other.

We were promised unending growth on a finite planet. We were told that a vastly unequal system would remove all differences. Social peace would be delivered by a system based on competition and envy. Democracy would be secured by the power of money. The contradictions were crashingly obvious. The whole package relied on magic.

Because none of it works, there is no normal to which to return. The Keynesian measures espoused by Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders – in a world crashing into environmental limits and the mass destruction of jobs – are as irrelevant in the 21st century as the neoliberal prescriptions that caused the financial crisis.

Pankaj Mishra, in his book *Age of Anger*, explains the current crises as new manifestations of one long disruption that has been ripping up society for 200 years or more. Our sanitised histories of Europe and America allow us to forget that bedlam and carnage, civil and international war, colonialism and overseas slaughter, racism and genocide, were the norms of this period, not exceptions.

Now the rest of the world is confronting the same disruptive forces, as industrial capitalism is globalised. It destroys old forms of authority while promising universal freedom, autonomy and prosperity. Those promises collide with massive disparities of power, status and property ownership. The result is the global spread of the 19th-century European diseases of humiliation, envy and a sense of impotence. Frustrated expectations, rage and self-disgust have driven support for movements as diverse as Isis, resurgent Hindu nationalism and stumping demagoguery in Britain, the US, France and Hungary.

How do we respond to these crises? Raymond Williams said that “to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing”. I know I have made the case for despair seem pretty convincing in the past. So this column is the first in an occasional series whose purpose is to champion new approaches to politics, economics and social change. There is no going back, no comfort in old certainties. We must rethink the world from first principles.

There are many points at which I could begin, but it seems to me that an obvious one is this. The market alone cannot meet our needs; nor can the state. Both, by rooting out attachment, help fuel the alienation, rage and anomie that breed extremism. One element has been conspicuously absent from the dominant ideologies, something that is neither market nor state: the commons.

A commons is an asset over which a community has shared and equal rights. This could, in principle, include land, water, minerals, knowledge, scientific research and software. But at the moment most of these assets have been enclosed: seized by either the state or private interests, and treated like any other form of capital. Through this enclosure we have been deprived of our common wealth.

Some commons still exist. They range from community-owned forests in Nepal and Romania to lobster fisheries in Maine, pastures in east Africa and Switzerland, the internet, Wikipedia, Linux, journals published by the Public Library of Science, the timebank in Helsinki, local currencies and open-source microscopy. But these are exceptions to the general rule of private and exclusive ownership.

In his book *Land*, the community organiser Martin Adams urges us to see the land as something that once belonged to everyone and no one, yet has been acquired by a minority that excludes other people from its enjoyment. He proposes that those who use the land exclusively should pay a “community land contribution” as compensation. This could partly replace income and sales tax, prevent land hoarding, and bring down land prices. The revenue could help to fund a universal basic income. Eventually we could move to a system in which land is owned by the local community and leased to those who use it.

Similar principles could apply to energy. The right to produce carbon by burning fossil fuels could be auctioned (a smaller pool would be available every year). The proceeds could fund public services and a transition to clean energy. Those who wish to use the wind or sunlight to generate power should be asked to pay a community contribution. Or the generators could be owned by communities – there are already plenty of examples in Scotland.

Rather than allow corporations to use intellectual property rights to create an artificial scarcity of knowledge, or to capture the value generated by other people (such as Google and Facebook), we could move towards a “social knowledge economy” as promoted by the government of Ecuador. A share of profits could (with the help of blockchain technology, which underpins digital currency Bitcoin) be exchanged for helping to build online platforms and providing the content they host.

The restoration of the commons has great potential not only to distribute wealth but also to change society. As the writer David Bollier points out, a commons is not just a resource (land or trees or software) but also the community of people managing and protecting it. The members of the commons develop much deeper connections with each other and their assets than we do as passive consumers of products.

Managing common resources means developing rules, values and traditions. It means, in some cases, re-embedding ourselves in the places in which we live. It means reshaping government to meet the needs of communities, not corporations. In other words, reviving the commons can act as a counterweight to the atomising, alienating forces now generating a thousand forms of toxic reaction.

This is not the whole answer. My hope is that, after exploring a wide range of potential solutions, with the help of your comments and suggestions I can start to develop a synthesis: a new political, economic and social story that might be matched to the demands of the 21st century. Realising it is a further challenge, on which we also need to work. But first we must decide what we want. Then we decide how to get it.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/13/despair-mess-commons-transform-society>

4. Lindy West: White nationalists? Alt-right? If you see a Nazi, say Nazi

Weak, noncommittal language allows people to hide from reality and avoid accountability. Writers must not be afraid to call some of Trump's believers what they truly are

The Guardian

Lindy West

Wednesday 23 November 2016 03.40 AEDT

What does it take to call a Nazi a Nazi? In the interminable fortnight since the election of Donald Trump, the US press has been floundering in a gyre of panic over the internal taxonomy of racists.

For months, many (myself included) indulged Trump's base in their euphemism of choice, the "alt-right", an attempt to rebrand warmed-over Reconstruction-era white supremacy as a cool, new (and harmless!) internet fad. Despite the fact that Breitbart News (described by former honcho turned Trump adviser Stephen Bannon as "the platform for the alt-right") had, at one point, a news tag labeled "black crime", and was a driver of the racist conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was a secret Kenyan Muslim, the press contorted itself into labyrinthine knots to avoid applying the word "racist" to Bannon or Trump in any committed way. (In our post-meaning world, being called a racist is nearly as grievous as being a racist.)

Public outcry has prompted some hemming and hawing over the finer distinctions between "white nationalists" and "white supremacists", the mainstream media not allowing either term to get too close to Trump himself, even as antisemitic, anti-black, anti-gay and Islamophobic hate crimes (not to mention KKK victory parades) continued to proliferate in his name. The website Boing Boing published a "White Supremacy Euphemism Generator for journalists", explaining: "even when people pander to the idea Western culture's wellbeing is inseparable from European ethnicity, they somehow avoid being called white nationalists or supremacists by journalists". One hang-up seemed to be a lack of self-identification. If a person doesn't consider himself a white supremacist, can he still be one? (Answer: OF COURSE.)

Finally, though, at Richard B Spencer's closing speech at Saturday's alt-right conference just a few blocks from the White House, it became undeniable what we're dealing with here (at least among this particular sect of Trump's true believers): it's a bunch of straight-up neo-Nazis.

According to the New York Times, Spencer – who claims to have coined the term "alt-right" – "railed against Jews and, with a smile, quoted Nazi propaganda in the original German. America, he said, belonged to white people ... As he finished, several audience members had their arms outstretched in a Nazi salute." The crowd joined Spencer in a cry of "Heil victory!"

And yet, still, headlines were tentative. The New York Times gesticulated wildly toward Nazism without actually using the word ("Alt-Right Exults in Donald Trump's Election With a Salute: 'Heil Victory'"), and a CNN panel managed to avoid saying "Nazi" entirely, despite discussing a chyron that read, "Alt-right founder questions if Jews are people."

But if declaring the superiority of the white race, quoting Nazi propaganda, calling for "peaceful ethnic cleansing", and provoking Nazi salutes from his audience isn't enough to qualify one as a neo-Nazi, then where on earth is the bar? What is the hesitation? And, given the close ties between the "alt-right" and Trump's cabinet, how is the top story on every front page not some version of "NEO-NAZIS ATTEMPTING TO SEIZE CONTROL OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT"?

Part of the disconnect seems to be by design. Several of the conference's speakers went out of their way to deny connections with Bannon and Trump, a distance I expect they have to cultivate to afford Trump the plausible deniability he's been coasting on for months. "When asked about Mr Bannon," the Times reported, "the conference's speakers said that they might have shaken his hand on occasion, but that they did not know him well." Not a Nazi, then, just a guy who's shaken hands with a whole bunch of them. That's fine. We'll wait and watch.

That sentiment seems at odds with what Spencer tweeted late on 8 November: "The Alt-Right has been declared the winner. The Alt-Right is more deeply connected to Trumpian populism than the 'conservative movement'. We're the establishment now." You don't know the guy, but his win puts you in charge? A supposedly anti-establishment movement declaring itself the establishment within hours of victory? It might give you whiplash if you haven't been paying attention: this isn't a new, young, maverick establishment – it's a dying one reasserting itself. This election, my husband mused to me once, is a part of the American Civil War.

In my column last week, I wrote: "One defining aspect of alt-right white supremacy is that it vehemently denies its own existence ... This erosion of language is an authoritarian tactic designed to stifle dissent. If you cannot call something by its name, then how can you fight it?"

So I was heartened yesterday when KUOW, a public radio station in Seattle, released a statement announcing that they will be substituting "white supremacy" or "white nationalism" for "alt-right". The reasoning, laid out in a memo to staff: "'Alt right' doesn't mean anything, and normalises something that is far from normal. So we need to plain-speak it."

"This may change," the station conceded. "Alt-right may become better defined and understood by the general public. But until then, we will avoid vague words that neutralise anti-social and abnormal ways of thinking."

It's essentially just a change to the station's style guide – a mundane housekeeping decision that usually only matters to copy editors. But in this case, especially if more news outlets follow suit, it could have a significant impact. Words have power. Weak, noncommittal language allows readers and listeners to hide from reality, weasel out of accountability, interpret facts in whatever way flatters them most. Stark truths demand either action or an admission of complicity.

Be brave, writers, and be honest. If you see a Nazi, say a Nazi.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/22/white-nationalists-alt-right-nazi-language-trump>

5. Richard Ackland: Michelle Guthrie, the ABC and the turning of a once-shining jewel into mainstream sludge

All public broadcasters are engaged in a constant process of chopping, slicing and reinventing, and every boss spreads his or her own brand of unhappiness

The Guardian
Richard Ackland
Wednesday 14 December 2016 11.36 AEDT

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is going through one of its periodic meltdowns, brought about because a new managing director has come down from the moon and set about doing things her way.

Michelle Guthrie has arrived at the public broadcaster via Google and the House of Murdoch, with a mission to trim the budget and to keep pace with technology and its impact on viewing patterns.

This is not a new mission, because squeezing services into ever tighter financial constraints and adapting to new realities has been going on ever since public broadcasting got under way.

In the case of Australia that was in 1932, in Britain 1927, Canada 1936 and New Zealand 1975.

All the major public broadcasters are engaged in a constant process of creating, squeezing, chopping, slicing and reinventing. Nor is the tireless criticism from commercial interests and governments – and from within – anything new.

Having said that, each managing director spreads his or her own brand of unhappiness in his or her own way. Guthrie's appearance at the end-of-year Four Corners postmortem is a case in point. According to Guardian Australia's Amanda Meade she told the ace reporters, researchers and producers who put together Australia's premier investigative current affairs TV show that she would like to see in the lineup more stories about successful business people.

When it came to the program about children on Nauru speaking about their dire existence as captives of Australia's offshore refugee policy, the managing director thought Four Corners should have found some happy children to interview.

In one breath she showed us she hadn't a clue about journalism – yet journalism is a large chunk of the ABC's core business. At least previous notable managing directors have had to varying degrees a foot in the journalist camp – Mark Scott, David Hill, Brian Johns – and consequently they had a grasp on how and what the news apparatus should be doing.

There are other dispiriting signs including the dismemberment of Catalyst, an appalling decision to strip from the schedule a weekly science program, and the ritualistic plunder of Radio National.

RN has been under assault for so long that it is constantly on a war footing. With an annual budget of \$23m, the network costs peanuts while audience surveys show that its specialist programs are one of the factors that generate audience loyalty for the ABC. Radio National is where you find much of the creative brains of the ABC, so to tinker and mess with the formula shows management is not without skill when it comes to shooting itself in the neck.

Guthrie goes into defensive mode when pressed about the RN cuts, asking staff at a meeting in Perth, with raised voice, how they "justify their massive budget when their reach is so low".

Along with much of her management, it's evident she doesn't "get" Radio National, where the mission is for more light and fluffy "flow" programming, while resources for documentaries, features and specialist broadcasts are diluted. At this rate what was once a bright shining jewel in an ocean of mediocrity will look and sound more and more like the mainstream sludge available on much of the ABC's metropolitan radio stations, not to mention the drivel on the commercials.

Never mind the quality, feel the width. It's not hard to sense that quite early in her reign Guthrie is on a slippery slope. Heartwarming support from Emma Alberici and Patricia Karvelas doesn't amount to a hill of beans if a sizeable proportion of staff are offside. We've seen it before with the Jonathan Shier experiment.

There are dark mutterings that ultimately, and quite soon, the RN network will transmogrify into a bunch of podcasts available online and on mobile devices. A website that ate a radio station.

If Guthrie's Google genes get the better of her she might entirely ditch the broadcasting frequencies and airwaves and turn the ABC holos-bolus into a website where customers can click away merrily for their radio or TV entertainment, sprinkled with advertisements for cars and credit cards.

The BBC saved £30m by moving BBC3 online, so imagine the savings if all the public broadcasting system was streamed, courtesy of one great thumping iView.

The one thing Guthrie has not mentioned as part of her reform agenda is ABC "news", and here criticism by the former PM Paul Keating is spot on, with his complaint about stories that go nowhere.

"In the case of the ABC news, if you want to watch a good news service, watch SBS news, which tells you what's happening in Iraq, what's happening in the US election, what's happening with Donald Trump.

"What you get on the ABC is: 'A truck has just overturned on the Pacific Highway.' It's like in the 1970s. The ABC is letting Australia down in terms of news presentation."

It's baffling why an organisation stuffed to the brim with journalists should have such a dimwitted view of news. Maybe it's the fault of managers many of who, in my former experience as an ABC presenter (Late Night Live, Radio National Breakfast and Media Watch), only have a slender grasp of what they are doing.

These serried ranks of bureaucrats on fat salaries with undistinguished achievements have floated into positions where they could tirelessly tinker and interfere with talented people trying to make programs.

This is not a universal complaint, but there are enough managers who would be better suited as footpath spruikers outside strip clubs than running important parts of a public broadcaster.

None of this is unique to Australia. The BBC and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have been pressured by funding cuts and accusations by conservatives of liberal bias, while the NZBC is a shell of what it is supposed to be.

In the end Guthrie and her agents may have made an unfortunate contribution to the dumbing down process but the structural changes are being driven by forces outside their control.

While the noble mission for the great old public broadcasters was to provide a service that commercial operators didn't or couldn't, today they are expected to be sufficiently "popular" to justify their taxpayer funding.

Technology is making the future case for stand alone public broadcasters more difficult, but when you consider what else is on offer and the quality of the people making the complaints, then its clear we'd be a lot poorer without this crucial Australian institution, even with its repeats of the repeats.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/14/michelle-guthrie-the-abc-and-the-turning-of-a-once-shining-jewel-into-mainstream-sludge>

6. Guy Rundle: how (and why) to save the ABC

Crikey
Dec 13, 2016
Guy Rundle

You think the current cuts to the ABC are the end of it? They are a fraction of the war on public broadcasting that is to come. But take heart, comrades. We can yet save the ABC.

Nine hundred years ago, your correspondent was working for the ABC at the old Gore Hill studios in Sydney — a sprawling campus of buildings, brick, wood, and iron sheds built when the ABC needed actual studios and to be close to transmitter towers — when a call came around: the MD (managing director) was to speak! The MD was Jonathan Shier, appointed at the height of the Howard years by a board headed by Donald McDonald*, PM John Howard's arty friend. Shier was a minor UK TV exec, mainly in advertising placement, who had leapt ahead of the pack for new MD by being willing to enact the purge that the Coalition so greatly desired at Aunty.

Once in power, he was hopelessly out of his depth, poor man, unable to comprehend the vast enterprise he had been put in charge of, and particularly at a loss to challenge the News and Current Affairs division, and their deep determination to do news and challenge power and propaganda. Shier hummed and haahed, then convened a nationwide organisation meeting in which he announced, bug-eyed, zombified, shambling across stage, that the seven or so divisions, based on rational categorisation, would be changed into 20 or so arbitrary units ("Drama" was one, but so was "Demographics and History", and, god knows "Cheese and Lacrosse" — it was that mad). "Will this work?" I said to a commercial producer sitting next to me, who had read one book in his life, The Thoughts of Nanushka. "Nahhh I'll just go directly to the head of TV. This guy's got eight months left."

So it proved. Incapable of providing real leadership, resisted at every turn by people intent on preserving the broadcaster's viability, Shier proceeded with filigree work: demanding that Faulty Towers be played on a Friday night (the tapes were so old that flecks of blue appeared during the transmission, where the surface had worn down to the chemical base), importing the BBC's Top of the Pops, even though its chart countdown bore no relation to Australian music ... and renaming Radio National "Radio One".

Sound familiar? Yes, when new ABC people have hit a wall, are out of ideas, they always hit on renaming the radio stations. With the rise and rise of Michelle Guthrie as new MD, we have entered one of those periods again. However, this time the danger is greater. Shier was a deranged incompetent, ultimately resigned when the board lost faith in him, to their credit**. Guthrie is an experienced CEO. The period in which a place like Gore Hill was still a going concern is long gone. The culture that assumed the indispensability of the ABC is over. Public broadcasting has to defend and reinvent itself at the same time.

The word from inside the ABC — which is like a message being tapped in Morse code from inside the hull of an upturned ship — is that Guthrie has been blindsided by the challenge of the job, is trying to make her mark by small and high-profile actions, from the axing of The Drum comment site to the killing of the transcription service. The Drum is no terrible loss (though more opinion is better than less opinion), though its removal will please News Corp, which sees the ABC as its main barrier to a one-outlet media landscape. The abolition of the transcription service is, by contrast, a piece of nihilistic vandalism, borne of a lack of any understanding or appreciation of the ABC's public role.

Who is Guthrie? Who knows? A News Corp and Google executive, she seems less someone with the attack-dog News Corp commitment to some absurd ideology than a lifelong management type lost in the wilds of that profession, which has nihilism as an operating principle. That she is reputedly a devotee of the bullshit "Six Sigma" management style is telling — it is of course the favoured management style of Jack Donaghy (as played by Alec Baldwin) in 30 Rock, and leads him to such triumphs as the pocket microwave, "Seinfeld vision" in which the latter's image is CGI'ed into all shows while he's on holiday, tanking the studio to lower the share price with a cop show named "God", in which the deity solves crimes (GOD: What if Esposito's lying to us? OFFSIDER: Don't you know???? GOD: Let us pray! OFFSIDER: To who?!?!) and the eventual sale of the entire network to the Sheinhardt Wig Company.

Shier had a shadow of the ideological battle he was part of. There's a strong sense that Guthrie's only commitment is to the cult of management. Perhaps she has been misrepresented in The Guardian, which draw on multiple background sources to say she had asked why the Four Corners crew reporting on Nauru hadn't featured more "happy children"; there weren't any, a show-maker had allegedly replied, after a silence. If not, it's telling.

The danger is that the ABC has got to a point where support for it is so attenuated and casual that those who have an ideological beef with it have much more energy than those who want to nobble it. In the teeth of it, the usual Stalinist process has started — people exceeding the quota of oppression to please the generalissimo. The purge at ABC Radio National appears to be an example of that — good broadcasters being turfed out, and the panicked process by which a good general broadcaster like Jonathan Green has been forced out of a Sunday morning show, in favour of Tom Switzer, rightish ideologuish type and professional grey man. Green has a light and pluralist touch, a sense of the absurd, suited to a Sunday morning show; Switzer is an intelligent commentator who is as light as an anvil dropped off a yacht. His Sunday morning slot will be either an attempt by him to play light, Brezhnev-as-DJ, or a grim ploughing through. Either way, a mistake for him, a panicked move by management.

We are watching all this happen in real time, piece by piece, yet there is, as yet, very little protest. Why is this? In part I suspect it's because the process is so confused. The IPA may wish to demolish the whole enterprise; almost everyone else has some conception that they're dealing with an institution built up over a century — yes, in a decade, the ABC will be a hundred years old — and which is entwined with the life of the nation. Howard's culture war against was half-hearted, but in retrospect it looks adamant compared to the hopeless, mass tanties of the current right. There is a weariness at this endless assault, and defenders always lack the energy of the attack dogs. The IPA et al have a simple charge: abolish it! Demolish it. To defend the given institution in these beaten-down times is a little more difficult.

The trouble is, in part, that the ABC hasn't reshaped itself. For decades it was a conservative, nationalist organisation. In the 1960s it was reshaped by a rising group of broadcasters and producers, into a critical and cutting-edge organisation. In the '90s and 2000s, as the world and class relations changed, that group became more isolated. Despite entreaties from many to make sections of the ABC more pluralist — not simply politically, but in its style and approach — they have been reluctant to do so. Radio National, to take one example, is both excellent and still sounds like student radio in 1976. Unlike BBC Radio Four, its closest comparison, it has failed to build a wide social base with comedy, drama and more wide-ranging programs. Thus, when the axe came, as it did recently, there was an insufficient public base to kick up a real storm. Control of sections of its TV and radio divisions went from ageing hippies to ageing hipsters whose conception of content was based around the cutting-edge, transgressive, challenging — and neglecting more grounded, broad-based, unchanging fare.

A deeper reshaping would have avoided the quick fixes that have been applied over the years — the direct interference in News and Current Affairs, and the installation of some genuine gimlet-eyed nutters in senior positions therein. That's been the way that ABC types always respond to political challenge, which is exactly the opposite of what should be done: the criticism of the narrowness of much of the ABC culture should be accepted and remedied, News and Current Affairs defended with a ring of fire.

There is a wider problem too: defending public broadcasting in an age of a borderless digital content cannot be done without rethinking the whole idea of what the state is doing being involved with broadcasting. It was initially based on scale — no one else could marshal the capital and infrastructure to provide broadcasting at all to vast sections of the country. It was superseded by the idea that a public broadcaster would provide what commercial broadcasters wouldn't — especially in terms of high culture. But the authority of high culture is dead now, and anyone who wants it can get it as a download. At some point, "high" culture became "transgressive" culture — and the audience became class-sectional.

To protect its crucial critical News and Current Affairs function, and its remnant high culture function, the ABC has to be more things to more people. It has to establish and use metrics different to the commercial ratings, which simply record (semi-fictional) viewer tallies. Unless you think that more people should be watching more TV more of the time, that doesn't measure a social good. The ABC needs to measure what its overall saturation effect — does it reach 100% of the population over a year? Has it increased the number of people who watch the ABC multiple times over a year? Most importantly, it needs qualitative measures. How many people found an ABC series/show/radio station inspiring, essential, moving, unique, illuminating, etc — in other words, how many got from the ABC something they wouldn't get anywhere else? Year on year it would then measure not weekly ratings, but the increased satisfaction of these qualitative goals, and uptake by an ever-wider population group, trending to 100%.

That would not only be a better measure of whether the corporation is achieving the aims set out in its charter, it would also serve to build a broader social base that can defend the broadcaster.

Really, this need a few people to get out of the Twitter/online zone and get organised. The right have the relentless motion of capital on the side; the left used to counter that with on-the-ground organisation and collective face-to-face association. But while capital remains, persuading the progressive class to actually get together in meetings and organisations — even for the things they value — has become difficult.

Well, to quote the news theme, ya-da-da-dah-dah-tatat-DAH! The trumpet soundeth, and the call must be answered, if the organisation is valued. If you're in the MEAA, petition them to go in harder on the current arrangements. If you're not, get involved with ABC Friends/Friends of the ABC. The organisation has been kept going by dedicated people for decades. They want and need new blood (and possibly, a less daggy name). Ten new people willing to put a shoulder to it would transform this social and cultural struggle. The few hours a week you would expend on such a cause would only be spent binge-watching *The Walking Dead* and tweeting archly. The IPA don't binge-watch — they are the walking dead, the chinos-and-pearls crowd shambling towards everything you value. It takes a century to create something like the ABC, and three years with the zombies in charge to kill it. The building, the studios, the towers that made the ABC an imposing presence are long gone. Somehow it remains, and it must do so. The most radical act at the moment is to conserve.

*not Donald MacDonald, a jobbing actor/writer, who was, by coincidence occasionally employed on the show I was working on at the time. He wrote what I reckon is one of the funniest Oz plays ever written, a simple farce called *Caravan*. Might need a re-polish, but someone should really restage that, it was a corker.

**by a coincidence I was at ABC Southbank the day the board met there to decide Shier's fate (ABC news crews were convened at the front entrance to get doorstops of the people who worked on the same floor as them). After the meeting, Donald McDonald, having made the right move under difficult circumstances, walked past. Strode past. I have rarely seen a man more haunted in the eyes, or suddenly aged. He was as grey as one of Derek Gilroy's cardigans.

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2016/12/13/how-to-save-the-abc-in-the-age-of-michelle-guthrie/>

7. Roger Cohen: Australia's island prisons are an exercise in cruelty

New York Times journalist Roger Cohen visited Manus Island and found it to be a "growing embarrassment to Australia".

The Age
December 12 2016 - 8:26PM
Roger Cohen

The plane banks over the dense tropical forest of Manus Island, little touched, it seems, by human hand. South Pacific waters lap onto deserted beaches. The jungle glistens, impenetrable. At the unfenced airport, built by occupying Japanese forces during World War II, a sign "welcomes you to our very beautiful island paradise in the sun."

It could be that, a near 100-kilometre-long slice of heaven. But for more than 900 asylum seekers from across the world banished by Australia to this remote corner of the Papua New Guinea archipelago, Manus has been hell; a 3½-year exercise in mental and physical cruelty conducted in near secrecy beneath the green canopy of the tropics.

A road, newly paved by Australia as part payment to its former colony for hosting this punitive experiment in refugee management, leads to Lorengau, a capital of romantic name and unromantic misery. Here I find Benham Satah, a Kurd who fled persecution in the western Iranian city of Kermanshah. Detained on Australia's Christmas Island after crossing in a smuggler's boat from Indonesia and later forced onto a Manus-bound plane, he has languished here since August 27, 2013.

Endless limbo undoes the mind. But going home could mean facing death: Refugees do not flee out of choice but because they have no choice. Satah's light brown eyes are glassy. His legs tremble. A young man with a college degree in English, he is now nameless, a mere registration number – FRT009 – to Australian officials.

"Sometimes I cut myself," he says, "so that I can see my blood and remember, 'Oh, yes! I am alive.'"

Reza Barati, his former roommate at what the men's ID badges call the Offshore Processing Centre (Orwell would be proud), is dead. A fellow Iranian Kurd, he was killed, aged 23, on February 17, 2014. Satah witnessed the tall, quiet volleyball player being beaten to death after a local mob scaled the wall of the facility. Protests by asylum seekers had led to rising tensions with Australian authorities and their Manus enforcers.

The murder obsesses Satah but constitutes a mere fraction of the human cost of a policy that, since July 19, 2013, has sent more than 2000 asylum seekers and refugees to Manus and the tiny Pacific island nation of Nauru, far from inquiring eyes. (Unable to obtain a press visa to visit Manus, I went nonetheless.)

The toll among Burmese, Sudanese, Somali, Lebanese, Pakistani, Iraqi, Afghan, Syrian, Iranian and other migrants is devastating: self-immolation, overdoses, death from septicemia as a result of medical negligence, sexual abuse and rampant despair. A recent UN High Commissioner for Refugees report by three medical experts found that 88 per cent of the 181 asylum seekers and refugees examined on Manus were suffering from depressive disorders, including, in some cases, psychosis.

The world's refugee crisis, with its 65 million people on the move, more than at any time since 1945, knows no more sustained, sinister or surreal exercise in cruelty than the South Pacific quasi-prisons Australia has established for its trickle of the migrant flood.

Australia, like Europe but on a much smaller scale, faces a genuine dilemma: What to do about desperate migrants trying by any means to gain asylum? Their journeys across the world have fuelled rightist movements in many developed societies. Anxiety, whether related to jobs or terrorism, is high and, as Donald Trump demonstrated, scapegoating is effective. Approaches to the crisis have varied. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, has taken in more than one million. But the Australian government argues that toughness is the only way to prevent the country from being overwhelmed.

It has "stopped the boats" and the Indonesian smugglers behind them: This is the essence of Australia's case. The government says it has prevented deaths like those in the Mediterranean, where more than 4000 migrants have drowned this year. By turning back the "queue jumpers," a phrase that resonates in a nation devoted to a "fair go" for all, it has safeguarded Australia's right to select who gets to people a vast and empty country. The official vow that those marooned on Manus and Nauru will never live in Australia has assumed doctrinal vehemence.

FULL STORY AT <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/australias-island-prisons-are-an-exercise-in-cruelty-20161211-gt8wae.html>

8. 'You wish you could save them': teachers describe anguish of children held on Nauru – video

Jen Rose, Evan Davies and Judith Reen speak out about their time on the remote Pacific island of Nauru, where they taught children detained indefinitely in an Australian offshore processing camp. ' "Why doesn't Australia like us? What have we done," ' Rose tearfully recalls her pupils asking, adding: 'To explain that to a five-year-old is just impossible'

Josh Wall and Paul Farrell
theguardian.com
Thursday 11 August 2016 07.10 AEST

WATCH VIDEO HERE: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/video/2016/aug/11/you-wish-you-could-save-them-teachers-describe-anguish-of-children-held-on-nauru-video>

9. Nick Riemer: Teachers should be an example and that means speaking their minds on refugees

Sydney Morning Herald
December 12 2016 - 3:53PM
Nick Riemer

This week, hundreds of school teachers from the national Teachers for Refugees group will protest against our brutal and internationally condemned refugee policies by wearing "close the camps, bring them here" T-shirts to school.

Predictably, the initiative has drawn strident criticism from the federal government and sections of the media. In yet another escalation of the authoritarianism of Australian political culture, an intervention from the federal Education Minister, Simon

Birmingham, has led to teachers being threatened with disciplinary action if they wear the shirts in class. In NSW, they even risk dismissal. Calls for justice, human rights, or respect for international law, it would seem, officially have no place in Australian schools.

Teachers' critics accuse them of wanting to "brainwash" students. Politics, they say, must be kept out of the classroom. The idea that wearing T-shirts constitutes brainwashing is preposterous. Birmingham himself has acknowledged that a debate on refugees is appropriate. Civics and citizenship forms part of the curriculum in NSW. Schools regularly participate in white ribbon programs to highlight the evils of domestic violence and violence against women. Why should the government's amply documented violence against refugees be taken any less seriously?

Teachers for Refugees have made it clear they are not interested in forcing anyone to adopt their views: teachers are authority figures, and they can't and shouldn't compel their students to agree with them. But they also shouldn't have to pretend that they come to social topics with no opinions of their own. On the contrary, teachers should be examples of the kinds of adults society needs – politically engaged, independent-minded, committed to rational, pluralistic debate over controversial questions, and not cowed by pressure into hiding their convictions.

Political neutrality in the classroom is, in any case, a fiction. Teachers are called on to take positions on any number of political issues as a part of their job. In history classes, no one could reasonably argue that schools must treat the ideologies of racism or fascism "neutrally", as though it was an open question whether they are valid.

A teacher's role is obviously not to be apolitical on topics like these, but to present movements like Nazism as wrong and criminal: there would justifiably be an outcry if, in the name of keeping politics out of the classroom, a teacher refused to condemn anti-Semitism, for instance. The question of refugees is no different: teachers and university lecturers have a duty to assert the principles of justice and human rights that the government is denying.

The demand for teachers' political views to be kept private also carries a sinister implication. Schoolchildren aren't immune from the news: many, especially in more senior years, will have heard about the harrowing conditions, the despair, and the tragic self-harm and suicides that flow from Australia's refugee policies. By forcing teachers to hide their opposition to those policies in class, the state is actively fostering a nagging doubt in students' minds: maybe, school children are being encouraged to think, the adults responsible for our education actually support this cruelty to refugees. The government, apparently, wants students to believe that their teachers may be in favour of arbitrary, ruthless abuse of vulnerable people. That possibility is deeply corrosive of the trust on which education depends.

These kinds of insidious consequences on education are just one of the dangerous long-term effects of the normalisation of refugee-detention on our society. Those effects should not be underestimated: a more authoritarian political culture, the erosion of justice and the rule of law as norms constraining the powerful, a weakening of the commitment to rational public policy, the increasing expectation of racist state violence, and the more regular suppression of dissent.

Politicians' current attempt to silence teachers is the latest bid by the state to tighten its grip over independent institutions of civil society. It is of a piece with the longstanding campaign against the ABC, with the establishment of the ABCC to wind back the power of unions, and with political interference in university research grants and the Safe Schools programme this year. The Border Force Act, which still gags teachers working in the detention network, provides a model for the crackdown on Teachers for Refugees.

The public education system belongs to the public, not the government, just like the ABC is a public broadcaster, not a state one. It is not for politicians to dictate what does and doesn't count as appropriate use of class time: that is for teachers themselves to determine, in consultation with their communities. Politicians should serve the public, not try to stand over it. The virulence of their attack on Teachers for Refugees springs from the recognition that, like the doctors who have also spoken out against asylum policy, the teachers are right.

Children are being abused, refugees are killing themselves and politicians on both sides are persisting with the policies that are responsible. In manifesting their support for refugees against the miserable and bloody opportunism of federal parliament, teachers – a far more trusted profession than politicians ever will be – are showing just how vital it is for society to maintain strong institutions independent of government. Defending refugees in class is every teacher's duty; we should insist on their right to do so.

Nick Riemer is a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney and a member of the Refugee Action Coalition Sydney.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/teachers-should-be-an-example-and-that-means-speaking-their-minds-on-refugees-20161211-gt8wjx.html>

10. Retiring Chief Justice Robert French stands by silence on asylum seeker ruling

ABC Radio National

By Damien Carrick for The Law Report

Monday 12 December 2016

As he nears the end of eight years as the nation's top judge, Robert French is standing by his response to critics of a controversial ruling on Australia's asylum seeker policy.

When the High Court struck down Labor's Malaysia Solution in 2011 it ignited an attack on the courts from politicians the likes of which had not been seen since the Mabo and Wik decisions of the 1990s.

Then prime minister Julia Gillard accused the court of "missing an opportunity to send a message to asylum seekers", and "basically turn[ing] on its head the understanding of the law in this country".

Speaking to The Law Report a month before his retirement — his first media interview in three years — Justice French said he remained comfortable with how he handled the situation.

"Generally speaking it is a very bad idea for judges who have been criticised to engage in some sort of public debate with the critic," he said.

Though others responded to Ms Gillard's comments, he said it would have been "a bad look ... to get dragged into that sort of exchange".

Justice French said no-one enjoyed criticism, but judges had to expect their reasons would come under scrutiny.

"If you don't have the capacity to shrug off that kind of criticism and just say ... it goes with the territory, and just get on with the job, then you really shouldn't be in judicial office."

Following the Malaysia Solution ruling, ALP parliamentary secretary David Bradbury fumed that High Court judges "don't have to take telephone calls about boats crashing into rocks on Christmas Island".

Justice French said while he appreciated the position of ministers or public officials dealing with on-the-ground realities, "the court's role is to interpret and apply the law as best it can".

Mandatory sentences 'not the answer'

One of the threads running through Justice French's career is a deep engagement with Indigenous Australians.

He was one of the founders of the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service of WA and was the president of the Native Title Tribunal for almost five years.

Delivering the annual State of the Judicature speech earlier this year, Justice French spoke about the "national disgrace" of Indigenous incarceration, which is at least 16 times higher than for non-Indigenous Australians.

He said one thing he was sure of was that mandatory minimum sentences were not the answer, as they meant that different cases must be treated the same.

"The court can say, 'this is an unfair result', sometimes judges do," he said.

"They may say, 'I impose this sentence,' (but) say, 'I believe I should be given more flexible options.'"

However, Justice French acknowledged that judges cannot do this in every case — and ultimately it was their duty is to apply the law of the land as parliament had enacted it.

French considers himself one among equals

When it comes to the operation of the seven-member High Court, Justice French has always described himself as "one among equals" rather than first among equals.

He said joint judgments were generally preferable to separate concurring judgments.

"There is plainly a very important place for joint judgments which will authoritatively and clearly state the law," he said.

The Chief Justice emphasised that separate judgments were appropriate if a judge wanted to pursue a different line of reasoning.

But he said he also saw value in processes that facilitate joint reasons.

"If a clear consensus emerges then I will suggest that one of the judges might like to write a first draft — it's just a suggestion, it's not a formal assignment, as happens in the United States Supreme Court," he said.

The draft is then circulated and discussed and those that want to come on board can do so.

No cause for concern about 'herd activity'

There are different approaches. The now retired Justice Heydon wrote in 2012 that "even when you agree with your fellow judges, judges should still write their own reasons".

He was concerned about judicial herd activity and artificial consensus among judges, and fearful that forceful personalities could weaken the resolve of individual judges.

But Justice French said there was no cause for concern about group-think or dominant personalities.

"Not on this court! I think everybody has a fairly healthy sense of their own independence, and when people agree, they agree with full intellectual assent," he said.

"The fact that some of them do write separately from time to time merely reaffirms that they don't join in routinely. I just don't see those risks reflected in the day-to-day realities of the court."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-12/retiring-chief-justice-stands-by-silence-on-asylum-seeker-ruling/8111576>

11. Immigration boss Michael Pezzullo flies to America to sell refugee deal to Donald Trump officials

The Age
December 13 2016 - 12:15AM
James Massola

Australia's immigration chief has conducted a secret visit to the United States to reach out to Donald Trump officials and spruik a refugee deal Malcolm Turnbull struck with outgoing President Barack Obama.

Department of Immigration and Border Protection secretary Michael Pezzullo and other senior bureaucrats have in recent weeks engaged in a series of high-level meetings with figures connected to President-elect Trump, and with officials from the Department of Homeland Security, to discuss operational details of the deal.

Fairfax Media has learned that Mr Pezzullo was in the United States to offer detailed briefings on President Obama's offer to take an undisclosed number of refugees from Manus Island and Nauru, and provide broader context about Operation Sovereign Borders, the tough border protection policy introduced under Tony Abbott.

The meetings have been designed to assuage Republican concerns about the deal and ensure it holds after President-elect Trump is inaugurated in late January. There were fears in Australia that Mr Trump - who made a hardline approach to immigration one of the hallmarks of his election campaign - could tear up the agreement, which the Turnbull government had spent the better part of this year securing.

As one Turnbull government source put it to Fairfax Media: "If you were a Republican you might think 'what the hell is this?'"

"But if you get a briefing from us on the context . . . it calibrates it from a Republican perspective."

The meetings were scheduled amid demands from senior US Republicans for the White House to make public information about the refugee resettlement deal.

The chairmen of the powerful House and Senate Judiciary Committees in Washington, congressman Bob Goodlatte and senator Chuck Grassley, have objected to "secret" negotiations with Australia, which they have said has "left Americans in the dark".

Under the proposed deal, as many as 1800 asylum seekers held on Nauru and Manus Island could be resettled in the United States.

Last week, a confident Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told Fairfax Media the deal had been "secured".

When asked whether the refugee deal could be scuppered by the incoming Trump administration, Mr Turnbull has repeatedly said his government would deal with one administration at a time.

But privately, sources believed there was some chance the deal could be scuppered and the senior officials were dispatched to head-off what would be a disastrous political setback for the Turnbull government.

The United States has an annual intake of about 100,000 refugees. The Manus Island and Nauru refugees would be within the existing intake. Australia has in turn promised to take refugees from the violence-plagued "northern triangle" countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador currently living in camps in Costa Rica.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton announced on Monday that Australia had signed a new memorandum of understanding that will see Vietnamese nationals intercepted at sea with no legal right to enter or remain in Australia returned to their home country.

Since 2015, 113 Vietnamese nationals on three vessels have been sent back to Vietnam after being intercepted by the Australian Border Force.

Under the Turnbull government's bid to shut down the offshore detention system, refugees or asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru who are not allowed or don't want to resettle in America would be sent home or given a visa to stay on Nauru.

A spokesperson for the Department of Immigration and Border Protection said Australian officials "including at the rank of secretary" routinely travel to the United States for "discussions on matters of mutual interest."

Comment was sought from Immigration Minister Peter Dutton.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/immigration-boss-michael-pezzullo-flies-to-america-to-sell-refugee-deal-to-donald-trump-officials-20161212-gt9f18.html>

12. Offshore detention report says half of child abuse cases receive inadequate response

Child Protection Board says less than 1% of cases result in criminal convictions and immigration department cannot be sure of number of incidents

The Guardian
Paul Karp
Friday 16 December 2016 17:18 AEDT

The response to almost half the reported incidents of child abuse in Australian immigration detention was inadequate and the immigration department cannot be sure of the number, nature and severity of incidents, an independent panel has found.

Those are the conclusions of the Child Protection Board's damning Making Children Safer report, released by the federal government on Friday.

It details a detention system plagued by the premature closure of child abuse investigations, miscategorisation of incidents and lacking capacity to respond to complex incidents.

The report called for considerable improvement in the reporting of abuse and found that less than 1% of cases resulted in criminal convictions.

The panel assessed 242 alleged incidents of child abuse and found responses were "adequate" or "good" in only just over half (57.4%) of the cases.

But the panel said there were a total of 1,211 "possible incidents of child abuse" between 1 January 2008 and 30 June 2015 and the immigration department "cannot be assured on either the number, nature or severity of the reported incidents of child abuse".

Detainees gave examples of submitting complaint forms or making oral complaints but hearing nothing from the department or service providers, it said.

The panel found that reports of incidents involving children were "very brief" with inadequate "often generalised, nonspecific descriptions being used and an apparent reluctance to describe exactly what happened".

For example, a person of interest was described as "rubbing against" a child without a description of what they were "rubbing with and where on the victim the rubbing took place", making assessment of the incident difficult.

A number of reports involved pornographic material on USBs being used during serious child abuse offending or to groom children within the facility.

The panel called for improved categorisation of the nature and seriousness of incidents. It noted problems including using separate incident classification systems, systems not requiring a detailed description, double counting and miscategorisation both in overstating or understating incidents' severity.

"There was a pattern of premature closure of matters and a lack of transparency in the complaint process," it said.

The panel said that the immigration department's capacity to investigate child abuse had to be "significantly strengthened" to ensure that inquiries are not finalised until all available facts are established and effectively responded to.

Over the past three years the remote immigration detention facilities have been plagued by reports of shocking conditions, poor management and deteriorating mental health of asylum seekers.

The Guardian's publication of the Nauru files showed the trauma and abuse inflicted on asylum seekers and refugees – particularly children – on Nauru.

But one of the consistent concerns raised in the Nauru files has been the practice of "downgrading" incident reports, where incidents in detention that should be classified as "critical" or "major" were downgraded to "minor" or "information".

The panel said the department and service providers "often lacked the capability to effectively respond to complex incidents".

For those in community detention, the panel found there were "no risk frameworks in place". It said service providers' policies on abuse "in many cases" were inadequate.

Despite the serious nature of many instances of child abuse in immigration detention, less than 1% of all cases resulted in criminal convictions, the panel found.

Only one case at the Nauru detention centre was referred to the Nauru public prosecutor and the case did not proceed.

But the panel noted that some government policies, including the prioritisation of children for community detention and the policies of enhanced border protection, had resulted in a "significant reduction in the number of child abuse incidents".

The Australian government claims to have removed all children from detention, a disputed claim based on recategorising sections of some centres as "community detention".

The panel said Nauru's regional processing centre's move to become an "open centre" in the last 18 months had a "clear and positive impact" on families and children.

In its response, the immigration department said it was developing a risk management framework but it was "not possible ... to be present with families in the community to fully identify all emerging risks".

The department accepted most of the recommendations, including to improve categorisation of incidents, to require service providers to deliver accurate and complete incident reports, and to ensure inquiries were not finalised without all available facts and an effective response.

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, blamed the problems in immigration detention on the "impossible burden" he said the previous Labor government's policies had created.

"Protecting children is everyone's responsibility," he said. "[The immigration department] has and will continue to work with state and territory child protection agencies which have legislative responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children."

The child abuse board consists of Margaret Allison, Dominic Downie and John Lawler. It recommended its report be sent for consideration to the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, which the government agreed to do.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/dec/16/offshore-detention-report-says-half-of-child-abuse-cases-receive-inadequate-response>

13. Immigration Minister Peter Dutton wrong on refugees' citizenship, Federal Court finds

Sydney Morning Herald
December 16 2016
Michael Gordon

The Federal Court has found Peter Dutton unreasonably delayed making decisions on applications for citizenship by refugees in a landmark ruling that has implications for thousands of would-be citizens.

The court has also ruled that Mr Dutton erred in rejecting the applications for citizenship of the two Afghan refugees several weeks after they commenced legal proceedings. The pair had been permanent residents of Australia for more than four years.

Justice Bromberg of the Federal Court ruled that the decisions to reject their applications were invalid and "at law no decisions at all" and dismissed Mr Dutton's submission that he deny the two men relief.

The case provides hope for more than 10,000 refugees, most of whom came to Australia by boat before the decision by the Rudd government that no one processed offshore would ever be settled in Australia.

While it will invite more legal action if there is no move to hasten decision-making for the refugees, the decision will also raise concerns that Mr Dutton could proceed with legislation to make it harder for refugees to obtain citizenship.

Mr Dutton's office declined to comment on the Federal Court ruling, saying only that his department was considering the judgment.

The Refugee Council of Australia, who brought on the action with pro bono lawyers, says the refugees have had their citizenship applications "put in the bottom drawer" by Mr Dutton's department.

Lawyers for the refugees argued that these delays have been unreasonable and appeared to be discriminatory.

The court was told the excessive delays had caused significant anxiety for the many thousands affected, as they have been unable to reunite with their families while their citizenship remains in limbo.

"For people who are recognised as refugees, it is extremely difficult to bring family members to safety in Australia without citizenship," said the Refugee Council's Tim O'Connor.

"As such, delays in processing citizenship applications have left many in prolonged situations of danger and persecution, despite having a parent, sibling or other close relative who has been recognised as a refugee in Australia."

Fairfax Media has spoken to a number of those whose applications have been delayed for periods of one and two years.

"It is ruin (sic) my life – and the life of my family," said Karim Sadaqat, who came by boat in 2010 and whose wife and two children remain in Afghanistan.

"They are there and I am here," said Mr Sadaqat, who has been waiting to undertake the citizenship test since August last year.

Another refugee, who asked that his name not be used, said he passed the citizenship test in March 2015, but had not been contacted regarding any booking in for a citizenship ceremony.

"I need to receive citizenship for my family. My daughter is in Pakistan, and is in need of urgent medical attention. No one else can take her," he said.

Mr O'Connor said the delays had denied basic rights to stability and family reunion through slow and targeted decision-making.

"Today's ruling recognises this injustice and represents a first step towards a resolution for thousands and a chance for them to start to rebuild their lives."

Fairfax Media reported earlier this year that a paper prepared by Mr Dutton's department marked "PROTECTED Sensitive: Cabinet" had canvassed options including a revamped Citizenship Test and Citizenship Pledge to "strengthen accountability for commitments made at citizenship conferral".

The paper also flagged changes to simplify Australia's visa framework and "create stronger controls over access to permanent residency and citizenship".

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/immigration-minister-peter-dutton-wrong-on-refugees-citizenship-federal-court-finds-20161216-gtd05o.html>

14. Immigration authorities unreasonably delayed refugees' citizenship bids, court rules

Federal court finds Peter Dutton's department took no steps for more than a year to assess the two Hazara men's applications

The Guardian

Christopher Knaus

Friday 16 December 2016 18.33 AEDT

A court has ruled that Peter Dutton and the immigration department unreasonably delayed the citizenship applications of two former Hazara refugees, a decision that advocates say will provide hope to thousands who have had their cases "put in the bottom drawer".

The Refugee Council of Australia is hopeful the decision will force the immigration department to stop delaying citizenship applications by former refugees, something they say has caused "significant anxiety for the many thousands affected".

"Today's decision is a landmark ruling, providing hope for over 10,000 people around Australia who have been denied justice by the immigration department," the council's acting chief executive, Tim O'Connor, said.

"Our government has denied them basic rights to stability and, importantly, family reunion, through slow and targeted decision-making.

"Today's ruling recognises this injustice and represents a first step towards a resolution for thousands and a chance for them to start to rebuild their lives."

The case involved two Hazara men who were found to need Australia's protection after fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both had been permanent Australian residents for more than four years by the time they sought to become Australian citizens.

They passed their citizenship tests and were, like most people, told they would know final decisions within four weeks.

The first man, named "F" by the court, waited 18 months for a decision on his citizenship before lodging proceedings in the federal court. The second, referred to only as "G", waited 23 months.

The department typically processes 80% of citizenship applications within 80 days, while applicants who sit citizenship tests are generally told a decision will be made in four weeks. The pair argued the delay was unreasonable and appeared to be discriminatory.

The case, initiated against the immigration minister by the Refugee Council of Australia with pro-bono legal support, sought the federal court to force his department to make a decision.

While the court case was still afoot, the department decided to reject the citizenship applications of both men. The department said it could not be sure of F's identity and was not satisfied that G was of good character.

The two men also asked for the refusal decisions to be set aside.

Immigration authorities had described the cases as "complex", arguing they would take far longer than normal cases.

But Justice Mordecai Bromberg found there had been unreasonable delay for significant periods in the department's handling of the applications.

"I find that the department took no steps to progress F's or G's applications for some 14.5 months from the time at which each of those applications was categorised as a 'complex case'," Bromberg said.

"I also hold that for a period of about four months in the case of G, in the time between when fingerprint checks were concluded and when his application was categorised as 'complex', nothing was done by the department to assess that application."

Once they began their court action, the department expedited their cases. That caused Bromberg significant concern.

"The fact that an applicant who institutes court proceedings is given priority suggests an arbitrariness which does not engender confidence that a reasonable allocation mechanism was being applied," he said.

Bromberg also found that the decisions to refuse the two men were invalid.

The Refugee Council said delays in cases of former refugees caused significant anxiety. It makes it difficult for them to reunite with their families, who are unable to come to Australia, exposing them, in many cases, to prolonged situations of danger and persecution.

The citizenship applications have been referred back to the immigration minister for decision.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/dec/16/immigration-authorities-unreasonably-delayed-refugees-citizenship-bids-court-rules>

16. MEDIA RELEASE: Car torched as Nauruan locals terrorise refugee settlement

Friday December 16, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

Nauruan locals have terrorised a refugee settlement on Nauru.

Around 3.30am, Friday morning (16 December), refugees were awoken by locals shouting "F*** refugees; F*** Off; Go to America."

Doors were bashed and rocks pelted at the converted shipping containers that serve as refugee accommodation at Nibok.

Air-conditioning units attached to the walls of the refugee housing were damaged as they were knocked off their mountings.

But in a new level of terror directed at the refugees, the locals torched one of the refugee's cars parked in the settlement -- see video attached. Some refugees with young children fled the settlement in the face of the attack.

"The latest attack on refugees has highlighted the urgent need for the safety of refugees on Nauru and the need for resettlement, for all," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"Some refugees have been interviewed by US officials but there is still no timeline for resettlement in the US, and it is already clear that not all refugees and asylum seekers will be settled under the US deal.

"Refugee have been on Nauru for three and half years. Their safety and their future is Australia's responsibility."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713

17. Human rights day: installation invites public to open hearts for offshore detention

The Confined Hearts Project by artist Penny Ryan includes handwritten messages from asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island and Nauru

The Guardian
Steph Harmon
Wednesday 7 December 2016 16.00 AEDT

This week Sydney artist Penny Ryan received 32 handwritten and hand-drawn messages in the mail. Scrawled on scraps of paper and cloth, they came from detainees being held on Manus Island and Nauru.

"We are suffering every minute of the day," read one.

"We just asking for save. We had enough torturing," read another.

"Manus and Nauru is killing us one by one, physically and mentally."

"Why am I in prison."

When asked how she felt reading each one for the first time, Ryan grimaces. "They brought tears, obviously," she says. "There's something really powerful about getting these. Suddenly you're talking about real people, individuals we don't get to see."

In the past six months Ryan has held more than 45 workshops in Sydney and Canberra, teaching more than 400 people – ranging in age from five to 94 – to sculpt human hearts out of clay. There are now 1,468 hearts in total: one for each man, woman and child the government said were being held on Manus Island and Nauru at the time her project began.

As she accrued more and more hearts – painstakingly crafted at workshops, where 15 to 20 people at a time talked about the issue and their connection to it – she began displaying them at a series of interactive installations, titled The Confined Hearts Project.

Open Hearts – which invited participants to unwrap 400 hearts – premiered in June for the Chippendale New World Art prize; and Heart Awakening, in September, invited people to wash 300 of the hearts in a ritual cleansing at the National Art School.

On Saturday 10 December, Human Rights Day, the project continues with its third event. For Opening Hearts, all 1,468 muslin-wrapped hearts – most inscribed with messages from their maker – will be installed in a spiral formation next to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, at Circular Quay.

The public will be invited to walk into the spiral's centre, unwrap the muslin covering a heart, place it back down, and walk out again holding onto the fabric – onto which they may write a message.

“I'd been looking a lot at what ritual can do to help people step out of their ordinary lives for even a moment, to reflect on something,” she says. “Giving them an act to do allows that sort of ritual.”

When Ryan met two people who would be visiting Manus Island and Nauru, she asked if they could explain Detained Hearts to the detainees, with the hopes some would write messages to Australia to be included in the project. While the artist is keeping the originals safe for a future work, photographic reproductions will be on display at Circular Quay.

Ryan has long been interested in socially engaged art which involves and in some cases galvanises participants; work by Jeremy Deller and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, for example.

The public event is about taking people out of their everyday life, and connecting them to the real people affected by the Australian government's policy. “Walking in, stooping down, picking up a heart – it's a process ... Most people report being slightly shocked by the fact that each heart is so heavy. The ceramic is fragile. It's about taking it out from the [political] debate, and back into a sense of human-ness. And taking time to get out of your ordinary life and letting yourself feel something,” she says.

“My own frustrations with some contemporary art have been about the lack of engagement around emotion, feeling, ritual. [I'm interested in] trying to create situations where you take time out from what is really an overwhelming issue.”

For Ryan, and for many of those who took part in her workshop, the plight of refugees in Australia and beyond is so immense it can be paralysing. “As soon as you start thinking about 64 million people on the move because of conflict and war, and we're here in the land of plenty – how do I make a difference?”

Her workshops opened with an hour of discussion around the issue, before she talked participants through six easy steps to make a 3D anatomical heart (“not so easy, to be honest!”). In each workshop, she says, the same conversations kept coming up.

“There's a sense of basic powerlessness and shame about Australia's reaction, a sense of privilege ... ‘I got here’ or ‘my parents got here’ or ‘my grandparents got here, often as refugees or post war, and we didn't have any of this. We got absorbed into the country’.”

Using their hands to make a clay heart, and to inscribe it with a message, gave the participants a way to channel those feelings, a kind of catharsis, she says. For many, it gave them an entry point to action too.

“The vast majority of people – I'd say 80% who came – had never taken any political action,” Ryan says. “They felt bad about [the issue], but they'd remained largely silent; might make a casual comment, but that was as far as they went.”

These workshops, she says, was not only the first time many had gathered in a group of people who felt the same way, but the first time many had taken a form of action – symbolic as it may be.

“Roughly 30-40 people came back for multiple workshops ... they could just come and know that they were coming to a place where there was an acceptance [of the same idea]”

From the event itself on Saturday, she's hoping the public approaches it with openness. “I want people to actually let themselves be moved by it. Let themselves actually feel something, for a moment. That's my biggest hope,” she says. “They might not necessarily take any direct action, but at least they won't be part of a passive violence group that's letting all of this happen without taking some form of action.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/dec/07/opening-hearts-unwraps-offshore-detention-its-about-letting-yourself-feel-something>

18. Domestic violence survivor, 12, and refugee win Human Rights Award for work helping others

ABC News Online

By Natalie Whiting

First posted 7 Dec 2016, 3:29am

Updated 7 Dec 2016, 2:09pm

Tasmanian boy Kobe Bennett is unflinching in describing his experiences of domestic violence. "When I was younger, my dad used to beat me up and throw me at walls and he tried to burn the house down once," he said.

His father has since been convicted of domestic violence-related offences, and life was now a lot better, the 12-year-old said. "It's much more fun," he said.

The young survivor has been awarded the youth category at this year's Human Rights Awards for using his experiences to help stand up for the rights of children and illustrate the impacts of domestic violence. He has been working with his mother producing a family violence audiobook, using a collection of personal stories.

"It's mine, my mum's and a whole bunch of other people's. It's just been piecing together what people have to say about family violence."

He hopes the project will help other children and wants people to be able to feel how he felt.

Refugee giving back in new and former home

Former refugee Besta Poni Peter was the joint winner of the individual award, one of nine handed out at Government House.

Ms Poni Peter, who fled war in Sudan and settled in Tasmania, was recognised for her work supporting and inspiring other refugees. "My heart is always supporting people who need support, so just hearing their voices and issues that are facing them," Ms Poni Peter said.

She has also been working with Bright Side Foundation, raising money for schools in South Sudan. "My hopes are to not only give back to South Sudan, but also Australia. To give back here and also back home, so my heart is in two.

"But first of all to give here, and that's why I've been here for 13 years and I really wanted to give so much back to Australia, because thank you is not enough."

Besta Poni Peter said she tried to empower other refugees in Australia.

"They're seeing me, a mother of five kids, working, studying and doing volunteer work — it makes a big difference because they can see from me, 'if she can do it, I can also do it'," she said.

Social change arts company Big hART picked up the award for organisation of the year.

Big hART formed in Burnie in the state's north-west 24 years ago and has grown into a multi-award-winning organisation producing cross-platform performances and projects.

The company aims to empower disadvantaged and marginalised groups, breaking down barriers and developing skills.

It has worked across 50 communities in performance, film, digital and theatre productions involving 300 artists and 8,000 participants.

The latest Tasmanian venture, Project O, is working with 20 young Wynyard women each year for the next five years to raise awareness of domestic violence impacts in the north west.

Tasmania's anti-discrimination commissioner, Robin Banks, said the award recipients were inspiring.

"I think it really says to us, particularly when you see how many young people have received awards this year, that our future is in pretty good hands," she said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-07/tasmanian-boy-honoured-after-abuse-at-hands-of-father/8097846>