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SIEV X and the Banality of Evil: an interview with Tony Kevin

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Abstract

Tony Kevin is the author of the award-winning *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of the SIEV X*, published in 2004. He retired from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1998, after a thirty-year public service career involving posts in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Prime Minister's Department. He was previously Australia's ambassador to Poland (1991-94) and Cambodia (1994- 97). Tony Kevin has been an honorary Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies since 1998. Since 2001 he has given guest classes on United Nations peacekeeping at Melbourne University Institute of Asian Languages and Societies, and since 2004 has given tutorials at the University of Wollongong on the role of diplomacy in International Relations. Since February 2002, Tony Kevin has been assisting in the public investigation of the sinking south of Java on 19 October 2001 of the asylumseeker boat that took 353 lives, referred to as SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, Unknown). Tony Kevin testified at the Senate hearings into SIEV X and SIEV 4 (The Children Overboard Affair) in March and April 2002 and has written numerous articles for *Eureka Street*, *Canberra Times*, *Melbourne Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, and *The Australian Financial Review*. He has been awarded the "International Whistleblower of the Year" by the prestigious London-based "Index on Censorship" non-governmental organisation in March 2003, and a "Just Australian of the Year 2003" award by the "A Just Australia" organisation in July 2003.

SIEV X and the Banality of Evil: An Interview with Tony Kevin

Interviewer: Anthony Ashbolt

[Tony Kevin is the author of the award-winning *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of the SIEV X*, published in 2004.¹ He retired from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1998, after a thirty-year public service career involving posts in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Prime Minister's Department. He was previously Australia's ambassador to Poland (1991-94) and Cambodia (1994-97). Tony Kevin has been an honorary Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies since 1998. Since 2001 he has given guest classes on United Nations peacekeeping at Melbourne University Institute of Asian Languages and Societies, and since 2004 has given tutorials at the University of Wollongong on the role of diplomacy in International Relations. Since February 2002, Tony Kevin has been assisting in the public investigation of the sinking south of Java on 19 October 2001 of the asylum-seeker boat that took 353 lives, referred to as SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, Unknown). Tony Kevin testified at the Senate hearings into SIEV X and SIEV 4 (The Children Overboard Affair) in March and April 2002 and has written numerous articles for *Eureka Street*, *Canberra Times*, *Melbourne Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, and *The Australian Financial Review*. He has been awarded the "International Whistleblower of the Year" by the prestigious London-based "Index on Censorship" non-governmental organisation in March 2003, and a "Just Australian of the Year 2003" award by the "A Just Australia" organisation in July 2003.²]

- AA: First of all, I think we need to outline the details of the SIEV X tragedy, background and context, and the questions it posed for you about Australian politics.
- TK: The context was of course the announced *Operation Relex*, which was a major military operation in the high seas north of Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef in the waters between those two Australian island territories and Indonesia, to combat a sudden upsurge over the previous two years, 1989 and 1990 and the first half of 1991, in the flow of large numbers of Middle Eastern-origin refugees seeking asylum in Australia. Just to give the figures on this, in 1998 you had something like 900, which was already quite an increase on the year before. In 1999 and 2000 you had something like 4000 a year. In 2001 you would have had 4000 had it not been for *Operation Relex* which sent back about 600, on four boats sent back to Indonesian waters, and transferred to Nauru or Manus Island about another 900. So you still have very large numbers coming down. SIEV X was the sort of traumatic event on the 19th of October 2001, which sent such shock waves around the world because of the scale of human loss (353 people—146 children, and 142 women) that it sort of shocked Indonesia into stopping doing whatever it might have been doing to allow this trade to continue. And it also shocked Indonesia into agreeing to an Australian demand to co-host a regional conference against people smuggling. And it also, very importantly, was the catalyst for Indonesia to accept a policy of tow-back by Australian boats—to be able to tow back to Indonesian waters boats—any boats—that the Australian defence force discovered in the areas approaching Christmas island or Ashmore Reef. So it was a seminal event, a tragic event of course, an event that Australians found very difficult to own and still find very difficult to own.
- AA: Why do you think that is?
- TK: Because the questions raised by it are too disturbing to bear thinking about. We have an announced border protection operation, a massive operation involving two of Australia's largest ships—our frigates which were shortly due to go to the Persian Gulf—lots of smaller boats as well, an Australian Orion maritime surveillance squadron operating from Western Australia and unknown capacities in the area of JORN over the-horizon radar, all dedicated to seeing boats on their way to Christmas Island or Ashmore Reef, and yet unaccountably this particular boat got sixty miles out into the Indian Ocean, south of the Sunda Strait, and according to the official Australian story

was undetected.³ Now that in itself is hard to believe. It becomes even harder to believe when you see the extent of the circulation of Asian cover-up and down right lying that took place during the Senate Committee into *A Certain Maritime Incident*,⁴ which had hearings throughout the Winter of 2002, and not only went into detail into the whole SIEV 4 incident, the so called Children Overboard, but also at my request went into SIEV X. What really came home to me after writing my book, and after seeing the way in which my book was received or ignored, for the most part ignored by official circles, is that really this is a very disturbing and discomfoting story and one that our official circles really don't want to know about.

AA: Even the title of your book, and of course of the enquiry as you refer to it—was that the official title, *A Certain Maritime Incident*?

TK: Yes.

AA: There's something Orwellian about that, isn't there?

TK: Well, of course the title referred to the famous incident of the photographs of the children in the water and how they got there, whether they were thrown by their parents, or whether as it turned out later to be the truth, they were there as the result of the particularly ruthless Australian strategy of keeping them on their boat after it had been taken in tow as a disabled boat, of keeping them on board their boat until it actually sank thereby forcing them to jump into the water. What this was about, we don't still really know. We don't know whether it was a determination to make them suffer, which was one possible explanation, make them appreciate the risks that they were running to create deterrence against others, in other words, or whether it was a legal argument that once they were brought on board HMAS Adelaide Australian obligations were engaged, rescue at sea obligations ... Well, if that were the case, they certainly weren't honoured because when they were brought on board HMAS Adelaide they were transferred onto another ship and taken to Nauru. So why they couldn't have been brought on board HMAS Adelaide twenty-two hours earlier, when they were taken into tow rather than left on a sinking boat, is something that still puzzles me. I called my book *A Certain Maritime Incident* even though it was about the sinking of the SIEV X, not about that particular maritime incident, because as you say it conveys the sort of bland, impersonal cruelty of the whole context in which SIEV X sank, and my publisher and I thought it was an appropriate title.

AA: Indeed. Before we get onto the whole question of government

accountability that you raise very clearly in the book, what sponsored your interest specifically in this incident, and generally in the cause of refugees? Was it something that was ongoing, or was it a more recent development? Does it go back, for example I am wondering, to your time in Cambodia?

TK: I guess it hooks into my concern that people are becoming pawns of government policies. That States imposing their national sovereignty preferences as to 'we shall decide who comes here and the circumstances in which they come' are capable of enormous cruelty. When it comes to stateless people, refugees, people searching for refuge and the hypocrisy of it given that we were signatory to the UN convention and have promised to honour that convention, the way in which Admirals of the Australian Defence Force said quite clearly it was of no interest to us whether they were claiming to be refugees or not, our job was to turn them around, to deter them, to send them away. I felt we were getting into very morally dubious territory here, the territory of the banality of evil. Evil things were being done to these people. Our defence force shouldn't be doing evil things. I, as a patriotic Australian, don't like that, and I felt it needed to be exposed.

AA: Yes, but is it something, if you had still been a government official, you would have taken on board, or would it have just been put in the side cupboard, as it were?

TK: I hope it would have been taken on board. I don't think I would have sufficiently put my conscience to sleep to let that one get through. I have to admit that I worked for thirty years in government and things did go through, but in retrospect I wonder what was I doing when that was happening. I think I was one of those lucky public servants who happened not to be working on particular desks where particularly nasty things were happening. So, for instance, I never worked on the Cambodia desk before I went to Cambodia as Ambassador, so I missed out on that whole period in which Cambodia was basically victimised, made a pariah state, throughout the 1980s, nor did I work on the Vietnam desk during the Vietnam War, for example. In a way I was lucky. I didn't face any of those moral choices during my thirty years of professional work.

AA: Onto that question of government accountability, particularly in our system where we are still meant to retain some sort of Westminster system of accountability. In our political system, of course, it is meant to be much more important than the system of checks and balances

and it is open to argument as to which is more democratic. At least under the Westminster system of a chain of accountability you have links in that chain. What you've been able to identify is those links disappearing and the chain no longer exists in a sense, and so you have grave problems for democracy. Is that one of the fundamentals things that you uncovered in your research about SIEV X?

TK: Yes, not just SIEV X but SIEV 4 as well, the boat intercepted by HMAS Adelaide about which one can say more things more definitely because so much more concrete evidence actually came out about what happened.

AA: Could you detail that then?

TK: SIEV 4 started off being an argument over whether photographs were being misrepresented as being something that they were not, parents throwing their kids into the sea in order to put unacceptable moral pressure on Australia. That was all a lie. But the really important thing about SIEV 4 was that when Australia's rescue at sea obligations were engaged, they were abused. The Captain of the Adelaide reported that SIEV 4 was unseaworthy and he was, as is his responsibility as a mariner, taking it in tow, and did he have permission to bring the people on board the Adelaide? The minute he was told 'No, you do not have permission to bring them on board, keep them on their boat,' the law of rescue at sea was being violated and everybody in the command chain from the Prime Minister down to him was violating that sacred obligation and as he just rightly said something went wrong in the command chain because nobody at any point said 'Hey, this is not only wrong but its also against the law. What are we doing here?' That fact didn't seem to engage anybody until a couple of Senators, Senator Jacinta Collins and Senator Andrew Bartlett, quizzed this point very, very thoroughly and it emerged that the Committee headed by Jane Halton, *The People Smuggling Task Force*, had been the conduit for a political view coming down—keep these people on their boat whatever happens. And that is the real story of the Children Overboard incident, that 200 people's lives were put at risk for twenty-two hours under the noses of a major Australian navy ship and nobody involved in the command chain said this is wrong.

AA: Is it stupidity, intransigence, banality of evil. What is it?

TK: It is certainly the banality of evil. I think it's fear, and the habit of obedience that whatever order comes down has to be obeyed, whatever it says.

- AA: In that context, is this government more blameworthy for that sort of culture of obedience than any previous Australian government you can identify, or can you see it building up in previous governments?
- TK: I can certainly see it building up. Some of the legislation that was passed under the late Hawke and Keating governments to do with refugee treatment was certainly laying the groundwork for this. And just to make a little personal anecdote here, I find it very curious that someone who struck me as a perfectly normal, average sort of public servant who I encountered in an overseas posting, doing a normal sort of immigration type job, finished up as the head of Woomera, when some of the most terrible things happened at Woomera. So I think that I have direct experience of how people can be brutalised in a system and it's very hard not to be and it probably involves career sacrifice not to be. It almost certainly does.
- AA: There's a sense, which you might find as galling, that the current Australian Wheat Board (AWB) scandal is rather minor, in a sense, compared with what you have identified as the scandal surrounding the SIEV X, and the refugee question in general. Of course the AWB scandal highlights a tendency to seek secrecy and cover-up that you have pinpointed. It's a blatant example of government hypocrisy, but by the same token every expert knows that corruption has always existed in that field of dealing with the Middle East.
- TK: The AWB scandal is very interesting. In fact I guess I do wish that SIEV X and Children Overboard, as it truly was, had engaged the same sort of scrutiny that AWB has. And of course, the very fact that AWB is being handled in a Commission of Inquiry, a Royal Commission with full judicial powers, whereas SIEV X and Children Overboard were only handled by Senate Committees, where basically public servants only have to answer the questions that they want to answer, is a huge fundamental difference for a start. But the AWB story is very interesting. And of course we are speaking on a day when it has been announced that the Prime Minister has to give a submission and may have to be cross-examined, so it's reaching a climax. The AWB story has once again shown the Australian cultural tendency to shy away from unpalatable facts. Not only in the way in which everybody in the command chain were all basically pushing the problem away and pretending that it could be addressed on the basis of the AWB saying 'No, no, we didn't do any of those things,' end of story. But also even now, and this is what disturbs me greatly, we still

don't really appreciate the nature of what the allegation is. Our opposition parties are still talking about it in terms of how reprehensible it is if money was sent to Saddam Hussein when we were about to go to war with Saddam Hussein, that we were paying for the bullets that might have shot our soldiers. Typically, this was an ethno-centric Australian focused way of looking at it and nobody in the Australian political culture, with very few rare exceptions, seems to be prepared to call this what it was, which was stealing from starving children, stealing from sick children, corruptly using money that had been earmarked for much needed medicines and much needed foodstuffs for those suffering groups of innocent people in Iraq. You have got to search high and low in Australian media commentary and political commentary to find recognition of that fact. And yet to me that's one of the most important facts. Once again it's this capacity to close our eyes and to close our hearts to suffering when it involves groups of people who we basically don't care a stuff about, like the Iraqi population.

AA: And yet there's a paradox here. And it's a paradox that you identify in a sense, without calling it a paradox later on in the book, and we might talk about this in a moment, but here was a situation where in the lead up to war, hundreds of thousands came out on the streets of Australia, saying 'no we do not want war,' 'we have no justification for war'. The minute Australian troops were committed, somehow or another, that resolve disappeared and the war went ahead. It became revealed that we were fed lies, and we were told that by Andrew Wilke and others beforehand, and we shrugged it off. In a sense Iraq broke the back of Australian resistance to government power. Perhaps it was just the end of people saying we can stand up and make a difference. That's a pessimistic reading of it. Do you see it that way?

TK: It's a pessimistic reading of it but you would have to say on the basis of attendance at demonstrations—compared to numbers going along to meetings since that—massive demonstrations which had no effect on government, which Howard contemptuously dismissed as the mob. Yes, I would have to say that the facts support the thesis that it broke the back. It would certainly have been a different story had we taken Australian casualties in Iraq or Afghanistan, and in significant numbers. I think that's what's really turned it for the Americans. That fact of more than 2000 American soldiers now killed in action. If you applied that sort of figure comparatively to Australia's population

which is much smaller you might hypothesise that if we had lost say 50 dead in Iraq we'd have a very different story now. As usual Australian troop commanders have been ordered at all costs to preserve the life of their men, which is good of course. I think, rather like in Vietnam, we're there to make a political point rather than to make a military contribution, and we are being kept out of harms way deliberately. It probably won't happen but there could, for example, be a bus blown up or a truck blown up and there could be a largish number of casualties. I pray it won't happen, of course. But it is one of the things that worries me about Australia, the way that we seem to be able to shrug off, and live with criminal activity by our government without it affecting us. Of course we are staring down the barrel of another scenario like that now in relation to Iran.

- AA: Yes. If my memory serves me correctly you were really the first one to identify the fact that our SAS forces were used in Iraq before they legally should have been and that's another example of what you are talking about—the illegality.
- TK: Yes, that was the ultimate illegality. Not only were we taking part in an illegal attack on a sovereign state that was not sanctioned by any Security Council resolution but we were also actually attacking before we said we were going to attack, which was if you like, the ultimate act of dishonour. And there again, even though I wrote an article about this, which appeared in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*,⁵ an impeccably conservative and mainstream journal, there has been absolutely no feedback to that article. No references to it, no annotations, no footnoting, no response, no comment. Nothing. Just silence.
- AA: And when it comes to media commentary on the invasion of Iraq or things going wrong in Iraq, or whatever, it's invariably former SAS officers who are dragged before the cameras, including ABC cameras.
- TK: Yes. I wonder at this capacity not to face unpalatable facts about ourselves, about our conduct in the world. Is it a peculiar Anglo-Saxon thing, I wonder? The British were like this over the Falklands, and some dreadful things happened in the Falklands war that are simply being airbrushed out of history, the way the British write it. You'd have to go to Argentina to see some of those accounts. And it's the capacity to control the past—George Orwell territory again. To control the future we have to control the past, and the way in which it is presented.

- AA: On the refugee question generally, this is specifically a question I suppose of interest to many of our readers who are trade union activists and members, people who care about jobs in the community. They are not Hansonites by any means, they're more part of a left labour movement, but what do you say to a worker, to a trade unionist concerned that migrant workers, perhaps particularly, perhaps particularly refugees, will further undermine working conditions and rights in Australia, as they are undermined by official legislation and so on. So the worker might say well, yes, it's a sad story and it's a pity that they're persecuted in their home countries but we have our jobs to protect. What do you say to that worker?
- TK: I just say that the ethic of propinquity, if you like, that when a person comes and knocks on your door and says help me, the fact that that person is engaging you at the personal level takes it, and should take it, beyond questions of state policy. You can't answer a fellow human being's plea for help, a fellow human being in distress, by starting to read them a lecture on employment problems in your country. Those sort of issues become engaged, properly engaged, and questions like should we be having unskilled temporary worker programmes, should we be allowing a backdoor migration program through student education, all those sorts of policy issues become engaged ... but once you start confusing a human cry for help at your door with abstract considerations of employment policy, you're heading to a very unpleasant sort of political culture.
- AA: I should add to that that this local area and union movement, and organizations nationally that are represented locally also, like the Maritime Workers' Union, have a very noble history of fighting on behalf of others. I was just asking you that question to confront what you do hear in certain sections of the community, for example 'they are going to take away our jobs.'
- TK: I would add a couple of things. I'd say that generally speaking Australians, even when they profess chauvinist or racist attitudes in general, which in various times in our history we have done in Australian history, when they encounter people face-to-face, show kindness and generosity. It's very rare that racism operates in Australia at the face-to-face level. At the face-to-face level people are usually kind and decent. The second thing I would say is that this fear of refugees taking over jobs is full of irony. There was the fear of refugees taking jobs in Australian meat works around Australia. In fact the real risk with

meatworkers and meatworks around Australia is the Howard Industrial Relations legislation, not the presence of any Afghan refugees. They didn't take any jobs away from any Australians, certainly last week the jobs of a large number of Australians in Cowra were put at risk.

AA: And will be in the future.

TK: And will be in the future.

AA: There's a sad moment towards the end of your book where you say, and we have touched on this before, while defending Labor's questioning of the lapdog role of our public service and security system, you remark (and this reflects the date of publication of your book) that Labor, 'seems within striking distance of winning government'. Around the same time, you note that 'if any government tries again to play the border protection card in Australian elections, that people will be alerted' and again a little bit later, 'I have often said that SIEV X is a test of the kind of country Australia wants to be.' It seems to me that you see glimmers of optimism in all of those references, one that wasn't borne out of course by Labor not being elected to office. Whereas, arguably, we can also see a darker soul, a cynicism about politics, a reluctance to depart from what Clive Hamilton calls the 'certainties of material comfort'—we benefit so much from the system why should we care about others. And yet you still see at the core, a possibility of Labor as a party, or some other grouping, getting together that essential compassion that exists within Australian community. Do you see that as a genuine possibility?

TK: I still do. I don't necessarily see it coming through the ALP as it is currently led and organised. It could come through Labor policy being influenced by what the minor parties do or what the factions within the Liberal Party do. I think since I wrote the book the fairly successful effort by Petro Georgiou and Judy Moylan's group to humanise the worst excesses of the detention policy, as well as the exposure of the Rau and Solon Affairs, the ongoing revelations about the affairs of Mr X and Mr Y...since then, there's no longer the same sort of in your face defiance, "we can do what we like to those people because nobody cares". These days they do have to at least pretend to care and I also think that the whole story of the West Papua 42 in the outrigger canoe is an encouraging story because it first of all shows that somehow or another the net did not stop these people reaching Australia. It would be really interesting to know when they were first detected by Australian border control, and what sorts of decisions

were taken as to letting them through or not letting them through, and who took those decisions. I'd like to know that. But also since they arrived here there's been this clear public pressure, which forced the government's hand I think, into accepting them for temporary residence status as refugees. I would have preferred that they were given permanent residence immediately, of course. I don't know why they are left in the limbo of temporary residency but at least they've been given three years of protection. I think that's the kind of hope that my book was looking forward to. And I hope my book contributed in a small way to the sensitisation of people about this issue of the rights of boat people. Because you see boat people are people. They're not a parcel of heroin. They're not an undesirable substance that can be basically burnt or discarded. They are human beings with the right to be treated as human beings.

AA: And in that context it must have disturbed you that a great amount of publicity went to people who were arrested in Indonesia on drug charges, vis-à-vis the refugee questions you like to focus upon. Is this just the media's propensity for scandal?

TK: I didn't like the way in which the Australian Federal Police (AFP), which of course plays a major role in the SIEV X story, a role yet to be detailed but there is a major role somewhere there, I didn't like the way they apparently basically set up Australians to face a possible death penalty in Indonesia. I thought there was a great ruthlessness and callousness in that. I don't mind that we care a lot about people like Shapelle Corby and the Bali 9 and the other Australian woman, Michelle Leslie. We should care about them. They're Australian citizens and they have a right to protection abroad and we have a right to use our national weight, such as it is, to try and look after our people. But we also need to recognise that all human beings engage in obligation, in humanitarian obligation, particularly when they come into our turf, or areas that we claim as our turf. I come back to *Operation Relax*—the minute we said we are going to put a cordon up there which is going to intercept whatever comes and send it back, and no one is going to get through, we were engaging in a humanitarian obligation, by that very statement, to protect life. And Howard knew this. Howard knew this, and he said from the very beginning, he said, we are not going to sink boats. And yet a boat was sunk by means as yet unknown.

AA: On that very issue, you probably don't want to speculate on that. Do you, however, have your own suspicions?

- TK: My thinking has moved on a little bit since my book, on all of this. The book makes an implicit assumption that the wave of boat people that came down here between 1989 and 1992 was autonomously generated, sort of an overflow from the Middle East, from refugee flows towards Europe. It was just a certain point in time, large numbers of people decided to try for Australia. I no longer believe that. I think that there's a very real possibility, and this flows from looking at the way smugglers like Abu Kusay and many others, received so much cooperation and protection from Indonesian authorities. You can't go on saying that they were making a lot of money and they corrupted the Indonesian police to protect them, it's too big for that. I really wonder now whether there wasn't a deliberate covert Indonesian policy after Timor to send a lot of people down to basically rub Australia's nose in it. And if you start with that hypothesis, which is a fairly recent development in my thinking, it explains a lot in ways that perhaps my book left a little bit unexplained. Why was the Australian reaction so vehement? Why did it engage such a high level of national security attention? People kept saying, what does it matter, these are just few thousand people, Australia is big enough to absorb them and if you say that the Australian national security agents perceived an Indonesian government covert effort to flood Australia with Middle Eastern boat people, then it sort of explains the strength of the Australian reaction and the ruthlessness of it. But of course that goes on to my position that you cannot treat people as if they were little parcels of heroin. They are people.
- AA: Whatever the motives of the Indonesian government we have certain roles and responsibilities that shouldn't be reactive to that?
- TK: Not in a way that damages the right to life of the people involved.
- AA: It's interesting to hear you say that there might be all sorts of geo-political reasons and nautical reasons that I don't even know about, but given the successful transition of a number of refugees from Australia to New Zealand, why don't boats all the time go to New Zealand? It raises, perhaps, that sort of question. Why was it always Australia? So there is a bit of evidence to support that hypothesis. Undoubtedly along the way other things will come to light that will refine your particular thesis.
- TK: Two things already have. It was very interesting in the middle of the brouhaha over the Papua New Guinean 42 both Hassan Wirajuda, the Indonesian Foreign Minister,

and Yudhoyono, the President, both said very clearly in the last two weeks, “Australia’s relied on our cooperation against illegal immigration over the last three years and they had better be careful because that cooperation may not be forthcoming in the future.” To me both those statements send very clear signals of a possible Indonesian covert involvement in turning on the tap and turning off the tap of Middle Eastern people.

- AA: Does this lead you to suggest that, as a few of your colleagues, and former colleagues, not necessarily close colleagues, but in different areas of the public service, have been arguing in print and elsewhere recently... that there’s too much strength in the Indonesian lobby within Foreign Affairs and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA)?
- TK: Yes. There’ll always be an Indonesian lobby in government because governments put the highest priority on getting on well with other governments, particularly powerful neighbouring governments. The Indonesian lobby in DFAT and DIMIA, in the AFP, is almost structural. It will always be there. And it will always be the moral role of non-government organizations (NGOs), and human rights groups, and opposition parties, to point out the human rights consequences of that sort of thinking being given too much weight. There will always be a tension. I don’t see this ever going away because there are those that say we must deal with Indonesia, as it is a huge country, it’s the largest Muslim country in the world, it’s our next door neighbour. We can’t afford idealistic causes like East Timor and West Papua. Yet, there are those who say “No! We have to stand for something more than *Realpolitik*, we have to stand for decency in the way we treat people.” Now I am very comfortable in that latter count. For a lot of my career, I have to be honest and say I would have probably argued the other way. I’ve changed.
- AA: And that’s the adjustment from a kind of conservative real-politick that goes naturally with the bureaucracy, to a distance that affords you a necessarily more humanitarian perspective?
- TK: Yes. I am speaking now as a citizen not as a public servant. I am speaking now as someone who is concerned at the moral worth of my country, and if Australia behaves in cruel and cynical ways towards people, that distresses me as an Australian, and so yes, it’s a very different perspective now.
- AA: At the time of the last election, you and a number of other former government officials, very high government

officials, former ambassadors, and so on, signed a letter deploring the current state of Australian politics. Has anything changed?

- TK: Probably not. None of the people who signed that letter, starting from Dick Woolcott,⁶ have restored positions of influence on the government. They are still very much on the outer. Of course, the letter was mainly provoked by the invasion of Iraq. In terms of what we were just talking about you can proceed either from a moral viewpoint or the *Realpolitick* viewpoint and still come to the same conclusion that the invasion of Iraq was a totally wrong and irresponsible decision. But I think a lot of the people who signed that letter are probably still in the *Realpolitick* mode. But we came together over those issues. We were merely calling for a less stupid government than the government that took us to war in Iraq. No, I don't think that anything much as changed and I very much fear that there could be secret plans even now for the Australian government to give diplomatic, and maybe even tactical military support to all sorts of schemes directed against Iran, so it's a very worrying time.
- AA: Do you see any coherent opposition developing in the federal arena or is it just falling all over the place?
- TK: It's all over the place. There are individuals who are trying to warn of the dangers of the current wrapping up of spin against Iran. I am certainly trying to warn against it but we are voices in the wilderness, as usual. Mainstream commentators don't want to touch it and yet there's a wealth of international, very high quality international analysis, showing the hollowness of the case for war against Iran but it doesn't seem to reach Australia. There's a great laziness about Australian commentators on international policy and strategic policy. They just basically take whatever is being fed to them by government spin doctors and they don't do the fairly small amount of work that's involved in reading the international media in a broad way to see that there are very different arguments on these questions.
- AA: Yes. Even to the point where Iran is synonymous with Arab, which of course it is not.
- TK: It would take me ten minutes on a computer to turn up a respectable page of Google references as to why an attack on Iran at this point is foolish, as well as immoral. It would take me ten minutes. And yet none of our so-called foreign policy gurus seem to bother to do that.
- AA: Hugh White is an interesting case, isn't he? I can remember him being a barracker for war. Now he is kind of withdrawing from that position.

- TK: He is very defensive on that point. He says that he was always against the war, that we went to war for the wrong reasons. He's very much on the fence and so many people are on the fence. You don't notice any of those people coming forward now saying we shouldn't be making war in Iran.
- AA: No. Whereas today, Seymour Hersh has revealed Bush government plans to bomb Iran.⁷
- TK: Going back over the history of the preparations for war against Iraq, there was a brilliant expose in *The Bulletin*⁸ that a very senior group of Australian ADF military planners went to Florida to work with Central Command on the invasion plans from the middle of 2002. So for nine months before the invasion in March 2003 we had Australian military planners working in Central Command in Florida, helping to plan the invasion. It makes me wonder whether something of the same kind might not be happening now. I would love to see somebody ask the question in the Senate. Can the Minister for Defence confirm or deny whether Australian military are currently engaging in contingency planning with Americans for a war in Iran? In fact I might suggest it.
- AA: The sad thing is the 'I don't know' or 'this is not in my purview,' or whatever, works these days.
- TK: Or they'd simply lie and say nothing's happening, when something really is happening.

Notes

- 1 Tony Kevin, *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of the SIEV X*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2004.
- 2 Refer [web site] www.tonykevin.com.
- 3 The Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN) over the horizon radar system. Refer [web site] www.defence.gov.au/dmo/esd/jp2025/jp2025.cfm.
- 4 For the full report of the Senate Committee's findings refer [web site] www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/maritime_incident_ctte/index.htm.
- 5 Tony Kevin, 'Australia's secret pre-emptive war against Iraq,' *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 58(3), March 2003, 318.
- 6 Richard Woolcott was secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade during the first Gulf War in 1991. He was also a special envoy for John Howard and Alexander Downer in 1996, and a member of the Government's advisory panel for its 1997 white paper on foreign and trade policy.
- 7 Seymour Hersh, 'THE IRAN PLANS: Would President Bush go to war to stop Tehran from getting the bomb?,' *The New Yorker*, April

17 2006. Available at [web site] www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060417fa_fact.

- 8 Tony Wright, 'The Road to War,' *The Bulletin*, 4 February 2003. Available at [web site] bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/bulletin/site/articleIDs/7EE7F57380CBBEC0CA256CF9006DB2BB; Tony Wright, 'Band of Brothers,' *The Bulletin*, 19 February 2003. Available at [web site] bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/bulletin/site/articleIDs/4D14C384DDE5D1EACA256CCD00251027.