

(Name of Project)

by
(Name of First Writer)

(Based on, If Any)

Revisions by
(Names of Subsequent Writers,
in Order of Work Performed)

Current Revisions by
(Current Writer, date)

Name (of company, if applicable)
Address
Phone Number

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SIEV X

David Blackman

101 Clyde St

Box Hill North 3129

0438 201 731

Davidblackman8@bigpond.com

Author's Notes

SIEV is a history play. It follows closely the Howard government's response to the Tampa's rescue of asylum seekers, leading up to what became known as the "Children Overboard Affair" and finally, the controversy surrounding SIEV X. All media addresses in the play are based on actual transcripts as are specific meetings between political and military figures. For the rest I have used my imagination.

As far as cast, a production should require no more than 6-8 actors with either the political or military figures doubling up for REPORTERS, SOLDIERS, KHAN, JAGLAND or RINNAN.

In terms of staging, the only fixed area should be the bridge of the Tampa/Adelaide.

David Blackman
May 2009

Cast of Characters:

JOHN HOWARD

PHILLIP RUDDOCK

PETER REITH

ALEXANDER DOWNER

KIM BEAZLEY

ARNIE RINNAN

ADMIRAL BARRIE

ADMIRAL RITCHIE

COMMANDER BANKS

THORBOERN JAGLAND

NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR

JANE HALTON

PAULINE HANSON

MAJOR KAHN

DR. HAMMOND

ARABIC PRESENTER

AHMED AL ZALIMI

VIRGINIA TRIOLI

PRESS SECRETARY

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

REPORTERS

SAS COMMANDOS

ACT ONE

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

LIGHTS on AHMED AL ZALIMI, a legal asylum seeker, being escorted by two SAS COMMANDOS in black combat fatigues and their faces covered with balaclavas. LIGHTS on SUNDIOUS AL ZALIMI lying on a table.

In shadows, a suited figure whose face cannot be seen, walks up to the body. AHMED, flanked by the two centurions, stands in front of the body, trembling in anticipation. AHMED takes a look and breaks down, falling onto the body.

LIGHTS on REPORTER ONE.

REPORTER ONE

And in what may prove to be an embarrassing revelation for the Howard government, Mike Scrafton, former assistant to Defence Minister Peter Reith, has told the press he spoke to Howard about the inaccuracy of initial allegations regarding the Children Overboard Affair...

LIGHTS on the suited figure reveals the PRIME MINISTER JOHN HOWARD. He is being strapped to a lie detector machine by one of the BLACK CLAD FIGURES.

REPORTER ONE

Scrafton has successfully passed a lie detector test on television and has invited the Prime Minister to do the same...

BLACK CLAD FIGURE

Do you know who this man is Prime Minister?

HOWARD

How could I not? His mug's been all over the newspapers...television...

BLACK CLAD FIGURE

His name is Ahmaed Al Zalimi.

HOWARD

That's right. He entered this country illegally.

BLACK CLAD FIGURE

Wrong. He was allowed entry into Australia on legitimate grounds.

HOWARD squirms in his seat.

Howard
Honest mistake.

Howard looks and points his finger at the lie detection monitor.

Howard
Hey that doesn't count. His family tried to enter illegally.

Howard checks the monitor and is visibly pleased with what he sees.

Howard
There you go...

Black Clad Figure
Do you know what happened to them?

Howard lifts himself a little out of his chair and peers at the body bag.

Howard
I only see one body. No tricks now.

Black Clad Figure
Please answer the question.

Howard
Well...from the looks of things it couldn't have been pleasant.

Black Clad Figure
Do you know where she was rescued Prime Minister?

Howard
Somewhere in the Timor Sea wouldn't be a bad guess...

Black Clad Figure
Do you know where the rest of his family is Prime Minister?

Howard
I have a pretty good idea but obviously for legal and political reasons that's about as much as I can say...

Ahmed turns his head sharply towards Howard. Ahmed frantically takes out his wallet and tries to show Howard a photo. He is imploring Howard to take a look. Howard curiously peaks then sharply turns away.

HOWARD

Not me mate. Can't be expected to look at that sort of stuff! Not a man in my position...

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

This is the story of a nameless boat that was later sunk with many names. For the Australian government, the boat is another statistic ; a cursed one. It has been called SIEV X, for Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle. And X for unknown, although every person has heard of its sad story...

LIGHTS on the PRIME MINISTER and the CONSERVATIVE RADIO TALK SHOW HOST. They are sitting across a table, each with a microphone in front of them.

RADIO TALK SHOW HOST

What do you do now?

HOWARD

It's a huge problem. We are a humanitarian country. We don't turn people back into the sea, we don't turn unseaworthy boats which are likely to capsize and the people on them be drowned. We can't behave in that manner. People say well send them back from where they came, the country from which they came won't have them back...

RADIO TALK SHOW HOST

The strategies are not working are they?

HOWARD

Well when you say the strategies are not working what is the alternative? You see the only alternative strategy I hear is the strategy of using our armed forces to stop the people coming and turning them back. Now for a humanitarian nation that is not really an option.

SOUND. Music "The Music of Fairuz"- by Rahbani Brothers – Side 2 Track 2: "Poeme D'amour". Both the PRIME MINISTER and the RADIO TALK SHOW HOST freeze in shock horror. LIGHTS.

ARABIC PRESENTER

SIEV X sailed from a port in South Sumatra on the 18th of October, 2001. The boat travelled for just one day before the catastrophe occurred. But this tale really begins with another boat...the Palaba, sitting dead in the water as it searches for Christmas Island and its rescuer from doom...the Norwegian freighter the Tampa...

LIGHTS on HOWARD and the IMMIGRATION MINISTER PHILLIP RUDDOCK.

HOWARD

How many times is it now?

RUDDOCK

Three.

HOWARD

And?

RUDDOCK

No change.

HOWARD

That's something.

RUDDOCK

The pilot does think though that the boat might be sinking faster than he first thought.

HOWARD

The boat is afloat or it isn't. Which exactly is it?

RUDDOCK

There are something in the vicinity of 200 refugees on board. Most of them jammed on the decks. And the weather is getting worse...

HOWARD

Refugees? They are now referred to as "illegals." What's the point of not calling them queue jumpers anymore if the Immigration Minister still calls them refugees..?

RUDDOCK

Illegals then. Well there's 200 of them about to drown in Australian waters.

HOWARD

Call the Indonesians. This is their problem.

RUDDOCK

But we have spotted them Prime Minister and by law...

HOWARD

By law! We've got 900 odd people on Christmas Island as it is. The detention centres are full. Where in heaven's name are we supposed to put them? Anyway, they haven't requested help.

RUDDOCK

The pilot has spotted an SOS signal Prime Minister.

HOWARD

What with?

RUDDOCK

The pilot thinks they're using engine oil on scarves. Regardless...he can make out it is a distress signal.

HOWARD

I don't care. Get onto BASARNAS...

RUDDOCK

They are unlikely...to call back. Indonesian Coast Guard are meticulous about not returning calls.

HOWARD

Nothing I can really do then is there? It's now a bloody search and rescue operation.

RUDDOCK

We could suggest that any vessels responding to Australian search and rescue broadcast tow the Palapa to Indonesia.

A faint grin comes over the face of HOWARD.

PRIME MINISTER

A fair and reasonable response...under the circumstances.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and the CONSERVATIVE
RADIO TALK SHOW HOST.

RADIO TALK SHOW HOST

Just below the surface, there is a high degree of anxiety about Asian immigration, about the idea that Australian culture is being changed in unexpected ways, and that recent immigrants are associated with unacceptable increases in crime and violence.

HOWARD

I'm just responding to the concerns of the electorate. I have the right to pursue policies without being accused of prejudice and bigotry, without being knocked off course by...phoney charges of racism.

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

And so a new kind of political correctness was born by a Prime Minister who claimed exceptionalism and privilege for himself, his government and all those who supported him...

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

LIGHTS on PAULINE HANSON behind the podium.

PAULINE HANSON

What should we do with them? I'll tell you what One Nation thinks we should do...we go out, we meet them, we fill them up with fuel, fill them up with food, give them medical supplies and we say, "Go that way". My supporters don't see them as refugees. They are queue jumpers...they're coming in by the thousands, it's beyond a joke and people are saying "We've had enough!"

LIGHTS on HOWARD surrounded by his inner circle; IMMIGRATION MINISTER PHILLIP RUDDOCK, FOREIGN MINISTER ALEXANDER DOWNER, and DEFENCE MINISTER PETER REITH.

HOWARD

I've got to do something about this...

REITH

About her you mean...

DOWNER

Can't believe what comes out of her mouth sometimes...

RUDDOCK

She's got the ear of the electorate...

HOWARD

Maybe their votes too...

REITH

Look...she'll never be anything more than a marginal player.

DOWNER

Then why are we worried?

REITH

The ground rules are changing.

HOWARD

The goal posts you mean...rules have always been the same. You do what you have to do to win.

REITH

She is a threat in some areas.

HOWARD

Kelly's worried she could lose her seat.

REITH

The Howard battlers...? You're kidding...

HOWARD

She pulled me up before Question Time...said this boat people issue was winning support for One Nation.

DOWNER

She's got the wind up her already.

HOWARD

Kelly's not like that...

RUDDOCK

We understand you're a bit fond of her.

HOWARD

Fond? She's got talent and already has lost two branches to One Nation one of them in her best fundraising branch.

REITH

She obviously can't take the seat for granted.

HOWARD

She's not and neither can we.

REITH

Your speech made it pretty clear...they're not coming to Australia. End of story.

RUDDOCK

The end's a long way off on this one.

HOWARD

Legally our position isn't the strongest.

DOWNER

That's putting it mildly...

HOWARD

But the end can never be in doubt. Right?

Silence. All nod in agreement.

HOWARD

So I will say this. One Nation will not be allowed to dominate this issue. If anything I want to sink them with it, render them bloody useless. In fact, I don't want to ever have to deal with them at this level of national politics ever again.

ACT ONE SCENE THREE

LIGHTS. SOUND of a ship crashing into port. HOWARD is thrown from his office into another orbit. LIGHTS on RINNAN on the deck of the Tampa. The image dwarfs HOWARD.

HOWARD

Who are you?

RINNAN

The Captain of the Tampa. Arne Rinnan. We have responded to your distress signals.

HOWARD

Look at the predicament you have put me in.

RINNAN

Prime Minister...these people are in dire need...they are sick, all they need-

HOWARD

They are illegal.

RINNAN

They have committed no crime.

HOWARD

Queue jumpers then! They will not enter Australia.

RINNAN

But I am outside Australian waters! Xmas Island.

HOWARD

You were told not to. Explicitly I might add.

RINNAN

I will not have these people on my conscience. Do you understand this Prime Minister? There are international laws...the laws of the sea...

HOWARD

Then let them go. Disgorge your cargo and your conscience will be set free.

RINNAN

It is not that simple. Your country...you have obligations...these people are unwell. I do not have the means to treat them. They are dehydrated, malnourished...

HOWARD

That remains to be seen Captain. And anyhow they chose to undertake this voyage.

RINNAN

I am staring at the hospital on Xmas Island...even blankets, some food...

HOWARD

You will receive no medical assistance on shore.

RINNAN

My company is waiting for you to come to your senses Prime Minister. They do not want to talk to the world media about what is not happening.

HOWARD

This is the responsibility of the Norwegian and Indonesian governments.

RINNAN

But it is you who must make the final decision. Not these governments...

Pause.

HOWARD

You're a Norwegian ship. You found'em in Indonesian waters.

RINNAN

At the request of the Australian authorities to rescue them!

HOWARD

We're getting nowhere Captain. I was hoping you'd be reasonable about this...

RINNAN

But we never actually speak do we Prime Minister...

HOWARD

You are in my thoughts constantly Arnie. I put myself in your position and for the life of me cannot figure out what you must be thinking.

RINNAN

Because I am not a politician. There are no calculations here...

RINNAN points below the bridge of the Tampa.
LIGHTS on the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER.

HOWARD

How's she doing...

RINNAN

What do you think..?

HOWARD

She looks a bit pale...

RINNAN

She is pregnant, her children have lice, rabies...

HOWARD

But they're alive aren't they? She should count her lucky stars...

RINNAN

She is delusional.

HOWARD

Then keep their spirits up Captain. Make them realise Australia simply isn't an option.

LIGHTS on HOWARD surrounded by REPORTERS.

REPORTER ONE

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT THE SICK PRIME MINISTER?

REPORTER TWO

HOW LONG WOULD YOU LEAVE THEM UNTREATED ON THE TAMPA?

REPORTER THREE

DO YOU CARE IF THEY DIED PRIME MINISTER?

REPORTER FOUR

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE HUNGER STRIKE?

REPORTER ONE

ARE YOU INDIFFERENT TO THREATS TO SUICIDE?

HOWARD motions them to calm down. They comply.

HOWARD

We are a humane people. Others know that and they sometimes try to intimidate us with our own decency. On the other hand, we cannot surrender our right as a sovereign country our right to control our borders and we cannot have a situation where people can come to this country when they choose.

LIGHTS back on RINNAN.

RINNAN

You are playing with their lives...and for what...to prove you can stand up to people who have nothing?

HOWARD

You couldn't be so wrong Arnie. I once stood in front of hundreds of hostile protestors, many of whom would have loved to take a shot at me..or so my security personnel assured me. All because I wanted tighter gun laws...a crazed loner had killed 45 Australians in Port Arthur...it was time to act. At one town I was ready to give a speech and they wanted me to wear a flack jacket under my suit. I looked like some kind of Michelin Man... I argued I didn't need it, that my position was my protection...a position that was reasonable and necessary.

RINNAN

So you showed personal bravery in the face of a possible threat to your life...

Pause.

HOWARD

I showed caution, fear, hesitation against a possible threat, not a real one.

RINNAN

You did not wear a jacket then you certainly do not need one now...

HOWARD

(pained)

I wore the flack jacket...and will always regret it to my dying day.

RINNAN

Where is the threat here Prime Minister..? Lives hang in the balance and are in your hands...

HOWARD

Political lives also hang in the balance Arnie...mine, the Party's...I can't take on your responsibilities on top of that.

RINNAN

Then you are taking a position that is neither reasonable nor necessary...

HOWARD thinks about this for a second.

HOWARD

You might have it right on one of those...

ACT ONE SCENE FOUR

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

As the problem increases in magnitude, the Norwegian and Australian governments look poised for a direct conflict over the fate of those on board the Tampa...

HOWARD

Their foreign minister wants to speak to me...all diplomacy and civility on the surface but he wants to twist my arm...with all the world watching...

LIGHTS on HOWARD and the NORWEGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER THORBJOERN JAGLAND.

JAGLAND

Thank you for receiving me on such short notice Prime Minister. I have no doubt you have many pressing issue to attend to.

HOWARD

And I have no doubt you are here to press one of those issues.

JAGLAND

The Tampa Prime Minister. My government is very concerned about the status of the refugees on board.

HOWARD

That's the point. They have no status and Australia is not prepared, nor should be expected to give them any.

JAGLAND

You are not prepared Prime Minister.

HOWARD

I am this government's most senior representative and we have been entrusted by the Australian people.

JAGLAND

Mr Prime Minister, there is a matter of urgency here. The Captain must obey his duties as governed by SCLAS. He cannot abandon people seeking legitimate refugee status in another country.

HOWARD

Then why doesn't Norway take them?

JAGLAND

They are trying to reach Australia Prime Minister. Norway has fulfilled its responsibilities in making sure these people do not drown in Australian waters.

HOWARD

Captain Rinnan has put my government in an incredibly difficult position. We have requested he take the cargo back to Indonesia but he has refused.

JAGLAND

The "cargo" Prime Minister, would not survive such a voyage. There are people on board who need urgent medical attention.

HOWARD

I've received no such information.

JAGLAND

The Captain and his crew have made assessments on the ground or deck as it were. They are best to know.

HOWARD

If these illegals require medical attention then the Australian government will provide it. Free of charge.

JAGLAND

There is talk of a hunger strike.

HOWARD

This will not affect our position one way or another. Anyhow, I'm sure the Captain is more than capable of looking after their welfare at this stage of the proceedings.

JAGLAND

Prime Minister...your government has responsibilities under international law. There was a time not long ago this would not have been an issue.

HOWARD

Times change. Australians want their borders protected. We live in a different world. Norway may have trouble understanding that but I don't. Nevertheless I can assure you that Australia will behave as a humanitarian nation.

JAGLAND

If I was sure of that Prime Minister, this meeting would not have been necessary.

Pause.

HOWARD

Good day to you.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RINNAN.

HOWARD

That wasn't fair Arnie.

RINNAN

My government has told me to say nothing to the media. But surely you did not expect them to remain silent.

HOWARD

You are just dying to turn this into a humanitarian issue aren't you Arnie?

LIGHTS on the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER. She is heavily pregnant.

RINNAN

She is about to give birth. Surrounded by all this filth. Dehydrated, malnourished and living in an unsanitary environment. What would you call it Prime Minister?

HOWARD

God...the smell.

RINNAN

My crew are doing their best.

HOWARD

But not good enough.

RINNAN

There are hundreds of them on these decks of my ship. We are not a hospital ship! I do not have the facilities to look after them.

HOWARD

Take them to Indonesia.

RINNAN

IMPOSSIBLE. You are asking me to risk their lives, that of my crew because of your politics. Indonesia is too far.

HOWARD

You have the keys Arnie. You acted on a humanitarian impulse and presented me with a political problem.

RINNAN

The sanctity of human life is above all other petty concerns!

HOWARD

Politics petty? Not on your life Arnie.

LIGHTS on RINNAN talking to REPORTER. Both are on the phone.

RINNAN

The situation on this vessel is deteriorating, and tensions are growing the longer my ship is forced to wait outside Australian waters. Any movement from the Island could prompt the passengers...

REPORTER ONE

Passengers?

RINNAN

...could prompt the refugees to jump overboard.

REPORTER ONE

What if the military were to prevent such actions?

RINNAN

I don't want the military on board. This could destabilise the Asylum Seekers. If they start to get nervous I think there might be violence. We are running out of medical supplies and blankets. Everyone except pregnant women and children are refusing to eat!

ACT ONE SCENE FIVE

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

HOWARD

We've got to send a message. You do understand that...

RUDDOCK

Of course. A measured response to Rinnan's intransigence.

HOWARD

Measured? Nothing measured will send the message I have in mind.

RUDDOCK

Which is...?

HOWARD

I want the SAS on board that ship.

RUDDOCK

SAS...

HOWARD

You have a problem with that...

RUDDOCK

Elite commandos on a civilian vessel full of...illegals.

HOWARD

Exactly.

Pause.

RUDDOCK

We could send the Federal Police...they would do a fine job.

HOWARD

No. I want the Australian public to know that this government has a take no prisoner attitude to border protection and who better to protect our borders...?

RUDDOCK

This sort of thing has never been done before PM. If an incident were to occur...

HOWARD

Incident? What kind of incident?

RUDDOCK

Umm...well if an illegal were to be harmed...accidentally of course, by an SAS soldier or a sailor on the vessel.

PRIME MINISTER

Won't happen. They're trained professionals. Best in the world. No matter what the British or the Yanks think about theirs, and they'll have strict orders directly from me governing their behaviour in this matter.

RUDDOCK

Prime Minister...when the SAS are called in people are usually in great danger...or will be once they arrive.

HOWARD

They will exercise restraint. I want to send a message Phil. Let the world know we mean business.

RUDDOCK

It could appear as a provocation. The international community-

HOWARD

It's meant to be a provocation! It's the most provocative I can get without torpedoing the bloody thing.

RUDDOCK

Have you spoken to Reith about this...

HOWARD

Upset he didn't think of it himself.

RUDDOCK

And Barrie?

HOWARD

He'll do what we tell him. In the nicest possible way of course.

Pause.

HOWARD

Don't tell me you don't have the stomach for this...?

RUDDOCK

What kind of question is that?

HOWARD

You once supported Labour's non discriminatory immigration policy...

RUDDOCK

That was 20 odd years ago!

HOWARD

Fifteen in fact.

RUDDOCK

I don't know how you could bring that up at this stage of the game...

HOWARD

You crossed the parliamentary floor against your own party...

RUDDOCK

And hung up on you to boot if I remember correctly...

HOWARD

Yes. You did.

RUDDOCK

Why are bringing this up now...

HOWARD

We're crossing the Rubicon together on this one. And there will be no equivocating or turning back. Scruples will have to be left at the door.

RUDDOCK

This isn't 1987. I won't hang up on you again...I promise.

HOWARD

I should hope not.

RUDDOCK

You were too obvious then.

HOWARD

What..?

RUDDOCK

The educated classes of this country have a streak of liberalism a mile wide. Any conservative policies have to be packaged...differently.

HOWARD

You believed in immigration without limits or restrictions back then. I've never wavered from my position since '87.

RUDDOCK

I'll make sure everything is in place. The taskforce needs to be prepared for any contingency.

RUDDOCK prepares to leave.

HOWARD

If the situation is as bad as Rinnan says it is, the SAS can provide first aid, be our eyes and ears and prevent any serious problems manifesting themselves. If not, they'll know exactly how to deal with them. And everyone will know we mean business.

LIGHTS on HOWARD. He address the audience.

HOWARD

"Mr. 18%" they used to call me. 18 percent of the Australian public preferred me as prime minister. Why does this man bother they used to say. My own party used to say. A party riven with factions and infighting. We were a joke and everyone knew it. But I just kept turning that spanner.

ACT ONE SCENE SIX

LIGHTS on HOWARD addressing REPORTERS.

HOWARD

There are no medical problems at all on the ship. A doctor from the Royal Flying Doctor Service was in radio contact with the vessel either this morning or yesterday afternoon and ascertained, for example that four of the illnesses were not as represented. One of them was completely feigned. The other three were completely mild.

LIGHTS on NORWEGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER
THORBJOERN JAGLAND.

JAGLAND

In the Norwegian view, Australia's rescue responsibilities...clearly include an obligation to allow the rescuees into the nearest harbour, which is in the Australian territory of Christmas Island. Such an obligation follows from rules of customary international law concerning access to port for ships and persons in distress as well as generally accepted international humanitarian standards.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

HOWARD

Every time I get in and refute his claims Rinnan takes it one step further.

RUDDOCK

We've just received this message from the Norwegian Search and Rescue Centre at Stawanger.

HOWARD

Read it.

RUDDOCK

"The situation is deteriorating ...the ship is in urgent need of medical assistance. The priority of this assistance is as follows: med-"

HOWARD

That's enough. I know exactly what they want.

RUDDOCK

Do we give it to them...

HOWARD

It can't be that bad.

RUDDOCK looks at the message.

RUDDOCK

Ten of the persons are unconscious with spasms...46 children on board...two pregnant women. Prime Minister, for appearances sake at least some action needs to be taken. If there was a death amongst the illegals our whole case would be literally blown out of the water.

HOWARD

I've assured the public that there is no medical crisis. If evidence or information was to get out contrary to that...

DOWNER enters. He is holding a document in one hand. He places it on the desk.

DOWNER

Have you seen this!? Rinnan's bloody well gone and broadcast a Pan Pan...

HOWARD

A what...?

RUDDOCK

An urgent message concerning the safety of a vessel and those on board. He's taken it another step further.

DOWNER

The bastard's trying to force us to act against our own policy.

HOWARD

We haven't responded to it...?

RUDDOCK

Of course not.

DOWNER

But for how long?

LIGHTS on RINNAN.

RINNAN

The hunger strikes are continuing...there are only forty blankets for 438 people and the nights are cool. The fate of the very young children hangs in the balance over the next 24 to 36 hours.

RUDDOCK

The Royal Flying Doctor Service is getting all concerned. They're calling to see why there has been no response.

HOWARD

Keep it that way. (To DOWNER). Did you speak to the Norwegian Foreign Minister?

DOWNER

Of course I did.

HOWARD

And what was his response?

DOWNER

Well...what did you expect him to say...?

HOWARD

(exploding)

What did he say Alex?! I'm not a mind reader...

DOWNER

Look...if anyone thought they could do a better job-

HOWARD

You're the Foreign Minister of the Australian government. It's your job. Nobody else's. What did he say?

DOWNER

I didn't beat around the bush. I came straight out and asked him to order the Tampa to sail for Indonesia.

RUDDOCK

And?

Pause.

DOWNER

He didn't think I was serious.

HOWARD

Jesus...

RUDDOCK

You didn't plead with him did you?

DOWNER

Sod off...

HOWARD

What do you mean he didn't think you were serious? Why in God's name would you be calling the Norwegian Foreign Minister in the first place?!

DOWNER

Exactly. Which is what I said to him but he wouldn't countenance the idea one way or the other. Had the cheek to remind me of the conventions Australia has ratified as a seafaring nation...as if I didn't fucking know I was at some of those conventions...

HOWARD

Try him again.

DOWNER

I can't. He won't budge.

RUDDOCK

Use leverage....threats on Norwegian financial interests in Australia...

DOWNER

We'd never follow through on that and he knows it...

Pause. Everyone considers this for a moment, not really sure whether it would be a bluff or not.

HOWARD

It's worth another try.

DOWNER

He reminded me of our legal and political obligations. There wasn't a flicker of doubt in his mind. I kept urging him to do something but it was useless...

RUDDOCK

First the Indonesian Ambassador tells you to fuck off and now the Norwegian Foreign Minister...all in a single day.

DOWNER

We're asking them to do the impossible and having nothing to offer them in return. It goes against everything I've ever learnt in diplomacy.

RUDDOCK

I doubt it.

HOWARD

We're not giving in and I'm not wearing any of this. If they're not prepared to help out it's not the Australian government that's going to suffer. I'm offering alternative solutions...

DOWNER

We can't ignore the medical situation any longer. It's too embarrassing.

The phone rings. HOWARD indicates for RUDDOCK to take it. He picks up the phone.

RUDDOCK

Rinnan's issued a MayDay.

DOWNER

Shit.

RUDDOCK

RCC is still forbidding the Tampa to enter Australian waters...please provide evidence of grave and imminent danger...Rinnan's threatening to enter territorial waters.

HOWARD

Call their Foreign Minister and tell him to order the Tampa to stay out of territorial waters or it will be boarded by military force.

DOWNER

You're joking...no of course you're not.

LIGHTS on DOWNER and the NORWEGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER THORBJOERN JAGLAND. They are both on the phone.

DOWNER

This is Alex Downer.

JAGLAND

This cannot be about the Tampa...but of course it must be.

DOWNER

I demand as the Foreign Minister of the Australian government that you order the Tampa to stay out of Australian territorial waters!

JAGLAND

I have already pointed this out to you Mr. Downer...as firmly and as diplomatically as possible that I have no authority to do so.

DOWNER

How in God's name can you take on face value Rinnan's assessment of the situation huh? How?

JAGLAND

He is the captain of the ship. Who else is better capable or authorised to make any assessment...

DOWNER

The Australian government disputes Rinnan's decision unequivocally.

JAGLAND

And also unequivocally I stick to the principle that the captain has the right to make the judgement.

DOWNER

I don't give a bugger what your captain thinks. But let me make one thing clear...if Tampa enters Australian territorial waters it will be boarded by Australian military force.

Pause.

JAGLAND

You...your government cannot be serious. Do people have to die before your government is convinced this is a health issue? This...is against international law Mr. Downer. I can only maintain the principles-

DOWNER

This is no idle threat. The Prime Minister will use military force if your Captain does not comply.

JAGLAND

The issue of the May Day has created new obligations for your country Mr. Downer. You have a clear obligation to receive the ship and provide assistance.

DOWNER

Is this your last word on the matter?!

JAGLAND looks at the receiver as if he cannot believe what he has quite heard. DOWNER abruptly hangs up.

LIGHTS on RINNAN on the bridge.

RINNAN

We are broadcasting another May Day...bloody unheard of...

RINNAN takes a moment before picking up his radio. LIGHTS on HOWARD, RUDDOCK, DOWNER listening in the PM'S office in stunned silence.

RINNAN (CONT'D)

The situation on board is deteriorating even further and it is getting out of hand. On this background I have no alternative but to declare a distress situation which can only be solved by approaching the closest shore to find shelter so that medical assistance can be rendered. Best Regards, A. Rinnan.

RCC VOICE OVER

You have no basis for calling the distress. Please provide evidence of grave and imminent danger to persons on board your vessel. If you proceed Australia will take full action to protect the integrity of Australian territorial rights.

RINNAN

It is my prerogative in my sole judgement based on present position to declare distress. It is still my firm judgement that survivors on board are in imminent danger therefore I maintain my May Day. If help does not arrive by 2.00pm Canberra time, I will have no alternative but to approach a sheltered position where a transfer by boat can take place before the end of daylight today.

LIGHTS on HOWARD, RUDDOCK, DOWNER.

DOWNER

He's bloody well going to do it...

RUDDOCK

What do you expect? His Foreign Minister told you where to put it on two separate occasions...

DOWNER

Why don't you fucking talk to him then? Heh? The prick's got right on his side and he knows it.

REITH enters.

REITH

Defence Chief Barrie is outside...

HOWARD

Send him in...

DEFENCE CHIEF BARRIE enters.

HOWARD

Issue an order for the SAS to head out to the ship.

BARRIE pauses for a second, momentarily startled.

HOWARD

I trust they're all ready to go...briefed on their responsibilities...

BARRIE

Yes. Absolutely.

LIGHTS on RINNAN.

RINNAN

Good morning. Please be advised that we are approaching Christmas Island to take shelter and to be able to effect transfer of medical assistance to your Dr. Hammond.

HOWARD

Remember...there's to be no flag flying.

BARRIE stops for a second, looks briefly at HOWARD then exits. LIGHTS.

ACT ONE SCENE SEVEN

LIGHTS on RINNAN. MAJOR KHAN, dressed in black commando gear is walking up to the bridge and is in the midst of taking off his helmet.

MAJOR KHAN

Major Khan Special Air Service Regiment.

RINNAN

Arnie Rinnan. Captain of the Tampa.

MAJOR KHAN

Don't be alarmed Captain. I'm not taking command of the ship.

RINNAN

And I am not giving to you.

KHAN is about to say something.

RINNAN (CONT'D)

I must warn you Major everything said on the bridge can be heard on an open radio to Oslo.

MAJOR KHAN

We're here to protect the medical personnel now arriving on the second Zodiac.

RINNAN

I asked for this medical assistance Major. Not soldiers. They will be in no danger.

MAJOR KHAN

We will not begin treating the sick until the Tampa is once again outside territorial waters.

RINNAN

This is blackmail.

MAJOR KHAN

All the responsibility for these people is on your shoulders Captain. Their welfare-

RINNAN

I will not sail. I am now inside. I will not go outside again.

MAJOR KHAN

I repeat, the welfare of these people rests with you. Unless you move outside-

RINNAN

Yes yes. So we shall sit here and await negotiations on shore.

LIGHTS on HOWARD, RUDDOCK and DOWNER.

HOWARD

How long has it been now?

RUDDOCK

12 minutes.

DOWNER

We should have heard something...

RUDDOCK

You think just because we sent commandos onto a civilian vessel harbouring asylum seekers...

RUDDOCK stops to correct himself.

RUDDOCK(CONT'D)

Illegals...harbouring illegals...that Rinnan was suddenly going to see it our way.

HOWARD

Khan's been told to keep up the pressure. He's not to take no for an answer.

DOWNER

I can't believe it's gone this far...

HOWARD

Diplomatic efforts failed.

DOWNER

There was no diplomacy...our arses were hanging out for all the world to see.

RUDDOCK

Jagland certainly saw it.

HOWARD

We were left with no choice.

RUDDOCK

If Rinnan is forced to leave Australian territorial waters...he will be risking the safety of his ship and all on board..no matter what we call them.

DOWNER

Under direct pressure from the Australian military receiving direct orders from the Australian government. Delightful.

HOWARD

What are you trying to say!?

DOWNER

He's not likely to do it.

HOWARD

I'm addressing Parliament in under an hour. Something has to give.

ACT ONE SCENE EIGHT

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

2.00pm. August 29th...John Howard addresses the Australian Parliament...

LIGHTS on HOWARD addressing Parliament.

HOWARD

The ship is now in control of the SAS. I should inform the House that the preliminary assessment carried out by the Australian Defence Force doctor indicates that nobody, and I repeat nobody, has presented as being in need of urgent medical assistance as would require their removal to the Australian mainland or to Christmas Island. I repeat that this is a result of the preliminary investigations and a further medical assessment continues...I might add that Australia's offer of medical help is not in any way conditional on the return of the vessel to international waters.

LIGHTS on KHAN and DR. HAMMOND who is examining the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER.

MAJOR KHAN

So what's the state of affairs?

HAMMOND

Which version do you want Major?

LIGHTS on RUDDOCK addressing the REPORTERS.

RUDDOCK

The Captain of the Tampa is misrepresenting the situation on the ship.

REPORTER ONE

How so Minister?

MAJOR KHAN

Give me the medical assessment...

HAMMOND

Besides the severe hydration, exhaustion and malnutrition...some are faring a little worse than others.

RUDDOCK

The military personnel on board the Tampa have assured us there are no medical emergencies. The illegals are in general good health.

HAMMOND

The pregnant woman urgently requires hydration.

MAJOR KHAN

How urgently...?

RUDDOCK

In fact they are receiving medical assistance from highly qualified personnel.

HAMMOND

There are five seriously ill people on board. She's probably the worst.

MAJOR KHAN

Do what you can.

HAMMOND

There's a fully equipped hospital a few kilometers from here. If any of them die I'll be held responsible.

REPORTER TWO

Do you feel Australia has any responsibility towards these refugees.

RUDDOCK

Illegals.

REPORTER ONE

Illegals.

RUDDOCK

None. None at all. Given our policy on illegal entry into Australia this government is doing all it can.

ACT ONE SCENE NINE

LIGHTS on TWO SAS TROOPERS wearing balaclavas videotaping the ASYLUM SEEKERS on the Tampa. LIGHTS on RINNAN and HOWARD.

RINNAN

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR MEN ARE DOING?

HOWARD

Home movies.

RINNAN

They are humiliating the refugees...

HOWARD

It's all for posterity Arnie. And history.

RINNAN

How about my crew taping your commandos subjecting them to this...

HOWARD

You wouldn't do that Arnie...

RINNAN

Evidence for the court.

HOWARD

Courts?

RINNAN

We know of attempts by some lawyers in your country to force your humanitarian hand...

HOWARD

That tape wouldn't leave the ship Arnie. Not much use to any lawyer.

RINNAN

Your men would be interfering with the control of the ship. You would have a real scandal on your hands then Prime Minister.

HOWARD

They're SAS Arnie. I wouldn't get them mad. They might be under strict orders but they are trained to win...

RINNAN

How in God's name could you send elite commandos to intimidate a bunch of half starved and desperate refugees?!

HOWARD

A point had to be made Arnie.

RINNAN

A point? Are you mad? There is no point to this.

HOWARD

That is why you are a Captain and I am a Prime Minister Arnie. There is every point to this. Border control Arnie. I have great love for my country and will do everything to protect it.

RINNAN

We have been contacted by lawyers...they want to speak to the asylum seekers.

HOWARD

That's a lot of phone calls Arnie.

RINNAN

Only one will do. But surely you know that Prime Minister.

HOWARD

These are truly dangerous waters Captain.

RINNAN

The soldiers have been given pleas for asylum.

HOWARD

We already know that.

RINNAN

And this does not worry you...?

HOWARD

What do you think those elite commandos have been ordered to do Arnie? They're best at a lot of things...not least of all keeping a secret. Your lost souls can plea all they like...may as well never have happened.

RINNAN

All it would take is one phone call Prime Minister...a mobile phone to one of those poor souls and you will have to accept them. Lawyers in your country are ready to take on their case.

HOWARD

Then why don't you do it..?

RINNAN is quiet for a moment.

RINNAN

438 people...let them in. My company does not want to meddle in Australian political affairs.

HOWARD

And they won't Captain. Make no mistake. Norway is bigger than your ship, bigger than the Wilhelmsen line...bigger than your laws of the sea...

RINNAN

My government is not here Prime Minister. And I am in charge.

HOWARD

Let's not be coy. You will not act without their consent.

RINNAN

You can't know that?

HOWARD

But I do Arnie. I do.

RINNAN

Unless of course...you're eavesdropping on calls between my ship and the Norwegian government, but that is...illegal.

HOWARD

All that matters is that my soldiers are on your ship...not your mythical lawyers.

LIGHTS. HOWARD addresses Parliament.

HOWARD

We need right on our side...a parliamentary Act that will legislate in favour of all our actions..whatever they are in the protection of Australia..!

ARABIC PRESENTER

And into the fray entered the leader of the Opposition, not as a proponent of fairness towards the desperate, but rather, an unbiased umpire, unwilling to disrupt the tranquil waters of Howard's new isolationism...

ACT ONE SCENE TEN

LIGHTS on HOWARD and OPPOSITION LEADER
KIM BEAZLEY.

BEAZLEY

John.

HOWARD

Kim. Glad you could make it.

BEAZLEY

A matter of urgency.

HOWARD

I'd say so.

BEAZLEY

You have it there...

HOWARD nods, indicating the document on the table.

BEAZLEY (CONT'D)

Let's take a look.

BEAZLEY begins to read it.

HOWARD

It's something that has to happen Kim. That's all there is to it.

BEAZLEY

We... I can't support this.

HOWARD

Why not?

BEAZLEY

Where do I start. It's un Australian.

HOWARD

Rubbish. This legislation protects Australia. It therefore can't be un-Australian.

BEAZLEY

If you were to pass an Act such as this...Australia's name would be pilloried around the world. I just can't support this John.

HOWARD considers BEAZLEY for a moment.

HOWARD

You know how this is going to look don't you?

BEAZLEY

Yes. That Labour has drawn a line in the sand on this issue. Legislation like this will turn Australia into a fortress.

HOWARD

That's what Australians want for heaven's sake and I'm prepared to give it to them...

BEAZLEY

There's not that many of them John...hundreds here and there...

HOWARD

What?!

BEAZLEY

Asylum seekers...

HOWARD

Illegals.

BEAZLEY

Europe's dealing with thousands upon thousands and they haven't drawn up anything remotely like this...

HOWARD

It's a matter of time before they change gears Kim. We hear what their pollies are saying behind closed doors. They're just waiting for the right moment. Ours has arrived.

BEAZLEY doesn't budge. Nor will he even look at HOWARD.

HOWARD

You've supported us until now Kim. Labour's constituents have made it very clear they don't want any interference with my government protecting this country's borders. And that's exactly what this legislation does!

BEAZLEY

It goes against just about every human rights charter that's ever been written John. You just can't go with this. It's pushing it too far and the Australian public won't support it.

HOWARD

You really think so?

BEAZLEY

Fundamentally, they want some equity, some fairness...this is a law for dictatorships not democracies!

HOWARD

Rubbish!

BEAZLEY

This law would place lives at risk on the ocean while forbidding any scrutiny from the courts.

HOWARD

You can't have it both ways Kim. Supporting us when we send in the SAS to deal with them then allowing them to be exposed to court action later down the track.

BEAZLEY

Sending in the SAS was complete overkill!

HOWARD

Then why didn't you say so when you had the chance!

BEAZLEY

I'm the former Defence Minister John. What choice did I have...

HOWARD

This evening I'm going to present this Bill.

BEAZLEY

You're forcing us into opposition.

HOWARD says nothing.

BEAZLEY (CONT'D)

You know full well Labour can't go this far.

HOWARD

Labour can do what it likes Kim. It's really up to you.

LIGHTS on HOWARD addressing Parliament.

HOWARD

This Bill will confirm our ability to remove to the high seas those vessels and persons on board that have entered the territorial waters under Australian sovereignty contrary to our wishes.

LIGHTS on BEAZLEY alone.

BEAZLEY

This is just one big shit sandwich.

HOWARD

It is essential to the maintenance of Australian sovereignty, including our sovereign right to determine who will enter and reside in Australia...

BEAZLEY

This Bill has to be rejected but it will devastate us...

HOWARD

It is essential that the removal of boats from Australian waters cannot be challenged in any court because the protection of our sovereignty is a matter for the Australian government and this parliament!

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

RUDDOCK

This just came in...

HOWARD

Not another protest...?

RUDDOCK

Much better than that.

HOWARD takes the letter and begins to read it with all the feelings of humiliation and embarrassment of its author.

HOWARD

“Some of us, out of ignorance or being a child or as a result of the pressures experienced or because of lost dreams which were feasible but have disappeared or because of the loss of money or loss of time: all these resulted in uncivilised behaviour. We apologise for this. We are persecuted people. We ran away from fire with our families to a country which we respect. We respect its people and its will and we are sure this country will accept us and save us from the tragedy and suffering. We are sure that the ship of our dreams will land in the land of our dreams...Australia.”

Pause. There is a palpable discomfort between the two of them and the truth and honesty of the letter.

HOWARD

Hope is eternal.

ARABIC PRESENTER

6.47pm. August 31st..

LIGHTS on HOWARD addressing Parliament.

HOWARD

This Bill will confirm our ability to remove to the high seas those vessels and persons on board that have entered the territorial waters under Australian sovereignty, including our sovereign right to determine who will enter and reside in Australia!

LIGHTS on BEAZLEY on the opposite side of the stage.

BEAZLEY

What we have here is not a national catastrophe but a serious problem. No matter what the circumstances it will be a reasonable and authoritative thing for an Australian officer to take a boat that is sinking and in which there are life threatening situations involving the people on board and order it out. That will be capable of being sustained by this Bill...drag the boat out, sink it, people die. It does not matter what you think ought to happen; that is what this Bill permits.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and BEAZLEY. They eye each other warily.

HOWARD

Look...what if I put a sunset clause of six months.

BEAZLEY

Nothing doing John. We reject it out and out.

HOWARD

Is that right...?

BEAZLEY

That's right.

HOWARD

I have the electorate Kim. You know that. Labour, Liberal, Christ I'm sure there are a few Greens who support what I'm doing.

BEAZLEY

I think John a large swathe of the electorate don't really understand what you're doing...at least not in a legal or moral sense.

HOWARD

For Christ's sake Kim why do you pick now of all times to take a bloody position...?!

BEAZLEY

Because up until now I've found nothing you've done...unreasonable.

HOWARD

That's why you will be crucified for going against it now. You can't flip flop when the going gets tough Kim. This Bill is made of steel, it brooks no compromise and Australia is ready for it.

Pause.

BEAZLEY

Labour would support a Tampa specific Bill.

HOWARD

Tampa specific...?

BEAZLEY

Hear me out. A Bill that would give legal protection to all those involved in the operation and support the expulsion of the ship on condition you find a safe haven for the asylum seekers.

HOWARD

That's virtually admitting military personnel are engaged in some kind of nefarious activity.

BEAZLEY

They're acting under your orders and may require your protection if anyone wants to look too closely at everything that's happened up until this point.

HOWARD

Tampa specific heh? It might be possible...

BEAZLEY

We're prepared to work with you on this one as closely as necessary.

HOWARD thinks about it some more. He turns to
BEAZLEY.

HOWARD

Safe haven Orrww! That's ridiculous!

BEAZLEY

I'll come over with a team...we'll work through the night until we find a solution.

HOWARD

I'm doing you a favour Kim. Safe haven...forget it.

LIGHTS on HOWARD, RUDDOCK and DOWNER.

HOWARD

Well...?

RUDDOCK

They killed it. 34 to 30.

LIGHTS. HOWARD is surrounded by
REPORTERS.

HOWARD

That boat will never land in our waters...never.

LIGHTS on HOWARD alone.

HOWARD

I'm going to crush Labour over this. Kim's like a guide dog holding out his
leash to whoever will pat him on the head. I'm trying to guard the sovereignty of
Australia and he's thwarted me at every turn...derailing one of the most
important pieces of legislation in Australian history.

LIGHTS on the REPORTERS.

REPORTER ONE

Sometimes talking tough makes a weak position even less tenable. John
Howard has backed himself into just such a corner over 438 refugees, mostly
from Afghanistan, sweltering on the deck of a Norwegian freighter near
Christmas Island.

HOWARD

I've done no such thing! They're the one's in a corner! The captain of the ship is
responsible...

REPORTER TWO

The Australian prime minister's refusal to let them land was compounded by an unnecessary display of force when soldiers boarded the container ship...

HOWARD

Unnecessary display of force?! Gawd...they must be joking. No one's fired a shot...

LIGHTS on RINNAN.

RINNAN

(to HOWARD)

Your men nearly caused a riot amongst the asylum seekers!

REPORTER THREE

He claims the law is on his side because the freighter is within Australian territorial waters with a cargo of people who were trying to enter the country illegally.

HOWARD

THE LAW IS ON MY SIDE! AND IF IT ISN'T I'LL BLOODY WELL CHANGE IT!!!

The REPORTERS adopt a personal tone in addressing the PRIME MINISTER.

REPORTER ONE

Maybe. But now, as victims of a shipwreck rescued in international waters, these desperate people are entitled to assistance.

REPORTER TWO

They were saved from a sinking ferry at the request of the Australian coastguard.

REPORTER THREE

And since they include pregnant women, children and some who are sick, they cannot remain much longer on an open and unhygienic cargo deck.

LIGHTS.

HOWARD

This won't go on much longer...you can be sure of that. It's just not politically wise to keep them on that deck anyhow...

ACT ONE SCENE ELEVEN

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK. REITH enters.

REITH

The Norwegian Ambassador is trying to board the Tampa...

LIGHTS on the NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR with an SAS COMMANDO with balaclava on and MAJOR KHAN standing in front of him on the deck of the Tampa. RINNAN watches.

RINNAN

This is a Norwegian ship Major. He is the Norwegian Ambassador to your country. His rights are greater than yours on this vessel.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

RUDDOCK

This isn't good...

HOWARD

Maybe we shouldn't have let him on board...

RUDDOCK

We're walking the razor's edge of a diplomatic international incident...

HOWARD

You think I don't know that?! We need someone to accept these people..

LIGHTS. The NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR stands face to face with the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER. MAJOR KHAN shadows the AMBASSADOR. The ASYLUM SEEKER hands the AMBASSADOR a letter. KHAN intervenes and takes it off the AMBASSADOR.

MAJOR KHAN

The letter stays.

NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR

As ambassador I claim a right of free passage under the Geneva Convention.

MAJOR KHAN

The letter stays.

LIGHTS.

RUDDOCK

He won't leave without the letter.

HOWARD

No he won't.

RUDDOCK

We've got ourselves a diplomatic crisis...

HOWARD

How do we keep a Foreign Minister from leaving a ship from his own country...

RUDDOCK

If that letter gets out then any request for asylum becomes undeniable.

REITH

Just take the letter from him. Why send in the SAS in the first place...?

RUDDOCK

And if he refuses shoot him I suppose...

HOWARD

Just...keep him waiting. Maybe he'll decide to leave without it.

RUDDOCK

We have no choice here...we can't stop him Prime Minister.

LIGHTS.

MAJOR KHAN

You are free to take the letter Ambassador.

KHAN hands the AMBASSADOR the letter.

MAJOR KHAN

There must have been a misunderstanding.

Pause.

NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR

I appreciate that. Misunderstandings do happen.

LIGHTS on the NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR
surrounded by REPORTERS and watched by
HOWARD, RUDDOCK and REITH.

REPORTER ONE

HAVE YOU RECEIVED A LETTER MR. AMBASSADOR?!

NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR

Yes. I have but I can tell you nothing else in relation to it.

REPORTER TWO

HOW ARE THE ASYLUM SEEKERS?!

NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR

Three survivors are quite ill but are being treated by Army medics...their water is low and still being rationed...the crew exhausted. We hope that all the rescued people can be put ashore and the ship can sail.

LIGHTS. DOWNER enters.

HOWARD

Well?

DOWNER

This is the final situation...any other solution is not even-

HOWARD

Alright. What is it.

DOWNER

New Zealand will take 150.

REITH

150? Why not all of them?

DOWNER

150. That's it. Priority to women and children.

HOWARD

Go on...

DOWNER

The rest will be taken to Nauru.

REITH

Just like Fiji I hear...

HOWARD

They've finally agreed?

RUDDOCK

Yes. We'll pay for everything of course.

LIGHTS. HOWARD is now surrounded by REPORTERS.

HOWARD

Naturally the UNHCR and the International Office of Migration will both be involved and indeed their involvement is part of the process of resolving this very difficult situation. Once the asylum seekers are well outside of Australian waters they will have their claims assessed under the normal processes applying to refugees around the world.

It was envisaged Norway would take some and Australia would take its fair share as well, consistent with our open policy concerning refugees.

Pause.

HOWARD

Commencing immediately the ADF will conduct enhanced surveillance, patrol and response operations in international waters between the Indonesian archipelago and Australia. This will involve five naval vessels and four P30 Orion aircraft. The code name for this is...Operation Relex.

ACT ONE SCENE TWELVE

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK. REITH enters.

REITH

They're all on board the Manoora.

HOWARD

Thank God for that.

RUDDOCK

The SAS fed them some story no doubt.

REITH

Told them a lot of stories in fact...

RUDDOCK

How so?

REITH

Well short of belting them off the Tampa, they had to be told something.

RUDDOCK

Like they were actually going to be allowed in Australia..?

REITH

(cautiously)

Something along those lines...

HOWARD

I think we're playing it too soft...

REITH

We go in hard...who's gonna stop us?

RUDDOCK

There are certain protocols. No matter how expedient our approach...

REITH

Protocols? We've trampled over God knows how many protocols, charters, standards of behaviour but so what? It's working!

RUDDOCK

Hang on Peter. We're a long way off calling this a success.

REITH

Rubbish. They're on the run.

RUDDOCK

Who?

REITH

All of them! The appeals gone our way. Bloody hell did you see that Vardalis fella crying on the street!?

DOWNER

He wanted to play with the big boys then starts bawling when he loses...

REITH

Pathetic.

HOWARD

Pathetic enough to call the Tampa three times. If Rinnan had taken his calls it might be us doing the crying...

RUDDOCK

Still time for that.

HOWARD

I don't like this kind of press. Makes us look bad.

REITH

We've got the momentum. No one gives a shit what we do now. PM, as long as we keep'em out of the public eye...no sympathy shots of bloody starving Iraqis...

RUDDOCK

Heaven forbid...

REITH

Right. As long as we do that we won't have a problem.

HOWARD

I disagree. The mood is running completely in our favour. Channel Nine could do a live feed of their plight and it wouldn't make an iota of difference.

RUDDOCK and DOWNER are silent on this.

REITH

Look at the Opposition. Beazley's rolled over so many times we could do a topographical survey of his backside.

HOWARD

What a gift he's been. As if we wished him into existence.

REITH

Exactly.

RUDDOCK

Labour's facing a possible backlash over the border protection legislation.

REITH

Well that's Labour's fucking problem.

HOWARD

There won't be any backlash amongst our constituency.

REITH

And the rest.

HOWARD

Rest who?

REITH

C'mon PM. You've out hansoned Hanson.

RUDDOCK

Love the idiom Peter...

REITH

She hasn't got a leg to stand on. Everything her supporters believe in you've acted upon beyond their wildest dreams. All those rednecks and racists...

HOWARD

Hang on. That's not the country I live in. Australians are a fair people. If they're racist it's only because they fear change because they love their country so much.

REITH

Of course...

HOWARD

Assimilation is everything and these people won't assimilate. Multiculturalism is a stake in the heart of Australian values and finally the electorate is waking up to this fact. Our policies are not racist.

REITH

Of course they're not. They're nationalistic. For the good of the nation.

HOWARD

We may still have a problem.

RUDDOCK

The Iraqis know that if they stay on the Manoora they are for all intents and purposes in Australia.

Pause.

REITH

What are you saying? That they now have legal rights because they're on an Australian warship...

RUDDOCK

Not at all. But if they refuse...

REITH

We bloody well boot them off. Christ we have troops on board don't we...

HOWARD

The illegals cannot under any circumstances remain on that boat. Whatever it takes...

REITH

We shoot them if need be...

RUDDOCK

Are you out of your mind...? There is a point we should be wary of crossing PM.

HOWARD

We're not going to shoot anybody. I don't care what else has to be done. But they will leave that vessel.

REITH

The military personnel have rules of engagement don't they? Well...expand them.

RUDDOCK

We've already had confrontations.

HOWARD

If they have to be dragged off that boat then...Alright I've said it.

REITH

Hear hear.

HOWARD

Ask them nicely. Then if they don't comply...nobody can say they weren't warned.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and REITH.

REITH

The Defence Chief...he's requested to speak to you directly about Relex.

HOWARD

Why?

REITH

Doesn't feel this is a naval matter...thinks we might be overstepping the mark.

HOWARD

What did you tell him?

REITH

What you'd expect...that we've given this a great deal of thought and...

HOWARD

Well?

REITH

That you're...well aware of the implications.

Pause. HOWARD considers REITH for a moment.

HOWARD

Tell Barrie I'll see him.

ACT ONE SCENE THIRTEEN

LIGHTS on HOWARD and DEFENCE CHIEF BARRIE.

BARRIE

I must warn you Prime Minister that Operation Relex could present us with a plethora of difficulties in carrying it out.

HOWARD

Plethora you say?

BARRIE

Quite a bit Prime Minister.

HOWARD

You voiced no opposition when you had the chance.

BARRIE

And if I had Prime Minister...?

There is a stony silence. HOWARD considers BARRIE for a moment.

BARRIE (CONT'D)

While on paper it looks quite...reasonable executing these kind of orders will be...

HOWARD

Difficult?

BARRIE

Exactly. Difficult Prime Minister.

HOWARD

There's nothing reasonable about this Admiral. If I wanted reasonable I'd set up an Immigration Office in Indonesia and invite all and sundry to apply for a visa.

Pause.

HOWARD

But I'm not about to do that.

BARRIE

Of course you're not Prime Minister.

HOWARD

Who do you think might cause problems Admiral?

BARRIE

Who?

HOWARD

Men under your command...

BARRIE

I said the situation might present problems...nothing about whom.

HOWARD

The problems will only arise if those under your command think they are going to have problems and treat things which arise as such.

BARRIE

I understand.

HOWARD

Do you?

BARRIE

I hope so. But Prime Minister, these are...to excuse the pun, uncharted waters. The scope of Relex is so vast it could lead to incidents which the military, the navy in particular is not equipped to handle.

HOWARD

What kind of incidents?

BARRIE

The way Relex is worded, we are not to give any assistance to a vessel or its passengers-

HOWARD

They are not passengers.

BARRIE

Whoever might be on board the ship...unless they are imminently in danger of drowning.

HOWARD

Yes.

BARRIE

Too often Prime Minister it is too late at the imminent stage and the laws of the sea are such that vessels are required to provide assistance at the very hint of danger...to prevent imminent drowning.

Pause.

BARRIE (CONT'D)

In other words, we're not supposed to let it get that far.

HOWARD

We're not barbarians Admiral. I'm not asking you to behave barbarically.

BARRIE

I understand that.

HOWARD

We're not asking you to sink their ships.

BARRIE

I know that Prime Minister. I saw the interview and you made your point extremely well.

HOWARD

But...

BARRIE

Men under my command...those at the coal face will...face conditions...circumstances that we know from experience overseas are incredibly stressful.

HOWARD

Comes with the job.

BARRIE

It is not the job of the military to prevent civilians from escaping whatever godforsaken country they came from. To not rescue civilians crossing an ocean in a leaky vessel-

HOWARD

They made that decision.

BARRIE

Regardless...

HOWARD

This is your second stint as head of defence forces isn't it...

BARRIE

That's correct Prime Minister.

HOWARD

And that's no accident. Admiral.

BARRIE

I would say not.

HOWARD

And from what I understand you're interested in another reappointment.

Pause.

BARRIE

Only if my superiors are satisfied with my performance as Commander of the Defence Forces.

HOWARD

Naturally. I shouldn't say this Admiral but Peter...Minister Reith is very happy with the relationship you two have forged. Talks about it all the time.

BARRIE

Does he...?

HOWARD

After Barrett was eased out...he was a friend of yours.

BARRIE

Well...yes he was Prime Minister.

HOWARD

We thought it was only a matter of time before your departure became imminent.

BARRIE

Right.

HOWARD

Instead, as Peter attests to with great frequency, you've shown yourself to be incredibly adaptable. Like a politician...almost.

BARRIE

One learns to survive Prime Minister.

HOWARD

But it's more than that isn't it Admiral? You like where you are...and we like you there.

BARRIE

That's much appreciated.

HOWARD

Which is why you won't be alone in all this. You'll be receiving the full support of the People Smuggling Taskforce. You'll receive support...

BARRIE

Directions you mean...

HOWARD

Yes direction too. You, the navy will not be on their own.

BARRIE

No.

HOWARD

Ultimately if we all do our jobs Operation Relex will be a great success and no one will ever doubt that the greatest burden will have been placed squarely on your shoulders.

Pause.

BARRIE

Thank you...Prime Minister.

BARRIE exits. LIGHTS on HOWARD.

HOWARD

Who would have ever thought my own party believed I could never be Prime Minister because of my views on immigration.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

RUDDOCK

We have another one. Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle Four.

HOWARD

How many?

RUDDOCK

Not sure. Estimates over a hundred.

HOWARD

Who's in the area?

RUDDOCK

Commander Banks on the Adelaide.

HOWARD

No rescues...unless...

RUDDOCK

He's already on his way. Navy's been briefed what to do.

HOWARD

It's not our problem then.

LIGHTS. SOUNDS of a howling sea. LIGHTS on COMMANDER BANKS conducting a rescue operation from the bridge of the HMAS Adelaide. He is totally engrossed as he calls out to his men. HOWARD watches agog. He quickly snaps out of it.

HOWARD

What...what's going on..?

BANKS

A rescue operation...what does it look like...

HOWARD

But I gave explicit instructions there was to be no rescue!!

BANKS

It couldn't be helped...they were drowning.

HOWARD

Rubbish...the boats sinking that's all. You should have made it very clear they were on their own...

BANKS

There was nothing we could do Prime Minister. Nothing. People were in the water...children. It became a humanitarian operation.

HOWARD

You made it one. And it's not within the purview of Relex.

BANKS

My men were watching Prime Minister...sailors with families watching families under incredible duress...something had to be done.

HOWARD

(livid)

Well...you've really done it then...putting the lives of your crew at risk to save illegals...

BANKS

They are not under orders. And I really don't think I could have stopped them if I tried...

HOWARD becomes agitated.

HOWARD

My God..the swells... and that sailor looks in trouble...a female as well...

BANKS

They are doing what has to be done...saving lives at sea...

HOWARD looks even more agitated.

HOWARD

DID YOU SEE THAT?!

BANKS

What?

LIGHTS on the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER slowly lifting her child (which cannot be seen) up towards the bridge.

HOWARD

CAN'T YOU SEE?! SOME OF THESE ILLEGALS...THEY'RE THROWING THEIR CHILDREN OVERBOARD!

BANKS

Children...where? I can't see anything...

LIGHTS. JANE HALTON and the People Smuggling Task Force are at the table. HOWARD watches in the shadows. LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

The axis upon which everything would turn started at 9.15am. Jane Halton, head of the People Smuggling Task Force, convened the meeting on a fine Sunday morning in Canberra. And upon these encounters, history...or tragedy, would be made...

LIGHTS. The phone rings. HALTON picks it up. HALTON holds the phone to her ear as she motions someone to give her a writing pad. She grabs her own pen.

HALTON

Passengers on SIEV 4...were wearing lifejackets...14 people had jumped overboard and...

Pause.

HALTON (CONT'D)

They were throwing their children...overboard...

HALTON emphasises the last word to make sure everyone at the table has heard her. There are rumblings all round.

TASK FORCE MEMBER ONE

Really...

HALTON nods.

HALTON

Keep me updated...by the minute if necessary.

DEFENCE PRESS SECRETARY

Children being thrown overboard as a desperate measure...

TASK FORCE MEMBER THREE

They'll want to know this...

TASK FORCE MEMBER FOUR

It fits with all the warnings we've been given...

HALTON

Desperate people will take desperate measures...

TASK FORCE MEMBER THREE

Forcing our Navy to rescue them...

TASK FORCE MEMBER FOUR

Very stressful...for the Navy...

The DEFENCE PRESS SECRETARY'S phone goes off. He answers it and quickly puts his hand over the mouthpiece. He looks around the table, ending with HALTON.

PRESS SECRETARY

It's the Minister...he wants something for today's press conference...

All eyes are on the PRESS SECRETARY.

PRESS SECRETARY(CONT'D)

Yes Minister...yes well we do actually...we do have something...passengers were wearing lifejackets...men had jumped overboard...and some...

The PRESS SECRETARY looks around the table once more. He focuses his eyes on HALTON who is now on another call.

TASK FORCE MEMBER ONE

Some...had thrown their children overboard...

Pause. There is a palpable tension at the table. Looks back and forth.

PRESS SECRETARY

Yes that's correct. Some of the passengers had thrown their children overboard...we think so too Minister.

LIGHTS on HOWARD alone. The phone rings. He picks it up.

HOWARD

You're joking. I can't believe it. Come straight to my office.

ARABIC PRESENTER

And so Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle Four would sail into political history...

LIGHTS on HALTON and REITH.

HALTON

We've just got a call from Defence Public Relations. Channel 10 contacted them requesting photos. Seems as though Commander Banks has given an interview to one of their journalists...Elizabeth Bowdler.

REITH

What?!

HALTON

There's more...he told Bowdler there were pictures to go with the story...because the Adelaide had emailed to Canberra two graphic photographs of Able Seaman Laura Whittle and Leading Seaman Barker rescuing children from the sea...

REITH

Rescuing children from the sea..? Jesus bloody Christ!

HALTON

He's directly violated orders under Relex barring all military officers from speaking to the media...

REITH

And worst of all...he's turning this into a rescue story...bloody well humanising these boat people...

HALTON

What do you want to do..?

REITH

See these photographs! What else?!

ACT ONE SCENE FOURTEEN

LIGHTS. HOWARD is speaking to a group of REPORTERS.

HOWARD

I think this is an opportune time to announce that my government will be giving additional funds to private schools as part of my election campaign.

REPORTER ONE

Prime Minister....

HOWARD

Yes...

REPORTER ONE

Can you tell us how many children were thrown overboard...were they wearing lifejackets?

REPORTER TWO

Is there any evidence Prime Minister that children were thrown overboard?

HOWARD

Well of course.

REPORTER THREE

If there is any evidence Prime Minister can we have access to it...?

HOWARD

My original claims were made on the advice from the Minister of Immigration.

REPORTER ONE

Are you saying then you're not 100% sure it actually happened?

REPORTER TWO

Why would you make such claims Prime Minister if you weren't 100% sure?

REPORTER FOUR

Will the Minister of Immigration produce this evidence...?

REPORTER TWO

Did he show you the evidence Prime Minister?

REPORTER ONE

There must be then Prime Minister some video or photographs showing children being thrown overboard?

HOWARD

Look, I will make some enquiries and see what evidence can be made available.

LIGHTS.

ARABIC PRESENTER

Rear Admiral Ritchie Commander of the Australian Theatre and one of the architects of Operation Relex, is the first to inform his Defence Minister of the possible scale of the problem...

LIGHTS on ADMIRAL RITCHIE calling REITH.

REITH

Well have you got it? What have you got...

It's no good.

RITCHIE

Really.

REITH

There are no reports.

RITCHIE

Impossible. They came from one of your ships.

REITH

Not the report that the Prime Minister is using.

RITCHIE

What about the testimony of the crew?

REITH

Nothing substantive.

RITCHIE

Did any of the crew see children being pushed overboard or not?

REITH

Look, there are two pieces...shreds more like it...of information...a youth, not a child, may have been pushed overboard.

RITCHIE

Anything else?

REITH

There may have been children in the water. Statements from the crew on the far side of the Adelaide might mind you, substantiate those claims.

RITCHIE

That's not bloody good enough.

REITH

No.

RITCHIE

What about video? There has to be some footage showing something...

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

HOWARD

Jesus Christ this could bloody well derail everything. After all the screw ups the Opposition has made I'm not about to lose an election because there isn't enough video evidence.

Pause. RUDDOCK says nothing.

HOWARD

Well? What do we have? I acted on your advice.

RUDDOCK

I didn't advise you to use this story Prime Minister.

HOWARD

Then why did you tell me?

RUDDOCK

Because that's what I was told.

HOWARD

And did you check the bloody thing first?

RUDDOCK

I assumed this was reliable information.

HOWARD

Why would you assume that...?

RUDDOCK

Or else they wouldn't have said anything.

HOWARD

They...?

RUDDOCK

Jane...The People Smuggling Task Force passed this information to my office. I had no reason to doubt it.

HOWARD

I can't go empty handed. You saw them. They've got a scent. A few of them can smell something fishy and I'm not going to give them the satisfaction.

LIGHTS on REITH and BARRIE on different parts of the stage. They are both on the phone.

REITH

Reith.

BARRIE

Yes.

REITH

I have in front of me two photographs from the ship showing children in the water.

BARRIE

Really.

REITH

Really. I want them released to the media.

BARRIE

I haven't seen these photographs.

REITH

I have them in front of me and they show children being thrown overboard.

BARRIE

I never said that. Those photos...they show children in the water.

REITH

Leading one to believe...

Pause.

BARRIE

I have no objections then.

REITH

Good.

BARRIE

Provided that the identities of the sailors are protected.

REITH

Of course.

LIGHTS. REITH is alone. He makes another call.

REITH (CONT'D)

Call a press conference. Let the gallery know I'm going to produce photos and answer questions.

Pause.

REITH (CONT'D)

Of course I'm bloody sure.

LIGHTS on RITCHIE and BARRIE.

BARRIE

What photos did you have?

RITCHIE

Crews...crews rescuing illegals Admiral.

BARRIE

Nothing of children being thrown overboard...

RITCHIE

We've been through this...

BARRIE

We haven't begun to get through this.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

RUDDOCK

These are the photos. As you can see the captions were removed.

HOWARD

Captions?

RUDDOCK

This one here had Laura the Hero and the other Dogs and His Family.

HOWARD

Jesus...what the hell does Reith have in mind?

RUDDOCK

I think he's counting on no one looking too closely.

HOWARD

What's he on?

RUDDOCK

ABC radio...Trioli...

HOWARD

Gawd...

LIGHTS on BARRIE and the PRESS SECRETARY.
They are both on the phone.

PRESS SECRETARY

The Defence Minister is about to go public...you can't be making these kind of calls at this time.

BARRIE

Your office did not get these photos from mine.

PRESS SECRETARY

Is that it?

BARRIE

They are not proof of children being thrown overboard.

PRESS SECRETARY

The Minister's doing a doorstep media conference at 4.30pm and the photos will be released.

BARRIE

I've seen the original photos with their captions and all they are is evidence of a mass rescue.

PRESS SECRETARY

Captions? The photos had no captions.

BARRIE

Obviously your Boss asked for them to be removed and the originals still exist.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and RUDDOCK.

PRIME MINISTER

These photos can never see the light of day.

LIGHTS on REITH and VIRGINIA TRIOLI.

TRIOLI

I'd like a look at these photos Mr. Reith.

REITH

Of course.

REITH hands them over.

REITH (CONT'D)

Well it did happen. The fact is the children were thrown into the water. We got that report within hours of that happening.

BARRIE

Lying prick.

REITH

Given that there are people who weren't there of course, you know making all sorts of exaggerated claims...

BARRIE

Like you are now.

REITH

We have reproduced the photos on the basis that the identities were not shown publicly, as stated practice.

HOWARD

What's he talking about?

TRIOLI

Mr. Reith, there's nothing in this photos that indicates these people either jumped or were thrown...

HOWARD

We've had it.

RUDDOCK

Not quite yet.

REITH

No well you are now questioning the veracity of what has been said.

BARRIE

As would any reporter with half a brain or conscience.

REITH

These photos are produced as evidence of the fact that there were people in the water.

TRIOLI

But the evidence has to show-

REITH

You're questioning whether it ever happened, that's the first point and I just want to answer that by saying these photos show absolutely whatsoever that there were children thrown overboard.

HOWARD

This is a fiasco. Get him off.

RUDDOCK

We can't. He called the Press Conference telling them he had evidence because you said we did Prime Minister.

HOWARD turns sharply on RUDDOCK.

TRIOLI

The photos show no such thing. Surely after all the pronouncements you've made on this issue, you'd have evidence to clearly show children being thrown overboard. Otherwise, why even bring it up?

REITH

Now we have a number of people, obvious Royal Navy people who were there who reported the children were thrown into the water.

HOWARD looks at RUDDOCK for confirmation of this. RUDDOCK shakes his head.

REITH

Now you may want to question the veracity of reports of the Royal Australian Navy. I don't and I didn't either but have subsequently been told that they have also got film. That film is apparently on HMAS Adelaide.

BARRIE

Now you've dug a hole big enough for all of us.

REITH

I have not seen it myself and apparently the quality of it is not very good, and its infra red or something but I am told that someone has looked at it and it is an absolute fact, children were thrown into water. So do you still question it?

TRIOLI

Couldn't these people be in the water after the boat actually sank?

REITH

Well...I have this sequence of events from the navy personnel on board. They have film of the incident, they have photos of the incident, and for those who are questioning the report that I'm giving you, they are saying the Australian Defence Force people are not telling the truth.

HOWARD

Brilliant.

PRESS SECRETARY

Brilliant.

BARRIE

Pathetic.

HOWARD

As long as we don't give ground they'll have nowhere to go. Keep denying till they've run out of steam.

RUDDOCK

The military will have to look into this Prime Minister and we really can't stop them. The photos came from their ships. If they cannot corroborate claims that have been made...

HOWARD

We've relayed information that was provided to us by defence, by the navy...by Commander Banks himself. That all that needs to be said.

RUDDOCK

Rear Admiral Smith has been given the task of interviewing Banks...to find out exactly what happened...

ACT ONE SCENE FIFTEEN

LIGHTS on COMMANDER BANKS on the bridge and HOWARD loosely carrying a document in his hand that he wishes he could dispose of.

HOWARD

I gather you might have seen the reports in the newspapers...

BANKS

Yes. I have. Of course.

HOWARD

Then it shouldn't surprise you Commander that what you say in the next few minutes will have a huge impact on the outcome of all this. Among other things.

BANKS

How so...?

HOWARD

This...story started with you Commander. I wouldn't have told what had happened if we didn't hear it from you first.

BANKS

Who is we?

HOWARD

The chain of command. All the way up.

BANKS

I submitted my report. Who it went to up the chain of command I have no idea. We're not expected to know those things. But it was supposed to be an account of what happened, not a political document.

HOWARD

Don't kid yourself Commander...everything about this is political.

BANKS

Relax is your idea...the government's idea. As far as I and the crew of the Adelaide are concerned-

HOWARD

You're all a bunch of heroes. We get it. All of Australia gets it. I'll make sure of that. Even if your orders were to have no contact with the media.

BANKS

These things inevitably get out no matter how well you try to suppress it...

HOWARD

Like your conversation with Channel 10?

Pause.

HOWARD

What is absolutely critical right now is that the military and the government are seen to act as one. No separate messages.

BANKS

I can only tell you what I saw and that is what I wrote.

HOWARD

That refugees...illegals...were preparing to throw their children overboard.

Pause.

BANKS

No. I never said that. I didn't see that.

HOWARD

Gawd...

BANKS

What I wrote and I can bring a copy of my report, but I remember it very clearly...a man, a father I would gather, held his daughter over the side of the bridge...

HOWARD

Intending to throw her into the sea...clearly.

BANKS

No. Not at all. I mean...the boat was sinking, the people desperate...they wanted their children rescued. It's perfectly understandable.

HOWARD

Look Commander...I'll spell it out for you. A lot is riding on this matter. Holding a child over the side with a lifejacket is not the same as throwing a child into the ocean...

BANKS

Of course it isn't and I made it very clear in my report.

HOWARD

If it's so bloody clear how come nobody else picked up the difference...?

BANKS

Possibly my wording got misinterpreted but it may have something to do with what certain individuals are looking for...even if it isn't there.

HOWARD

I would navigate very carefully on this one. Your Boss will be the first person I speak to about this conversation.

BANKS

But we never had this conversation!

HOWARD

Somebody on your ship must have seen a child being thrown overboard!

BANKS

I would have been aware of such an incident.

HOWARD

Careful Commander. So much for everybody is riding on this...an election may ride on this. Something your Boss is very attenuated to and trusts that all his personnel are also.

BANKS

I'm not a politician. In fact I consider myself quite apolitical-

HOWARD

Yes yes we expect you to say that. Now...can you tell me with absolute certainty that none of your crew witnessed a child being thrown overboard?

BANKS

With absolute certainty?

HOWARD

Yes.

BANKS

You might as well ask me if I can guarantee no one pushed someone aside to get off the boat when it was sinking...

HOWARD

Yes or no.

BANKS

No. I can't tell you with absolute certainty.

HOWARD

So...one of your crew might have very well seen an illegal throwing their child into the sea...

Pause.

BANKS

Yes.

HOWARD allows himself a brief smile.

HOWARD

Good. I want them interviewed and videotaped as soon as possible.

BANKS

The crew are exhausted...

HOWARD

I meant to say now Commander. Time is of the essence.

LIGHTS on BARRIE sitting behind his desk.

BANKS, on the other side, drops his report on it.

BANKS

I have in front of me Commander, sixteen statutory declarations from crew members who witnessed the incident.

BARRIE

And?

BANKS

Not one of them saw a child being thrown overboard.

LIGHTS on REITH looking through the photos.

REITH

Look at the photos. It's plain to see children in the ocean after they were thrown overboard by their parents.

BARRIE

They must have seen something...

BANKS

Many of them saw a father holding a child over the rail.

REITH

A father was seen about to throw...throwing a child into the water.

BANKS

He either intended to jump with her, was about to throw her overboard and some crew thought he wanted the sailors to save the child.

REITH

I don't think you can question what's in those photos.

BARRIE

What about the youth who was pushed overboard?

REITH

It wasn't just children, anyone young enough to be manhandled went over.

BANKS

Five sailors claim they saw a teenager or young man go overboard. One thought he saw a child but all the witnesses said this youth or child was wearing a life jacket when they jumped...voluntarily.

ACT ONE SCENE SIXTEEN

LIGHTS on HOWARD facing the REPORTERS.

HOWARD

We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come. I don't want in Australia people who would throw their own people into the sea...I don't. There is something to me incompatible between somebody who claims to be a refugee and someone who would throw their own child into the sea. It offends the natural instinct of protection and delivering safety and security to your children.

LIGHTS on RUDDOCK facing the REPORTERS.

RUDDOCK

A number of people have jumped overboard and have had to be rescued...more disturbingly a number of children have been thrown...I regard these as some of the most disturbing practices that I have...um...that I have come across in the time that I have been involved in public life...clearly planned and premeditated.

HOWARD

I imagine the sorts of children who would be thrown would be those who could be readily lifted and tossed without any objection from them...

LIGHTS on HOWARD, RUDDOCK, DOWNER and REITH.

DOWNER

How long do we keep going with this?

HOWARD

There's no admission...everyone...the task force...absolutely no admission of error.

DOWNER

But it was an error...

REITH

My arse it was. C'mon let's not kid ourselves.

RUDDOCK

What about the military?

REITH

I'm hearing a lot of noises.

DOWNER

Just tell'em to keep their mouths shut...

HOWARD

Bullshit. Last thing we ought to do. Nothing explicit.

RUDDOCK

PM'S right.

HOWARD

Of course I am.

REITH

I figure the chiefs will want to save face...all out of the public glare of course. Hit me with a few facts, some cold hard truths.

DOWNER

But what if they go to the media...

HOWARD

They won't.

The rest are not too sure about this.

HOWARD

At least the Defence Chief won't and if he says nothing neither will the rest.

RUDDOCK

(to REITH)

You've got to speak with him.

DOWNER

Absolutely...don't let the prick get any ideas.

REITH

Put the hard word on the Chief of Australia's defence forces...that's one for the memoirs.

RUDDOCK

Just let him know where we stand...where his government stands...

REITH

I won't do any such thing. We've called the shots on this. That's the way it should remain.

All look to at HOWARD to see whether he agrees with this position.

HOWARD

He's right. If we approach them now it will be taken as a sign of weakness. Start whispering in their ear...the press will get hold of it. Say nothing.

DOWNER

We acted on their advice. They're not blameless in all of this.

RUDDOCK

No one should even be thinking of blame. If the Defence Chiefs wanted to correct any misunderstandings they had plenty of opportunity to do it once the announcements were made.

HOWARD

I thought this Halton was beyond reproach in these matters...overeager I guess, wanting to please.

DOWNER

Get rid of her...when all this dies down.

REITH

She's put everything aside to deal with this issue-

PRIME MINISTER

We're not going to get rid of her. Inadvertently or not, she's handed us the golden goose and it will lay us a few more eggs yet.

ACT ONE SCENE SEVENTEEN

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

And as the yawning chasm between the government and military over the truth of this affair began to grow wider, exercises in face saving were soon the order of the day.

LIGHTS on HOWARD and REITH.

REITH

Barrie's requested a meeting...

HOWARD

Not another one..?

REITH

With me. About the Adelaide...

HOWARD

What's your take on it?

REITH

He'll wring his hands...or want me to wash them for him...

LIGHTS. BARRIE is facing REITH. HOWARD is behind them. REITH fades into the darkness.

BARRIE

I thought I was meeting with the Defence Minister..?

HOWARD

You are.

BARRIE

Then why am I here?

HOWARD

I like to imagine myself at all critical meetings that could affect my government...

BARRIE

Maybe it should have happened a bit earlier Prime Minister.

HOWARD

And what pray tell Admiral do you think might have happened if we did?

BARRIE

The government might not be in the position it's in right now.

HOWARD

We're in...Admiral. You're part of this government. The Defence Minister, the Immigration Minister...myself, we've all acted on your advice...on your information.

BARRIE

Bullshit.

HOWARD

Bullshit heh? It's your Defence Forces that have gotten us into this mess....

BARRIE works very hard to control his anger.

BARRIE

My personnel...had no idea how their reports were going to be used.

HOWARD

We acted on their eyewitness accounts...observations first hand...

BARRIE

No one...not one naval personnel has stated categorically that they saw any children being thrown overboard.

HOWARD

That doesn't mean it didn't happen...

BARRIE

The photographs are evidence of children being rescued from the sinking SIEV.

HOWARD

Well then...you should have checked them shouldn't you...

BARRIE

They had captions Minister...stating very clearly what the photos were depicting. The captions were removed.

HOWARD

Who by?

BARRIE

No one in Defence Forces I can tell you that.

HOWARD

Are you saying someone in my government tampered...doctored these photos to make them something they're not...?

Pause.

BARRIE

I'm not saying that...no...no at all.

HOWARD

I didn't think so.

BARRIE

This Operation Relex was never feasible Minister. What was conveyed to your task force should have been vetted...checked before it went higher up, not taken as gospel.

HOWARD

It was in writing...someone thought they saw a child being held over the side.

BARRIE

That's not saying children were being thrown into the sea...God...the Navy knows what's happened Minister. There are plenty of eyewitnesses as to what they actually saw.

HOWARD

Are you going to publicly contradict me on this one Admiral? Turn against your own government, the PM himself in a time of crisis. Because believe me, he'll...I'll see it as a very personal attack.

Pause.

BARRIE

I have no intention of contradicting anyone. I just wanted you to know the Navy's position...my position.

HOWARD

Good. Cos for a second there I thought you wanted me to admit there was a gross misrepresentation of those photos.

BARRIE

Not at all.

HOWARD

I think you should speak to your personnel. Nothing needs to be clarified...dates...nothing.

BARRIE

I think we should agree Prime Minister simply drop the matter.

HOWARD

Yes that sounds like a very good idea. Don't worry Admiral, I'll deal with the consequences. No one's asking you to fight my battles...

LIGHTS on REITH and HOWARD.

REITH

He tried to take the higher ground...

HOWARD

And?

REITH

You won't be hearing any more about this Prime Minister.

LIGHTS on BARRIE alone.

BARRIE

I have fulfilled my duty. I have brought it to his attention. As far as I am concerned, because he is now managing public affairs aspects, that is where it lies.

LIGHTS on BARRIE and REAR ADMIRAL CHRIS RITCHIE.

RITCHIE

Commander we've got absolutely nothing. I've got all the first hand statements of the crew. Nobody saw any child being thrown overboard. No child was recovered from the water.

BARRIE

What about the video?

RITCHIE

It shows nothing.

BARRIE

I've got to give them something...Christ.

RITCHIE

From these three points Commander, you can safely say it simply didn't happen.

LIGHTS on HOWARD. The bridge appears once again shrouded in mist. SOUND of foghorns. It is an unsettling scene. HOWARD is alone. LIGHTS on the FEMALE ASYLUM SEEKER. She is prostrate. RINNAN appears on the bridge.

HOWARD

Not another one...

RINNAN

There will be no rescue Prime Minister...

HOWARD

Why don't you do the honours Arnie? Heh? You're the bloody hero now...feted around the world for your "great humanitarianism..."

RINNAN

She is dead.

HOWARD

Dead..?

RINNAN

Drowned.

HOWARD

Where was the navy? Surely they wouldn't have let her drown...

RINNAN

There is more than one Prime Minister...

HOWARD

How many...

RINNAN

343.

HOWARD

This is...

RINNAN

Terrible.

HOWARD

Yes. It is terrible.

RINNAN

This didn't have to happen Prime Minister.

HOWARD

Yes if their boat never sailed...

RINNAN

This is not like the others...

HOWARD

No. This is everything like the others.

RINNAN

And the deaths..?

HOWARD

An unfortunate consequence...of illegal people smuggling operations. Nothing more.

LIGHTS on BEAZLEY on one side of the stage surrounded by REPORTERS and HOWARD on the other, still in his netherworld, coldly observing the action.

BEAZLEY

It's a major human tragedy if that has occurred...and it is a very sad thing indeed.

HOWARD

How sad Kim? Go on Kim. You tell'em. Go there if you dare and I'll hang your carcass out for every vulture in Canberra.

RINNAN

He expresses what you cannot or dare not...

BEAZLEY

What it points to is the failure of policy. We have not got the agreement we need with Indonesia in order to be able to ensure that those who put themselves in such danger are not encouraged to do so.

HOWARD

The carcass dared.

LIGHTS on HOWARD now in the spotlight surrounded by REPORTERS.

HOWARD

The Opposition Leader's remarks are a desperate slur. A desperate slur. I was very touched by that tragedy in Indonesian waters. I'm human like everybody else, but the vessel sank in Indonesian waters. Now I am saddened by the loss of life, it is a huge human tragedy and it is a desperately despicable thing for the leader of the Opposition to try and score a political point against me in relation to the sinking of a vessel in Indonesian waters, not in Australian waters. We had nothing to do with it...it sank, I repeat sank, in Indonesian waters not Australian waters. It sank in Indonesian waters and apparently this is our fault.

LIGHTS. HOWARD, RUDDOCK, REITH and DOWNER are surrounding the TV image of BEAZLEY addressing the PRESS. DOWNER is also scanning a newspaper.

HOWARD

I've staunched the flow.

DOWNER

For the time being at least.

REITH

What a prick...blaming us for all this. He's a no hoper honestly.

HOWARD

He's been handed the greatest tactical advantage an Opposition could have going into an election and he hasn't got a clue how to use it.

DOWNER

What if he gets a little help?

DOWNER shows them the inside of the newspaper.

DOWNER

Look at these photos. Christ of all the bloody victims we've got to have three whose father has their dress up photos...

HOWARD

What's his name..?

REITH

What does it matter..?

RUDDOCK

Not information I would want to save to memory...

DOWNER reads from the newspaper as if he is in his own world.

DOWNER

Ahmaed. His name is Ahmaed Al-Zalimi. His wife's name was Sundous. She was travelling with their three daughters, Emaan, who was eight, Zahra who was six, and Fatima, who was just five years old. They drowned. The mother was rescued...

Pause. Almost as if for a moment there is a silence born out of respect for the immensity of AHMED'S loss.

HOWARD

We weren't to know.

REITH

Christ how can they even think we're to blame for this?!

DOWNER

Don't protest too loudly.

RUDDOCK

If you've read the reports no one has actually blamed the government.

DOWNER

Matter of time. These kids could be the tipping point.

REITH

Tipping point my arse...

HOWARD

As long as we stay on message.

DOWNER

This isn't the West Wing. The real press are a bunch of treacherous bastards...

HOWARD

We can't deviate . We must show resolve with compassion. No matter how many times they throw these images in our face, don't flinch.

REITH

And look like heartless bastards...

RUDDOCK

Jesus Peter...you've been a pitbull on this from the beginning.

REITH

Someone had to be.

DOWNER

What was their mother thinking...

ALL three of them look at DOWNER for a second.
As if air had suddenly been let into the room.

HOWARD

Exactly. You'd never expose children to that sort of risk. Australians understand that.

RUDDOCK

But for whatever reason they did.

HOWARD

And?

RUDDOCK

I don't think we should go there with this one PM. Might seem a little callous.

Pause. No one disagrees.

REITH

Anyhow their father's wailing about apparently...losing the plot. They get on camera it could be a real mess.

HOWARD

It was Indonesia's problem not ours. Christ it sank outside of Australia's waters.

DOWNER looks closely at one of the articles in the papers.

DOWNER

"Boat capsized and sank quickly south of the Western end of Java..."

HOWARD

I've said it enough...Indonesian waters.

REITH

We just keep saying it...Indonesian waters. It's a great big bloody ocean and unless they wash up on Cottlesloe one fine Sunday morning the public's not going to get itself overly upset.

RUDDOCK

It makes a difference. The public cannot believe they were in Australian waters when they drowned. Ultimately, given that we knew the boat had left, it places some responsibility in our search and rescue zone.

DOWNER

353...most of them children...supposedly.

HOWARD

(to REITH)

Is Jane absolutely sure of the facts?

REITH

Yes...of course.

RUDDOCK

Just like with children overboard.

REITH

Yes.

RUDDOCK

She may be referring to the Indonesian search and rescue zone...

DOWNER

Which includes Australian waters.

All eyes to HOWARD.

REITH

Nothing out of that task force will contradict our position Prime Minister.

HOWARD picks up the newspaper and scans it fervently.

HOWARD

“The harbourmaster at Sunda Kelapur Port, North Jakarta, reports that survivors were picked up at a point 51 nautical miles south of Java”.

Pause. Silence all round.

HOWARD

Where does that put it...

DOWNER

(Defeated)

Firmly in Australian waters for Christ’s sake...

RUDDOCK

As long as no one connects the dots it won’t play.

REITH

Look...the electorate doesn’t give a shit...

HOWARD

I’m not about to lose an election to this gutless bastard over an issue I’ve staked my leadership on. Something went wrong out there. A boat that shouldn’t have been allowed in a tepid lake let alone the open sea capsized and sank...

REITH

Hear hear.

HOWARD

This is not mine...this is not Australia’s responsibility.

LIGHTS on the ARABIC PRESENTER.

ARABIC PRESENTER

November 8th...John Howard addresses soldiers embarking for Afghanistan on the newly designated National Day of Farewell...

LIGHTS. HOWARD is standing at the podium. LIGHTS reveal AHMED standing in front of his WIFE lying on the table as in the opening of the play.

HOWARD

There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven...

AHMED

My children said to me ‘Dad, we are coming to you, to meet us’. I swear ...the little one kept saying “Pray for us. I swear Daddy we will come. It is a matter of a short time”.

HOWARD

...a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep up and a time to throw away...

AHMED

I said to them, “My heart is aching. I am very worried. How are you going to cross the sea?” She said “What else can we do Daddy?”

HOWARD

...a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace...

AHMED

How long do we have to remain that far apart? Let us come. God will either help us or take us”. He took them.

LIGHTS on his CHILDREN, all in body bags. He picks up the sleeping body of his WIFE and prepares to carry her away.

AHMED

Before she drowned, my daughter was killed on the boat with a nail. Nails were popping out of the boats planks. One of them penetrated her heart and killed her instantly...

HOWARD notices AHMED who is staring at HOWARD before he departs.

HOWARD

Oh don't look at me like that Ahmed. Australia is a country that prefers its migrants arrive by jet airplane, not some rickety leaking vessel. Feels too much like an invasion force. We are a welcoming nation...but simply on our terms. I'll never forget when the Entalina tried to drop off 150 refugees in Darwin back in '79. The wharfies threatened to black ban the ship if any of'em were allowed on shore! Vietnamese they were, escaping a new government that we had fought ourselves. And it was Labour, those staunch defenders of human rights, that created detention centres for you mob. Not us liberals. Against United Nations conventions on children, refugees, didn't matter. We just...retained a good idea.

SUNDOUS briefly awakes as if in a dream and is comforted by AHMED as he leaves the stage. The bodies of their DAUGHTERS are swallowed up by the sea. HOWARD stands alone.

Blackout