

Fear and Silence in Australia

By [John Pilger](#)

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Australia, once the land of the “fair go”, has collaborated with Guantanamo more closely than any other western government and is guilty of human rights abuses of its own.

National myths are usually partly true. In Australia, the myth of an egalitarian society, or “fair go”, has an extraordinary history. Long before most of the world, Australia had a minimum wage, a 35-hour working week, child benefits and the vote for women. The secret ballot was invented in Australia. By the 1960s, Australians could boast the most equitable spread of personal income in the world.

Today, these are forgotten, subversive truths. As schools are ordered to fly the flag (its Union Jack still mocking from on high), the maudlin story of Australian soldiers dying pointlessly for an imperial master at Gallipoli is elevated, along with barely veiled colonialism and racism. Self-promoted as a bastion of human rights, Australia has become a sideshow of their denial and degradation.

Many Australians are aware of this, not least those who filled a small Sydney theatre on 26 January, “Australia Day”, which celebrates the dispossession of the Aboriginal people by the British in 1770. Stephen Sewell’s remarkable play *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* was showing at the Stables Theatre. Inspired in part by Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, it strips away the democratic facade of Bush’s America – “if you want to see America, look into the eyes of its prisoners”, says one of the principal characters. Rapacious power dressed as democracy, and the fear and silence of its privileged – notably academics – are Sewell’s theme and one that is rarely discussed in public in Australia.

When the performance ended, a lawyer, Stephen Hopper, stood and spoke. It was as if a long silence had been shattered. Hopper is the lawyer for Mamdouh Habib, one of two Australians imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay. He described Habib’s suffering and torture, first in Egypt where he was “rendered” by the Americans after they had kidnapped him in Pakistan. In a CIA-supported prison in Egypt, he was suspended from the ceiling with only an electrified barrel to stand on. “He would stand and get a shock or hang painfully by his arms until he’d collapse,” said Hopper. He was blindfolded and locked in rooms that were flooded with water and charged with electricity. In Guantanamo Bay, the guards brought a prostitute who “stood over him naked while he was strapped to the floor and menstruated on him”. Photographs of Habib’s wife and four children were defaced. “The Americans in their wisdom have taken the heads off the pictures,” said Hopper, “enlarged them and superimposed them with the heads of animals and then strung them up all over the walls of the interrogation room. [They said to him]: ‘It’s a shame we had to kill your family.’”

We know about these atrocities from the earlier accounts of the British prisoners. What is different here is that no government calling itself democratic has so completely collaborated with the Guantanamo regime as that of John Howard. Stephen Hopper described how an Australian official stood by as Habib was tortured by the Americans and dragged on to a plane; there is documented evidence of this. The Australian attorney general, Philip Ruddock, claims he knew nothing about this. Ruddock has relentlessly slandered Habib, and the other Australian prisoner, David Hicks, as terrorist suspects when not a shred of evidence has been produced. It was only when it seemed the US Supreme Court would examine his case that Habib was hurriedly sent home. Gareth Peirce, who represents the Guantanamo Britons, told me: "The fact that David Hicks is before a military commission is entirely due to the Australian government doing nothing for him." Even Hicks's American military lawyer says his "trial", with its vaporous conspiracy charges, is a travesty. Yet Ruddock, whose job is to resist the abuse of liberties bestowed by the law, has allowed a mockery of the judicial process to be used brutally against Australian citizens. Having placed Habib under constant surveillance and prevented him from leaving the country, he now is trying to stop him speaking publicly about the grotesque things done to him. What is clear is that this squalid politician fears the truth that Habib is now free to tell.

It is a fear faithfully reflected by most of the Australian media. The Sydney Morning Herald shamefully allowed an Israeli propagandist, Ted Lapkin, to say that Habib, an innocent man under any proper legal system, had "paid the price for his actions with incarceration by

American authorities". A leading "liberal" commentator, Michelle Grattan, has described Habib, who is clearly damaged by his abuse, as having "entered the celebrity category", and says he "cannot reasonably complain about [remaining under watch] by Australian authorities". It is hardly surprising that, according to Reporters sans Frontieres, the Australian press rates 41st on the world's press freedom index, its obsequiousness to power just ahead of autocratic and totalitarian states. Like those in Sewell's play, many Australian journalists remain silent (as do most Australian academics; I can think of only three who speak out regularly). Some of the most prominent journalists form an adoring court for a prime minister who has out-Blaired Blair in his rank deceptions and is out-Bushing his mentor in Washington in his demonstrable contempt for human rights.

Under Howard and Ruddock, Australia has built its own Gulag, imprisoning behind razor wire Iraqis and others fleeing dictatorships. These innocent people are held in some of the most isolated places on earth, including Manus Island and Nauru. They include children. A Kashmiri refugee, Peter Qasim, has been locked up for nearly seven years. The head of a UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Louis Joinet, who has made more than 40 inspections of mandatory detention facilities around the world, says he had not seen worse abuse of human rights than in Australia.

The first Australians have experienced this for a long time. Under the Howard government, support for Aboriginal health and legal services has diminished. In western New South Wales, the life expectancy for Aboriginal men is 33; Australia is the only developed country on a United Nations "shame list" of countries that have not conquered trachoma, a preventable blindness that affects mostly Aboriginal children, and is a disease of poverty.

Six years ago, I interviewed Ruddock when he was the federal minister responsible for ensuring that uppity black Australians did not embarrass the government in the run-up to the Sydney Olympics. I asked him: "How do you feel receiving Amnesty reports on human rights violations with 'Australia' written across the top, such as 'Aborigines are still dying in

prison and police custody at levels that may amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment’?”

Smiling, he replied: “Why do they use the word ‘may’?”

The land of fair go deserves better than supercilious cruelty.

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About the author:

John Pilger is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker whose articles and documentaries have been published worldwide. For more information on John Pilger, visit his website at www.johnpilger.com

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