



Peter Mitchell went from tender-hearted poet to boss of Sydney's Villawood detention centre. *Source: The Daily Telegraph*

AFTER six years running Villawood detention centre, Peter Mitchell believes locking up asylum-seekers is inhumane and pointless.

How did a tender-hearted poet become boss of Sydney's Villawood detention centre?

Peter Mitchell still isn't quite sure. In 1990 he was a young musician and writer in need of a steady job. His wife told him to sit the public service exam.

He chose the Immigration Department because it sounded more human, more soulful, than working for some other department, such as Taxation or Defence.

He was right about the human part - although instead of spending his days making friends with would-be migrants, Mitchell found himself hunting them down.

His first job was in the compliance team in Sydney; a wild cops-and-robbers life of dawn raids and midnight busts, catching overstayers and locking them up, pending a forced return to their homelands.

With no training and little understanding of what authority, if any, he had to go slapping handcuffs on people, Mitchell found the job at first horrifying and then exhilarating.

He grew to love it, and to feel guilty about loving it. He moved up to become Villawood manager under the Howard government and later ran refugee centres packed with traumatised Kosovar and East Timorese refugees.

He learnt to be wary of the "racist cowboys" and the pole-climbers within the system, and watched with appalled amusement as politicians' vanity collided with the real-life dramas within the system.

Every day, he dealt with suicidal, violent and heartbreakingly vulnerable detainees - and learnt to navigate the delicate maze of a system clogged with men, women and children: some angry, some terrified, all desperate to get out.

And through it all, Mitchell struggled with his emotions: was he doing good work? Was he a cog in a brutal machine?

Now, he has decided to go public with his internal emotional battles. His confronting new book, *Compassionate Bastard*, is his effort to shine some light on the most complex and controversial topic of modern Australian politics: the "misery industry" of immigration, asylum-seeking and settlement.

So how does Mitchell, who retired from the department in 2003, think Australia should approach the boat-people issue?

He sighs down the phone line from his home in Newcastle.

"That's the question I dread," he says. There's a pause.

"It's not easy. This is a complicated, complicated issue. I just don't believe that the current system of mandatory detention is the ideal model. It doesn't deter people.

"If you're in a war zone, you aren't going to be put off by having three hot meals and a bed in an Australian detention centre. It's actually quite attractive."

Mitchell is weighing into this debate at a time when refugees have again become a giant headache for the government. People-smuggler boats appear over the horizon every few days - 36 boats and 2183 people so far this year alone. The federal government, having dismantled the Pacific island processing centres established by former prime minister John Howard, is now scrambling for a solution.

The death by drowning of at least 30 asylum-seekers off Christmas Island's cliffs in December pushed the government into panicked negotiations with first East Timor, then Malaysia, then Papua New Guinea.

Now it awaits a decision from the High Court that could blow the whole issue apart again.

Gillard and Immigration Minister Chris Bowen are maintaining their tough line on unauthorised entry to Australia, but it's becoming increasingly clear that even government staff on the front lines have lost faith in mandatory detention.

Workers at the Christmas Island detention centre are increasingly troubled by the logjams, and last week the top immigration bureaucrat, department secretary Andrew Metcalfe, openly questioned the policy of mandatory detention, saying he would personally like to see more use of "community detention", with asylum-seekers living in suburbia under official supervision.

Since last October, 1765 people had been placed in community detention including 841 children, Metcalfe said.

The Australian Medical Association said doctors, too, were troubled by the trauma they saw among detainees.

Peter Mitchell worked diligently to keep the detention system humming, but now he also believes it should be set adrift.

"From my very first night [as a compliance officer], dumped into that deep end, I was very provoked and shocked by the things we were doing to these people," he says in our interview.

"I pretty soon saw there were others manipulating that empathy."

He's referring to the small minority of detainees who simply will not accept a "no" to their demands for a refugee visa - and the vocal refugee advocates who attempt to paint the entire Immigration system as a deliberately cruel and heartless regime.

Mitchell has worked as a teacher in Tamworth and the Lake Macquarie district since his Immigration days, as well as writing poetry and music.

He was immigration manager at Villawood from 1996 to 2001, during which time the Howard government began outsourcing day-to-day running of the centre, first to the government agency APS, then a private company, ACM. Mitchell was Immigration's man on the ground.

During Mitchell's reign, Villawood's population was a mix of boat arrivals and overstayers, with the population rising from 80 detainees to 750.

Today, Villawood hosts 350, a mix of boat people and overstayers.

Within Villawood, Mitchell watched in horror as some individuals slashed their bodies, starved themselves or attempted suicide, trying to force the outcome they wanted.

The inadequate and "inhumane" centre - which was a hotchpotch of buildings totally unsuited to detaining families - meant staff struggled to contain protests.

But more than anything, Mitchell says, those violent acts traumatised the children living in detention.

"It wasn't fair," he says. "They were trying to get ahead of others who were more deserving. That was really frustrating.

"Behind the scenes at Villawood we were very aware of the individuals and who was doing what. But because of the strictures of the Privacy Act, no one from the department can come out and explain what's going on. We can't discuss cases, we can't be specific - and because we're just boring bureaucrats with nothing to say, the media don't get the full story."

Although no easy solution presents itself, Mitchell firmly believes in four central principles.

First, detainees should be kept in "community detention" wherever possible, rather than behind razor wire.

Second, Australia must urgently step up efforts to stop boats departing their countries of origin, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Third, detention times should be shorter and more predictable.

Fourth, everyone in the detention process should be able to use the Australian court system to appeal and request reviews of decisions.

All these measures, he believes, must be grounded with vigorous policing of the real "immigrant problem": the number of visa overstayers living and working illegally in Australia.

This "compliance" work, which Mitchell encountered from his earliest days with the department, has dropped away in favour of processing boat people, but he believes employers must be held far more responsible for checking the bona fides of any foreigner they employ.

He points to the story of the Kosovar and East Timorese refugees taken by Australia in 1999 as a shining example.

He managed the East Hills detention centre in Sydney, where the refugees were accepted on a temporary basis while their homelands were ripped apart by war.

With federal and state governments enthusiastic, the programs had wide community support.

"It seems like a golden age, compared with the way the issue is reported now," Mitchell says. "It was perceived as a generous act on the part of the government.

"It's a fascinating comparison: by being a bit open, and by being more compassionate, you can really garner good news about the tragedy of human refugee and asylum-seeker people.

"The mean politics of the current debate seem to me so short-sighted.

"It's possible to be more humanitarian and compassionate, and still not be a soft touch."

One case in particular touched Mitchell deeply - that of the Salihu family, who fled from Kosovo. It was one of the serious controversies of "Operation Safe Haven".

The family objected to their accommodation at East Hills and alternative digs at a Singleton army barracks. In June 1999, they began a hunger strike - including frail 74-year-old grandmother Elmaze Salihu.

They refused treatment at Singleton Hospital and returned to East Hills in a taxi paid for by a journalist, whereupon Mitchell allowed them back through the gates in what appeared to be capitulation by the department.

That was not the full story. For the first time, Mitchell reveals the truth of the department's hardline stance.

The family, he says, were almost accidental refugees. A teenage daughter, Valbona Salihu, had been working as an interpreter for Australia's advance delegation at the refugee camp in Macedonia and signed up her family - including Grandma, who didn't want to go.

"The old lady had to be dragged on to the plane by her son," Mitchell writes in the book. "All the rest of it ... was more or less a stratagem devised by the old lady to effect her family's return to Kosovo, as soon as possible."

Mitchell's instructions came "from the highest level of government" - prime minister Howard was personally watching every moment.

He insisted the family could not be readmitted beyond the East Hills waiting room. They could either go back to Singleton, or back to Kosovo.

The family resumed the hunger strike, sitting in the waiting room. It was Mitchell versus Grandma.

"She milked this for all it was worth, staging throw-downs and foam-at-the-mouth scenes," he writes in the book.

"These terrified both her family and me, at first, but eventually the calm responses of the on-site medical teams and ambulance crews allowed us to glimpse the contrived dramatic nature of it all."

Still, Mitchell had to calm medical staff, who felt sympathy for Grandma, and his own troubled conscience.

"I resented the way the situation was being handled. I was concerned that the family couldn't have a shower, a towel, or even a stretcher bed and a sleeping bag. In denying them these 'comforts', I was following orders, but it was unsettling to still be relying on this Nuremberg defence" - a reference to the claim of Nazi officers they were "just following orders".

Eventually, Grandma won. The UN agreed the family could return home.

Mitchell writes: "I heard later through the Kosovar community network that the old lady had lasted about a month after returning. She died, quietly and presumably contentedly, in her beloved homeland."

Refugees won't ever stop coming, Mitchell says - so why not embrace them a little more generously?

"If we had more people coming through the global humanitarian settlement scheme, if more First World countries took people, I think that's the way to go," he says in our interview. "If you could take people from the places of first refuge, the camps in Africa and Pakistan, that's another way of undercutting the people-smugglers."

"You don't need to spend your life savings to get on a boat if we can be more active on this."

It drives Mitchell wild to hear politicians suggest it's possible to stop boats coming.

"They're pandering to the ignorance in our community," he says. "This is a big motivation for my book. There are few people who write books from inside government. People are afraid of the Official Secrets Act."

"The fact that I've written this, I hope, is going to shine a bit of light into the mystery of what goes on in mandatory detention."

"It's beyond my level to solve it, but if we can better inform the people being pandered to [among the voting public], I think we might get a bit closer."

The East Timorese and Kosovar programs - despite Grandma - demonstrated Australians' essential generosity of spirit, Mitchell says.

"It was extremely popular because people understood it was an emergency," he says.

"Australians are famous for stepping in when our help is needed. I'd love to see more of that intelligent, compassionate approach now."

Mitchell says the Rudd government was right to close the "Pacific Solution" processing centre on Nauru in 2007, as it was empty of detainees, most of whom had been accepted in Australia as genuine refugees.

He suspects some people-smugglers may have been waiting for Howard to lose power before relaunching boats - and he also believes a new wave of conflicts in our region exacerbated the urge for people to board leaky boats bound for Australian waters.

Now, though, Mitchell remains highly wary of Australia restarting offshore processing.

"I think Australia is bigger than that, we can send a much more positive message," he says. "I don't see the correlation that if we send that message, we open the floodgates."

"At the basis of it all, Australia has a small problem on a global scale."

"It's not nearly as intense for us as for Italy, say - or Europe generally. Try telling them we've got a boat-people problem. We're geographically blessed like that."