



# Scrap 'inhumane' centres: former official Detainee lock-up a 'failure'

**CLAIRE HARVEY**  
 IN SYDNEY

MANDATORY detention of asylum-seekers must be scrapped, says a former Immigration official central to the Howard government's hardline detainee policy.

Peter Mitchell, who ran Villawood Detention Centre from 1996 to 2001, speaks out for the first time today, telling the *Sunday Mail* detainees are kept in "inhumane" conditions in a system that totally fails to deter boat arrivals.

Mr Mitchell's autobiography, *Compassionate Bastard*, is to be launched tomorrow. Among Mr Mitchell's revelations are:

**IMMIGRATION** staff's deep frustration at the delays and logjams that see desperate detainees spend years behind razor-wire.

**THE** lifelong trauma suffered by asylum-seeker children in detention when fellow detainees self-harmed or committed suicide.

**THE** "cowboy" world of Immigration compliance teams in the 1990s, raiding homes and crash-tackling overstayers with no training or guidance.

**THE** 1999 drama when a Kosovar family refused to stay in a Singleton barracks during "Operation Safe Haven". The matter blew up into a test of wills between the Salihu family and Prime Minister John Howard who, Mr Mitchell reveals, was directing Immigration officials to take a tough line. Mr Mitchell reveals the family was split, with grandmother, 74-year-old Elmaze

Salihu, rejecting all efforts of accommodation or help because she wanted to return to Kosovo.

"I just don't think mandatory detention works," said Mr Mitchell, who worked for Immigration from 1990 to 2002, including five years running Villawood when its population of visa overstayers and boat people exploded from 80 to 750 detainees.

"There needs to be a legitimate assessment of people, confirming their identities and interviewing but you don't need to keep locking people up," Mr Mitchell said.

He said the former prime minister Kevin Rudd was right to end the Howard government's "Pacific Solution" of offshore processing in Nauru.

Mr Mitchell said the most urgent priority was a complete overhaul of "inhumane" detention centres such as Villawood, where detainees are able to climb the roof, set fires and commit suicide because old-fashioned buildings are impossible to adequately police.

"I had huge personal sadness when I first went to Villawood and saw it expand. It has been pressed into service rather than purpose-built," he said.

**An** See extracts from  
 Peter Mitchell's book  
[adelaidenow.com.au](http://adelaidenow.com.au)



**Hot spot:** Detainees protest on the roof of the Villawood Detention Centre in 2007