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# Ignorance is no defence

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**Instead of another attack on the pricks in public life – and on recalcitrant colleagues in the media – today I propose to attack the public. Not just for the sake of argument, but because the public has a case to answer.**

I've been belting out columns for *The Australian* for decades. Given my ideological proclivities, my tenure may seem mysterious. I put it down to pity at the loftiest heights of News Limited. Yet there was a time when Rupert Murdoch – he himself – personally sacked me. This led to me spending a few years at *The Age*, then known by its conservative critics as “the Spencer Street Soviet”. The managing director was the young Randal McDonald, with Graham Perkin his legendary editor. Under their protection, Ben Hills ran the Insight investigative team, and managed to reveal all sorts of mendacity in Melbourne, both mercantile and municipal. Publishing this stuff was seen as subversive by the powerbrokers who dwelt in Toorak and dined at the Melbourne Club. McDonald, inspired by the example of Katharine Graham at *The Washington Post*, was despised as a class traitor.

One Insight investigation revealed that a highly significant Melburnian, a knight of the realm, had done some trading that was more down-under than insider. It involved the proposed underground railway and the buying up of real estate that, eerily, coincided with the undisclosed locations for the subway stations. As you can imagine, the profits were enormous. And what happened when *The Age* broke the story? Next to nothing. There was much

tut-tutting and tsk-tsking, but no-one went to jail. When similar stories by the team failed to dislodge other prominent miscreants, I realised that it was the public's fault. The media had done its job, and they weren't doing theirs.

Melbourne regarded itself as morally and culturally superior to sinful, sensual Sydney – the city seen as the standard-bearer in all forms of criminality, from bent cops to corporate crooks. Why, then, did so many of Melbourne's better known citizens survive scandals – even get away with murder?

There was even a case involving a well-known public figure whose wife died in mysterious circumstances closely resembling homicide. Though he had both motive and opportunity, the case, despite broad hinting in the media, was never investigated.

These days, of course, people are inured to political outrages. They expect them, take them for granted, even enjoy them. The public will get its knickers in a twist over a silly matter such as Peter Reith's mobile phone, while ignoring his involvement in having troops secretly trained in Dubai to be strike-breakers – something that could have, should have, brought the government down. When the same gentleman played a leading role in the “children overboard” con, once again we allowed him to get away with it. And only grumbled mildly when he was rewarded with an important overseas posting.

Recently, Helen Trinca wrote a forensic account of the waterside wars, focusing on the Dubai story and the government's denials of involvement. Once again, the revelations were of an order that would have toppled any respectable government, if that's not an oxymoron. Yet her book failed to raise an eyebrow. Nor did *Dark Victory*, written by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson. It turned the searchlight and the blowtorch on the behaviour of our leaders during and after Tampa, but provoked neither public nor fellow journalists into appropriate apoplexy.

The recent controversies swirling around the ex-minister for immigration, involving international criminality, generous donations to party slush funds and the provision of visas failed to dislodge Philip Ruddock. Indeed, the PM gave the minister an astonishing promotion. A bloke whose compliance with the law may at some stage be questioned has been appointed Attorney General! To run the laws of the land! And the public cops it.

As recently as the Hawke years, ministerial heads rolled on a fairly regular basis. But, despite Howard's promise to enforce ministerial rectitude, naughty ministers are defended. The worst a Wilson Tuckey need fear is a reshuffle. When the PM takes us to war via a series of shonky manoeuvres and misrepresentations, you'd expect community outrage. Blair is copping it in Britain and Bush in the US. But here? The Australian public doesn't seem to give a stuff. Newspoll announces that 71 per cent of the public feel they've been misled, but the PM's popularity rises. Just like John Laws' and Alan Jones' ratings rose after a reluctant Australian Broadcasting Authority was forced to investigate the "cash for comment" affair.

The media might not cover itself in glory on a raft of issues, but the public is complicit in letting the system down. You don't need to watch *The X-Files* to know the truth is out there. It's freely available to anyone who cares to read widely, either by selective scrutiny of the mainstream media or via the Web. We're dealing with a public that doesn't want to know. A public that chooses to ignore the truth about Tampa, the refugees, SIEV-X, the detention centres, the war in Iraq.

A public that proffers the blind eye and deaf ear, preferring to live in the amoral world of blissful, wilful ignorance. Instead of being enraged by the lies of our leaders and the gutlessness of the Opposition, we excuse our failure as citizens by saying, "We're not to blame; they've made us cynical." Sorry, that's not good enough.

The public has to lift its game.

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## **It's time - release all children and families from immigration detention**

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**The Human Rights Commissioner Dr Sev Ozdowski welcomed the government's decision to release Iranian asylum seeker Ibrahim Sammaki from immigration detention and grant him permanent residency in Australia.**

Dr Ozdowski has called for a similar compassionate response to be shown by releasing all children and their families in detention into the Australian community.

"The government's decision to permit Sammaki to bring his two Indonesian children (Sarah, aged 4 and Safdar aged 8) to Australia demonstrates that compassion is an indispensable component when dealing with migration and refugee issues," said Dr Ozdowski.

"It is clear it is time for the government to extend this compassion to the remaining 96 children in Australian immigration detention (excluding Nauru) by releasing them and their families into the community."

The Commissioner said that many Australians including himself believes such a step would:

1. be beneficial to the children and their families
2. allow the rehabilitation process to begin sooner rather than later, as ultimately more than 90 per cent are found to be refugees and are released into the community (Iranian children - 97 per cent and Afghan children 95 per cent )
3. enable this decision to be made without contradicting Australia's border protection policies and principles of sovereignty.

"The UN Convention on the Rights of the