

## **IMPRISON AND DETAIN | 24 MAY 2001 THANG NGO**

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for coming to support what I think is an amazingly good cause. And it is amazing that I am speaking to you today, as the only Vietnamese speaking councillor on Fairfield Council, the most multicultural local government area in all of Australia, where more than half of the people there were born overseas.

When I listened to Maqsood speak my heart fills with an emotion that just boils over. Because people like us, people from non-English speaking communities, actually can't speak English. We can't articulate our problems, we can't bring to mainstream what really concerns and worries us and it really, really touches my heart to see that there are others now finally taking up the challenge.

And doing that and in the spirit of talking about things that are blatant, or things that are more discreet, what I would like to bring to your attention today is a little bit of a different issue. I believe today that we're talking very much to the converted, you know the issues of persecution, racism with indigenous Australians, with asylum seekers; you've heard all of those stories. Well I've got a different story to tell you. I've got a story about communities, ethnic communities who are in Australia.

I'd like to take you on a bit of a journey to Cabramatta. The minute I say Cabramatta, we get all these ideas, these emotions and they could be right or they could be wrong. But let me tell you about the Cabramatta that has been racially punished. In Cabramatta, seven out of ten people speak a language other than English at home.

How do the police deal with this very multicultural ethnic mix? And by the way when I say seven out of ten speak English at home, their English proficiency's also quite low so they can't speak that either.

There are 140 police officers, I actually think that's quite a high number of police officers, not one speak any Asian languages. And then you wonder why there's no communication between the two communities. And why, in fact if you broaden that out, I hate using stats but I think it demonstrates it quite well, in the beautiful New South Wales police service, there are thirteen thousand five hundred, around that, if you go according to the latest police annual report; of that about two hundred and sixty are from a non-English speaking background.

There are in fact more disabled police than there are police from a non-English speaking background.

And as late as last month, when the police finally heeded our calls for a recruitment drive to bring people from a non-English speaking background into the New South Wales Police Service, the chief of police who is responsible for Ethnic Affairs as he calls it, blames outdated ethnic

perceptions of the New South Wales Police Service as the reason for us not joining them.

And need I recall, bring your memory back to just a couple of weeks ago, the very first ever police officer, this is in Victoria, of Vietnamese speaking background, went to the Equal Opportunity Commission because he was discriminated, not by his community, but by the Victorian Police Service. They called him names which people don't dare call me these days, a 'gook', and he supposedly should be able to take that and be one of the boys.

So I don't know whose ideals are outdated and who needs to come to terms with the twenty first century?

I'll move on, because I think we don't really have that much time. What's the result of this misunderstanding, this mistrust? Well, the latest stats I can get in relation to imprisonment rates, is that people born in Vietnam, per head of population, has two hundred and fifty times, I mean two hundred and fifty per cent, two and a half times more likely to be imprisoned than people born in Australia.

And as mentioned by Chris earlier, this is before the announcement by the Premier, on 27th of March, which gives police additional powers in drug houses, powers that as he's mentioned, reverses the presumption of innocence, so you have to prove that, you know, you're going in there without intent to buy drugs and what really touches me and actually brings me actually closer to our indigenous Australians is that, is the mandatory sentencing style in this legislation.

From what we know at this stage, without the legislation drawn up yet, the first offence, you get one year, the second offence is five years, mandatory. So, and my caution would be, where would they be applying that rule, they would be applying it to the most multicultural local government area in all of Australia.

They're targeting my people. And if nothing has come out of this, it's to bring I think more communities together, because we can finally see our similarities rather than our differences. And the funniest thing that people do is actually divide ethnic communities by showing us our differences, well I'm sorry. These rules are actually bringing us, I believe, together, and I hope that will be the case.

Now, this is before people get in gaol. The other story I have to tell is what do we do them when they are actually in prison? The most obvious example I've got is of a group of Vietnamese refugees who came over here, they were accepted as permanent citizens, permanent citizens, they haven't taken out Australian citizenship yet. They committed crimes, some of them are drug crimes, in fact one of them was born six days different to me, so we're quite similar.

Before their sentence is finished, the Minister for Indefinite Detention,

proclaimed them, it's actually a fact unfortunately, puts them under a deportation order to send them back to Vietnam because they've committed very un-Australian crimes, drug crimes are very un-Australian [laughter] and then, so what's happened is Vietnam says, well wait a minute, these people committed the crimes here, most of their lives is spent in Australia, all their support networks, their parents, all their relatives are here and you want to send them back to Vietnam, we're not going to take them back.

### **So what happens?**

They finish their sentences ladies and gentlemen; they finished it and are they out? No, they're still in prison. The longest case I know of, of I suppose overtime, is three years over, and that's actually not particularly bad when you compare it to, there's a particular drug addict who was convicted for small time dealing, and he received a sixteen month sentence. Three years later he's still there.

And they're not held in detention centres when they've finished, they're held in prisons. So the idea is that they, they're still in the mentality of a prisoner and one of them wrote the most heart wrenching stories I've ever, or letter I've ever read. He said, 'I don't feel human, I get strip searched when my family come and visit me, this is after my sentence is finished, in prison, because I'm in maximum security'.

'I don't want my family to visit me', he's in that quandary and no one should be able to go through that, I would call it emotional torture. So, and then of course, the final part if you're talking about racialised punishment, is you have to talk about the people of Cabramatta. Because I think that they're being punished at the moment for living in Cabramatta. And when you look at it, there's a containment policy of drugs in that area, unemployment's double the national rate, there's actually no soccer field that the kids can play, kick a ball, they're all booked up by the big clubs.

There's one basket ball court that was built last year and minimum police action, so what happens is you get the people of our area are the victims of the crime and the name of the Vietnamese community is punished at the same time.

So that's why everywhere I go I make a real point of saying, 'I am a Vietnamese Australian and no one will ever take that away, because as long as we're proud, we'll always manage'. And my final thing, if I can beg your indulgence, is I can't blame the authorities for everything, there are some issues, which my community has to deal with.

My greatest disappointment as I've said to other people is why isn't there more Vietnamese Australians here to support the asylum seekers, they went through Westbridge Hostel, they were refugees, they were criticized for being economic and not political refugees.

Every similar accusation that has been labelled at the new asylum seekers and the unfortunate part is we're being played against each other.

The Vietnamese community has been made to be the lowest of the low. And now I hate to say it, but I think some of the people feel relief that they've found someone lower than themselves and we should never ever stoop to that. No one, no one should go down that path and, and just last Friday Pauline Hanson held a fundraiser, for her campaign in the Marconi Italian Club in Fairfield. The exact same problem that we see and yet in yesterday's herald, Paul Sheehan, had the hide to call me a hypocrite and un-Australian for criticising that.

The exact same problem that we see through and yet in yesterday's Herald, Paul Sheehan, had the hide to call me a hypocrite and Un-Australian for criticising that. They are the things we have to deal with and I think if anything, if I can just walk out and let you know, we're talking to the converted, that we should go back to our communities and bring them together, because as other speakers have said before, that is the only way we're going to get through this with any dignity.

Thank you.

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