

Having a finger in the pie in Canberra from the boondocks in Narrogin

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Changing the World -- One Click at a Time

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It's almost two weeks after the Bali bombings when I speak to Ibrahim by phone at the Woomera detention centre – that is, on the “illegal phone”, graciously smuggled into the South Australian desert refugee jail by some of “the Young and Restless” – the young activists who inventively forwarded to their friends many pre-paid mobiles, wrapped in gift wrappers, packed away inside altered Coca-Cola cans with a hidden screw-top, or as in one case, wrapped inside a baby's nappy in the pram that went, complete with mum, through the detention centre gates during visiting time. Babies in prams don't get x-rayed...

Through the tears and while still in shock, Ibrahim gives me permission to forward his phone number and story to journalists.

He had just been informed that his Indonesian wife, in a taxi to consult with a lawyer in Bali – exploring her options to be reunited with him in Australia, had also died as a result of injuries sustained during the Bali bombing. Much earlier it had been known that his wife was amongst those injured, but none of the Australian media had bothered to report on this extraordinary link between our treatment of asylum seekers and one of Australia's other national tragedies until I alert reporters to his distressing case.

Fast forward to a year later, and on the Monday following the commemoration of the bombings, I phoned by chance with someone who had just stepped off the plane in Perth – returning from the commemoration in Indonesia.

My friend tells me: “Jack, Howard met the kids.”



She was referring to the two children, who – since mum died – were living in a questionable environment, and who had been denied even as much as a holiday visa by Australia, just to see Dad, who by that time had been relocated to the Baxter detention centre. Democrats Senator Natasja Stott Despoja had tried. Former Governor-General Sir William Dean had added his weight to the effort. South Australian magistrate Brian Deegan – who had lost his son Josh in the Bali bombings - had done work on it. Other parliamentarians had tried. All to no avail. Frightened off by the prospect of the two

children submitting an asylum claim on arrival in Australia, the Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock had stuck, in his usual cold-blooded way, to the script. A “no” it had been and a “no” it would be.

The children’s family - so the story goes - had approached the Office of the PM and asked whether they could meet the PM at the official function at the bombing commemorations, and because Australian media were swarming around at this function, they were refused access. Instead the Howard staffers suggested that the children could attend the footy match between Australians and the Balinese, because this would be a low-key event without media presence.

So the kids were there, and they were holding hands with Mr Howard as they chatted with him in front of the footy team.

Two hours after the phone conversation with my friend who had just returned from Bali, an estimated 10,000 people had received an email from me, asking them to urgently contact the then ALP leader Simon Crean and the ALP Immigration spokesperson at the time, Nicola Roxon MP, suggesting to confront this issue head-on on the floor of Parliament

By Tuesday 10:00am, the next morning, I know that the emails have reached Parliament, through the Ballarat Labor MP Catherine King, to the office of Nicola Roxon – with the reply, that there’s not much time, but that they’ll try to schedule a question in during the parliamentary sitting. The email was sent back to our office via one of our supporters.

Forward to Wednesday morning, and Crean and Roxon issue a joint press release and do a doorstep in Canberra. In question time, Crean lashes out at Howard’s hardline mercilessness in stopping two kids to be re-united with their father. The story goes right around, and on Thursday the Sydney Morning Herald features the photo of the footy team, Howard and the children.

I always think that the photo – shot by a reporter of a Javanese media outlet, is what did the job, more than anything else, especially because Howard had the audacity to deny knowing that the two children he chatted with in front of that footy team, were Ibrahim’s two children.

The following weekend Sir William Deane, Stott Despoja and Brian Deegan were back, hammering the issue, and a week later the new Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, announced a permanent visa for the two children and an impending release – also with a permanent visa – for Ibrahim.

Half a year later, and I visit Ibrahim in a Melbourne suburb, who cooks us a meal, while Safdar and his younger sister Sarah chat with me, and the youngest one crawls on my lap. Ibrahim hardly remembers me from the first phone call in Woomera, and that’s fine. His life goes on, talking about jobs, about paying the rent, and about visiting friends.

What is significant about this story, is not so much the story – of course it was this one I presented to you, because it’s tremendously moving – as the methodology underneath the wrapper – the power that can be unleashed using email and the internet connection, that immediate connection between your computer and someone else’s computer.

Only since a few months I am connected to the internet through broadband. Most of my work in the last five years or so, has been done using a dial-up connection, and I even tested my connection speed by requesting comparative reporting of mine and a Perth-based friend’s computer. What we found, is that my speed was better. Of course since that test I could joke that I can wield more influence in Canberra than the folks in Perth, because I’m sharing the server network on dial-up, located in Pingelly, with about 40 kids and five farmers in the region – and that’s on a busy day.

Project SafeCom is not so much a “refugee advocacy group” as a fast, spontaneous, and sometimes risk-taking *bottom-up democracy push*, where, if they desire so, thousands of people, most of whom I have never met, get themselves activated and push in an advance of citizens on their members of Parliament – to hold them to account, to demand of them that they’re answerable to their audience, to Australian citizens, and that they do so in decency, humaneness, in honour of those International Conventions Australia has signed, whether that’s the Refugee Convention or not.

Take another example, relevant because it’s happening right now. Yesterday morning, on Channel Seven Sunrise (who watched the show?) you could have seen the 30-second advertisement from GetUp! - at www.getup.org.au - about the recently announced Bill to bar anyone daring to approach Australia by boat to seek asylum and ban the poor sods to processing centres in Nauru, in PNG on Manus Island or any other “suitable” location. I call the atrocious Bill that blatantly ignores our UN and International Law obligations (it is neither illegal nor “unlawful” to arrive in Australia to seek asylum, using boats!) the *Ban the Boatpeople Bill*.

Some of you who receive the Project SafeCom alerts – including my email about the Ban the Boatpeople Bill - would have seen my reference to the GetUp! Campaign, including the request for you to contact them and ask them to join in with this campaign.

Apart from including the info about GetUp! in some copies of my Call to Action two weeks ago, I also made some phone calls around Australia that same day, so it took just two days to convince GetUp! to join us and other groups in the campaign. Both through their email campaign (GetUp! has 80,000 subscribers) and with their television advertisement campaign, this advance of citizens may well – if you include other groups such as A Just Australia and ChilOut – grow to about 250,000 people being mobilized to express their dissent with the Bill and ask for this Bill to be scuttled and urge their Parliamentarian to cross the floor and oppose the Bill.

I used the same methodology to assist in pushing ALP Immigration Spokesman Laurie Ferguson out of his portfolio. Within days of the start of my “Educating Laurie” campaign, the MP had transformed the hesitant welcoming by thousands of advocates around the country in emails to him into a growing fury with his unbelievable arrogance, his bombastic dismissal of views and serious concerns about

how detainees were treated in Baxter and other centres, and his useless but infuriating know-all replies to these emails. Eight months later a staffer of a NSW Senator quipped on the phone: “*Jack, that took you eight months...*” when the news broke that Beazley had terminated him from the job.

For more than an entire year hundreds of people, mobilized in our “*Catching Illegals Down-Under*” campaign, complained to the Editors of print media whenever reporters would use the label “illegal” when referring to “unannounced boatpeople seeking asylum” and sent copies of their communication with the media outlets to the Secretary of the Australian Press Council. It took someone in NSW to sustain the complaint she held against the Sydney Morning Herald and lodge it with the Press Council, when SMH would not budge: the Press Council ruled to uphold the complaint against the Fairfax paper and named in its adjudication that the use of such terminology amounted to “incorrect reporting”. It was a win on all fronts, even though the Department of Immigration – predictably – immediately wrote to the Press Council expressing its disagreement with the ruling.

Since Tampa we have been able to develop working relationships with ALP’s Dr Carmen Lawrence, the Australian Democrats, the Greens, some terrific independents such as Peter Andren MP, while during the period that Petro Georgiou and Judi Moylan MP tabled their Private Member’s Bills I was in regular contact with them. I have to confess though, that while there were more Christmas Cards last time around from Federal Parliamentarians than from family or friends – and just one from the ALP – still not understanding that there’s a government that’s many times more shrewd than they ever can imagine, working the population like a set of Mafia-trained con-men.

So, never underestimate what you can achieve with a simple computer, endless commitment and highly organised dedication. What I was able to achieve can be replicated any time, and it doesn’t matter where you are.

Some suggestions: what you need to build an e-campaign

- Ability to compose emails so they can be grasped in 3 ½ seconds
 - remember how you feel about emails when you walk into the office on Monday morning – and know that emails that have their essence grasped within 3-4 seconds will most likely be read in its entirety.
- Have plenty of nouse of how to get your emails read
 - use – but sparingly – color and bold to give accent to your message;
 - use short paragraphs with double line-breaks to use space to maintain clarity and ease of reading.
- Impeccable email manners and knowledge of email programs and what they can do
 - use the BCC field, never the CC field;
 - don’t just accept what’s on your computer – MS Outlook – but find an email

program that does more, and that does it professionally.

- Knowledge in action concerning privacy legislation and spamming no-no's
 - know when you can “save and add” an email address to your database, and when you simply can't, in terms of the privacy legislation;
 - get some expressed or implied agreement with the folks you send emails.
- No flaws in your focus on what your action is
 - many people make the mistake to buy into issues that also should get attention but that are not exactly part of their initial brief and intent. Once you're in full flight and you discover your parliamentarians, and that you can interact with them on the issues, don't get seduced to “also” write them about “everything else”. It's the best and fastest way to undermine the focus of your campaign. Your brief is determined by your campaign. Don't step outside that brief.