

J'accuse – An Open Letter to the Australian Federal Parliament

By Ngareta Rossell

The original '*J'accuse*' letter to a Paris newspaper was written by French novelist Emile Zola in 1898.

It accused the French government of falsely alleging Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus of treason and of holding a secret Court Martial which found him guilty, sentencing him to lifelong penal servitude.

In response to the increasing human rights abuses against asylum seekers in Australia, our own '*J'accuse*' letter begins:

"We the undersigned accuse the current Federal Government and both major political parties of wilfully and deliberately..."

It contains thirteen accusations and three recommendations:

1. To abandon mandatory detention and offshore solutions for asylum seekers.
2. To cap detention at a maximum of 30 days.
3. To adopt alternative solutions consistent with our obligations under the Refugee Convention.

For asylum seekers in Australian-imposed detention, 2014 was a brutal and murderous year, heralded with the Minister dismissing the Independent Health Advisory Group and increasing the veil of secrecy. We witnessed the deaths of Reza Barati inside the Manus Island Detention Centre, despite the Minister's assurances of safety, and of Hamid Kehazaei, that continues to raise serious questions.

Our *J'accuse* letter was written by the *Asylum Seeker Interest Group* (ASIG), a diverse group convened by Professor Louise Newman and made up of doctors, lawyers, teachers, early childhood specialists, journalists, church leaders and this year's Human Rights Award recipient school principal Dorothy Hoddinott. Drs Barri Phatarfod and Richard Kidd represented Doctors for Refugees in the drafting of the letter. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists kindly host the group's meetings in their Sydney offices.

J'accuse was presented in the Inner Senate Courtyard of Parliament on October 20, 2014 by members of ASIG, who with the assistance of GetUp, collected more than 50,000 supporting signatures. Speeches were made to the assembled press, including SBS and the Sydney Morning Herald, condemning the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Australian government.

J'accuse was accepted by Sarah Hanson Young on behalf of the Greens and by Melissa Parke, ALP Member for Fremantle, WA– the lone representative from either major party. Copies were presented to the offices of both Prime Minister Abbott and Immigration Minister Morrison, but to date no response has been received.