

Fielding gets refugee's version of border protection



Show of hands: Family First senator Steve Fielding and his wife, Susan, meet West Papuan refugee Yunis Wainggai and his daughter, Anikie, yesterday.

Photo: *John Donegan*

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NOTEBOOK

IT WAS an orange brick veneer house in Maidstone, with a roughly mown lawn and weeds choking a blooming japonica. Inside, West Papuan refugee Yunus Wanggai waited with his daughter Anike, 4, lawyer David Manne and a translator to talk to Family First senator Steve Fielding.

They felt that their conversation with the senator could prove pivotal in determining the fate of the Federal Government's border protection legislation. The senator presumably knew it, too. Reporters came to witness the event, but a member of the senator's staff said later that this was not the senator's intention, this was not a media stunt. In any case, reporters were not privy to the conversation.

Senator Fielding and his wife, Susan, had come to hear Mr Wanggai's story of persecution and escape. He and Anike were among the 43 West Papuan refugees who recently sought, and were granted, asylum in Australia. Mr Wanggai, a fisherman and mechanic, is a supporter of West Papuan independence who helped people flee to Papua New Guinea when they were pursued by Indonesian authorities. Like the other West Papuans, he says he came to Australia to save his life.

His story came to prominence after Anike's mother, Siti Pandera Wanggai, said Indonesian authorities had pressured her to plead for her daughter's return and to make the false claim that Anike was taken without permission. Ms Wanggai has herself fled to PNG; she says she left West Papua because she feared for her safety. She, too, is seeking asylum in Australia.

Senator Fielding told reporters that he had come to Maidstone to hear "another view". He had already spoken to Prime Minister John Howard, to the Indonesian ambassador Hamzah Thayeb, to the Opposition and to welfare groups, and would now hear from Mr Wanggai.

The Fieldings pressed the buzzer and after a long, awkward pause, entered the house. Photographers and a cameraman followed to take pictures and listened while Mrs Fielding asked Anike if she missed her mother (yes, she did). Outside, neighbours walking by made their own eloquent plea for multicultural Maidstone: a beautiful, heavily pregnant African woman in a headscarf; a Middle Eastern man in a crocheted cap; a tradesman's van — Thanh and Sons. An elderly woman stopped her car and called out: "Peyton Place is it?"

After two hours, the Fieldings emerged. The senator said he would spend the weekend weighing up the case for and against the legislation and talking to his wife. Mrs Fielding said she found Mr Wanggai's story "very moving" and spoke of the importance of hearing first-hand accounts. Whether Mr Wanggai's story will outweigh the Government's diplomatic and security arguments remains to be seen. Anike lifted the venetians and waved goodbye, unaware of how important she might prove to be to the cause of future refugees.

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