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Ex-watchdog hits out at bid to detain freed migrants

Exclusive
Angus Thompson

Australia's former watchdog for national security laws has savaged the Albanese government and the opposition over their plans to put former immigration detainees back behind bars, accusing them of whipping up fear and pursuing an unworkable regime.

Grant Donaldson, SC, who finished his statutory role as the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor last Sunday, said he struggled to understand how the government could develop a preventative detention scheme that the courts could impose on people whose prison sentences had long expired.

"I think it's a disgrace and shames both sides. The government and the opposition should be ashamed of themselves," said Donaldson, who was the solicitor-general for Western Australia between 2012 and 2016.

"They have created fear and hysteria in the community when that was totally unwarranted. The perception that they've created is you've got hoards of Attila the Hun released from immigration detention, and they're going

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Senate to probe grocery prices
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around raping and pillaging people in the community."

Last month, the High Court overturned a 20-year precedent by ruling that holding people in immigration detention indefinitely was unlawful, triggering the release of 145 detainees and prompting the government and Coalition to rush through laws requiring ankle bracelet monitors and strict curfews.

Last week, the High Court published its reasons for the landmark ruling, which left the door open for some of the cohort - who include people convicted of murder and child sex offences - to be re-detained if they could be practically deported or if they were considered an unacceptable risk to the community.

Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil has committed to enacting the "toughest possible preventative detention regime" before parliament rises for the

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THE CARE FACTOR

Foster carers who look after the state's most vulnerable children warn rising costs of living mean many are leaving the sector.

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Mike and Fiona Te Wierck have fostered dozens of children.
Photo: Simon Schluter

AUKUS ramps up on AI, drones and space

Lisa Visentin
Sunday political correspondent

Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom will ramp up co-operation on underwater drones, artificial intelligence and deep-space technology to counter China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

Defence Minister Richard Marles joined his US and UK counterparts to announce a

beefed-up collaboration on high-tech systems and military drills under the AUKUS pact, as the US State Department cleared the way for the potential \$2 billion sale of training and devices to Australia.

At a joint press conference in California yesterday, Marles said the new technology agreement marked a "watershed moment" in the security alliance.

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Regulator probes podiatric surgeons

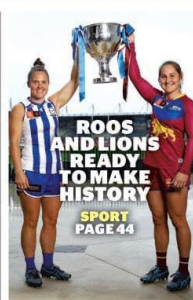
Exclusive
Charlotte Grieve
Amelia Adams

When Suzanne Hogan removed her surgical boots, she could not believe what she saw - her right foot was three sizes smaller than her left.

She was operated on three times by a podiatric surgeon, a practitioner who can perform surgery without a medical degree.

An investigation by *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *60 Minutes* has found patients were left deformed and feeling misled about the qualifications of those who operated on their feet. After receiving questions from *The Age* about problems with podiatric surgeons, regulator Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency is reviewing the industry.

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NATURE: AOKI

Foster carers leaving system as cost of living, low allowance bites

By Kieran Rooney

December 3, 2023 — 7.30pm

Victorian foster carers receive the lowest base payment of any state in Australia, with the sector losing nearly twice as many carers as it recruits. Families looking after the state's vulnerable children warn that the rising cost of living is forcing them to reconsider whether they can take them on and calling for an increase to the allowance. Michael te Wierik and partner Fiona have cared for more than 70 foster children. Data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that 621 households exited the foster care system in 2020-21, while 317 were recruited. Foster Carer Association of Victoria (FCAV) figures collected in March 2023 show there was a 26 per cent drop in people going through the accreditation process. When combined with people leaving the system, this meant there were 100 fewer households available for placements this year. Michael te Wierik, who was Victoria's Father of the Year in 2022, and his partner Fiona have cared for more than 70 foster children over 16 years. The Narre Warren father backs FCAV's push to raise the rates because people are struggling with cost of living and taking on children is a big decision that's not always appreciated by government and the community.

"If the remuneration was a bit more tailored to what was going on in the real world, and then people will probably be more inclined to do it," te Wierik said. Victorian carers are paid the lowest base rate of any state, starting with \$435 a fortnight for children seven and under. That rises to \$450 per fortnight for those aged between eight and 10 and \$499.90 from 11 to 12. The ACT, New South Wales and Queensland all pay more than \$600 a fortnight for carers looking after children older than six. Western Australia's base rates are closest to Victoria's at \$435 a fortnight for children six and under – but this rises to \$512 for children between seven and 12.

FCAV chief executive Samantha Hauge said the care allowance needed to be urgently increased because it did not cover the day-to-day costs of caring for a child. "Victoria's allowance rates are the lowest in the country by significant margins," she said. "A Victorian carer of a child up to seven years of age only receives \$217.80 per week to cover general household, education and health expenses. Many kinship, foster and permanent carers are forced to use their own money to pay for care expenses." Hauge said the allowance was too low before cost of living became a major issue, but the problem had gone beyond manageable levels over the past two years.

"In both the 2022 and 2023 financial years the Care Allowance was only indexed by 2 per cent when household inflation was over 6 per cent on both years, with the consequence that the already low care allowance has declined in real value. Hauge said Victoria was losing good carers as a consequence. "In fact, double the number that can be recruited year-on-year and vastly more than any jurisdiction around the country – there is no doubt about this causal relationship," she said. "Carers are leaving the system because funding is slow to catch up to their real needs, and they simply cannot afford to continue this volunteer role. Financial and support imposts are also a barrier to carers entering the system." The state government in January 2022 received a commissioned report from consulting firm KPMG that has not been released publicly, but The Sunday Age has seen parts of it. It backed a 67 per cent increase to the total amount paid to foster carers. It would have cost \$114 million in the 2021 financial year if implemented, but the state government has not adopted the recommendation.

Bendigo carer Leigh Stevens said cost of living pressures had forced him and his partner Bek to think about their capacity to be part of the system. They have looked after 14 children over seven years.

"Any foster carer will say they don't do it for the money," he said. "This is the first time that we've really had to sit down and question whether it's something that we can continue to do. "It is a topic of

conversation that we never thought we'd have to have. Tossing up what the future looks like in our foster caring. Because everything's just so expensive now."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing said it provided a range of support to kinship, foster and permanent carers and that the allowance was indexed annually.

"We continue to work with relevant stakeholders on further opportunities to support foster carers," she said. In May this year, carers were also able to access a \$650 supplement payment for each child in their care.

Kieran Rooney is a Victorian state political reporter at The Age.

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