

Just Comment

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Truth in Government:

What can we reasonably expect from Governments?

When 43 eminent retired diplomats and former government officials make an unprecedented call for truth in government there is a serious question of whether we reasonably expect out politicians to be honest and truthful. Why are so many critics emerging from across the political spectrum calling for “truth in government”?

A Quantum Market Research Poll conducted in November 2003 listed “honest and truthful” and “honorable and trustworthy” as the top attributes Australians expected of their leaders (*News Review, smh.com.au 21/8/04*). In contrast, a recent Morgan Poll (20/8/04) found that despite 60% believing John Howard lied over the children overboard affair, only 29% thought that he should lose his job for it (*News Review, smh.com.au 21/8/04*). Strong economic growth and prosperity continue to be the basis of which Australians assess any political

performance, lies or not. Furthermore, according to Newspoll data Australians have come to expect our politicians to lie.

As events have unfolded in the children overboard affair the question does not so much concern whether the government lied to a public expecting untruthful politicians but whether there is evidence of a cover-up in a pre-election campaign.

Children Overboard

- On October 7, 2001 HMAS Adelaide intercepted asylum seekers on the sinking vessel SIEV4. Within hours accusations were emerging that asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard to gain attention to their plight and gain asylum. Phillip Ruddock, then Immigration Minister, stated “all we know is that children were thrown in”.

- On October 8, photos were taken of sailors engaged in a mass rescuing from the sea as SIEV4 went down. The issue became galvanized as Ruddock produced descriptions of the scene as “some of the most disturbing practices I’ve come across in public life”.

- For several days Phillip Ruddock, Peter Reith and John Howard continued to whip up public resentment against asylum seekers with statements denigrating their morals. In reference to a video of the alleged incident Peter Reith stated, “I am told that someone has looked at it, and it is an absolute fact children were thrown into the water”. John Howard was quick to follow stating “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia, I really don’t” (*ABC*



online – Children overboard Chronology PM).

- By October 10 Reith released photos to support his allegation that children were indeed thrown into the water while more and more of the media began to ask questions, particularly as the photos were without captions and were not dated and showed children in the water but nothing more.

- By October 11 Reith and his staff were warned that the photos (of adults and children in lifejackets in the water) were taken of the mass rescue of October 8 and there were no children in the water on October 7 (*Marr and Wilkinson, 2003:203*).

- On November 7, the Acting Chief of the Defence forces Air Vice-Marshal Angus Houston informed Peter Reith in a phone conversation that “there was nothing to suggest that women and children had been thrown into the water”.

In reference to a video

of the alleged incident Peter Reith stated, “I am told that someone has looked at it, and it is an absolute fact children were thrown into the water”.

It was later revealed that the ONA report which John Howard referred to as the basis for his information was based on public comments made by Peter Reith and Phillip Ruddock. Both continued to make misrepresented claims well up to the election, despite Defence information to the contrary

• On November 8, on ABC radio's AM, Catherine McGrath asked the Prime Minister about subsequent advice from the Navy that children had been thrown overboard; to which John Howard replied "my understanding is that there has been no alteration to the initial advice that was given – and I checked that as recently as last night". Later that day at the National Press Club John Howard referred to the Office of National Assessment (ONA) report stating that children were thrown into the water. That evening on SBS's Insight John Howard stated "nothing can alter the fact that I have in my possession an ONA report that states baldly, as I said at the National Press Club today, that children were thrown in the water – if in fact that advice is wrong, it would have been a good idea if we had been told that a month ago by the navy".

• On that same day Vice-Admiral David Shackleton when confronted by press in Perth admitted that the navy had no evidence of children being thrown into the sea. A new statement was later issued from David Shackleton "clarifying" his position as not contradicting Peter Reith. Reith was never to make corrections to his statements. Marr and

Wilkinson in the book *Dark Victory* (2003) detail unfolding events as Defence Personnel attempted to sort out the government's misrepresentation of the incident but despite serious doubts emerging from a hierarchy of senior navy officers an election campaign had successfully capitalised on misrepresented information.

• August 15 2004 , Mike Scafton, a former senior Official for Defence Minister Peter Reith made public details of three phone conversations on November 7 with the Prime Minister John Howard. He claims that he told John Howard that video of the alleged incident did not support the government's claim that an asylum seeker threw a child into the water; that Defence Department photos also used to support that claim were a false representation of the events; and that most of the people inside the Defence Department already believed the incident had never happened (*ABC online*).

• However, on November 8, John Howard made no mention of receiving this new advice from Mike Scafton, when speaking to Catherine McGrath on AM , nor to the National Press Club, nor to SBS Insight that night. In fact, what he said was that when he checked last night there was no new information, despite Mike Scafton later saying that he left the Prime Minister in no doubt that there was no evidence that children were thrown overboard. John Howard disputes this claim saying that he only spoke to Mike Scafton about matters related to the video. In an interview with 4 Corners in February 2002 John Howard told Liz Jackson that he had also referred to the photographs when he spoke to a member of Reith's staff (ie, Mike Scafton).

• It was later revealed that the ONA report which John Howard referred to as the basis for his information was based on public comments made by Peter Reith and Phillip Ruddock. Both continued to make misrepresented claims well up to the election, despite Defence information to the contrary.

• Following the 2001 election Mike Scafton made a statement to an internal

public service inquiry that did not indicate phone his conversations with the Prime Minister. Mike Scafton now claims that he was afraid while still a public servant fearing career repercussions and only the recent disrespect shown to the 43 prominent signatories of the open letter criticizing the government's record on honesty, had prompted him to finally speak out.

• The internal public service inquiry found that Peter Reith withheld the truth before the election. A Senate Select Committee Inquiry found in October 2002 conclusively that "no children were thrown overboard". The Senate majority found that Peter Reith had "deceived the Australian people" during the election campaign by claiming that children were thrown overboard. According to Mike Scafton's claims John Howard was clearly part of that deception. Mike Scafton has come through a polygraph standing firm on everything that he maintains he told the Prime Minister on November 7 2001. 3 public servants have publicly backed Scafton's account while some members of the Prime Ministers staff back his account.

The events unfolding in the Children Overboard Affair indicate that even if the public are not paying attention, the fundamental tenants of democracy require basic principles of truth and accountability. Democracies cannot function without the truth.

Just Action

- Check out the latest publications, websites and campaigns for truth in government – truthoverboard.com; johnhowardlies.com; Not Happy John
- Write a letter expressing your concerns to the editor of the newspaper in your capital city with the largest circulation. Write to journalists and editors of opinion columns asking for the issues to be discussed and debated.

 **Edmund Rice Centre**
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90 Underwood Road, Homebush NSW 2140

Phone (02) 9764 1330 Fax (02) 9764 1743

Email zeena@erc.org.au Web www.erc.org.au

 **ACU National**

Australian Catholic University
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135

Phone (02) 9739 2100 Fax (02) 02 9739 2105