



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Migration

SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 March 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Wednesday, 13 March 2013
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Questioner
Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr MORRISON (Cook) (15:20): The last time the Australian people had confidence in a government running the immigration program of this country was when John Howard was the Prime Minister. That is the last time that people felt that way and there is a very good reason they felt that way. Under the Howard government the level of permanent migration to Australia doubled, but at the same time the percentage of Australians who had concerns about immigration levels being too high had halved over the term of that government. There were important policies that were responsible for what was an impressive quinnella in terms of those results—rising immigration but rising confidence in immigration.

Those policies not only had to do with the Prime Minister of the day and the cabinet that supported him—in particular, the Father of the House, the member for Berowra. He and his successors pursued two important policies that ensured confidence in the integrity of our immigration program. The first one was: they stopped the boats. It is not a slogan; it is a fact; it is a result. It is something that actually happened as a result of policies of the Howard government. The second thing that was done under that government, and initiated by the member for Berowra, was that the government focused on skilled migration. They believed, and they were right, that focusing on skilled migration within the immigration program was the most important way (1) to get an economic dividend out of your immigration program and (2) to ensure the social cohesion that is necessary for a society which is going to be an immigrant society. The focus of the Howard government was on those individuals who come to Australia with skills, with something to offer—people who get a job and who pay taxes. The percentage of the permanent migration program devoted to skilled migration increased from less than 30 per cent under Prime Minister Keating to almost 70 per cent by the time the Howard government left office.

Because of those twin achievements of increasing the level and focus on skilled migration—457 visas were a component part of that strategy—and of stopping the boats and sending a very clear message that a coalition government would ensure that our migration program was focused not only on economic outcomes but on the integrity of our borders, it is not surprising the Australian people had confidence in the government's ability to run our immigration program. That confidence is no longer there. That confidence has been shattered by the performance of successive ministers for immigration—the third is at the table now—over the course of this government.

The performance of the government on border protection is historic. More people have arrived illegally on boats this financial year—and we still have several months to go—than occurred over the entire period of the Howard government. So far this financial year 13,745 people have turned up illegally on boats. Over the entire period of the Howard government—over 11 years—there were 13,584. That is a staggering milestone achieved by this government this financial year.

It is therefore no surprise that, in this financial year, the cost of this government's border failures is going to be \$2.5 billion—that is just in the immigration portfolio this year. The cost when we left office was \$85 million a year. It is now \$2.5 billion. The cumulative blow-outs in the asylum seeker program in the immigration portfolio—just since the last election—are \$5 billion and counting. When we reflect on the scale of that failure, it is truly staggering.

What is even more staggering is the front of this government in coming into this place—the Leader of the Opposition questioned the Prime Minister on this just today—and saying that next year the cost will go from \$2.5 billion down to \$1.3 billion and that in the year after that it will go down to \$450 million. At Senate estimates recently, when Senator Cash was pursuing the department over these extraordinary figures, she held up the chart showing the huge drop-off in planned expenditure over the next few years and she asked a simple question: 'Is that what the budget looks like when you stop the boats?' The answer was yes.

So the government has put into their budget—and they have told the Australian people—not that they are going to stop the boats but that they have actually already stopped them! It has already happened, according to this

government, and that is what they put in their budget. They will have to come clean when the budget rolls around this year. If they want to pursue these ridiculous estimates—which they have signed off on and put to the Australian people—I am sure, when it comes around to PEFO, they will have egg all over their faces.

On this issue of border protection and immigration—people arriving illegally by boat—this government has shown that they have no answers and that they have absolutely no resolve. At first they denied there was a problem. That was the position taken by Senator Evans. Then they sought to ignore the problem, saying that nothing needed to be done. The latest response is to blame someone else for the problem. Apparently what has been happening over the last five years is the coalition's fault.

The Australian people are not mugs and they understand that the government had an answer in place and that, when they removed it, the number of people in detention—people who had arrived by boat—went from four at that time to what we have now. The current estimate of those in detention, on community release and in community detention is over 15,000 and that may well rise to 20,000 by the time we get to the election. The Australian people are able to draw their own conclusions. Since the community release model was announced over a year ago, over 20,000 people have turned up.

As we know, the government is now running a water taxi service to our north—48 out of the 50 interceptions and rescues involving AMSA have taken people in the Indonesian search and rescue zone to Australia. But the department and the government have themselves confirmed that the Australian government has no responsibility whatsoever to take them to Australia. So we are running a water taxi and we are running a community program where people are basically getting what they got on a boat to get.

The vast majority—over 90 per cent—of the people arriving by boat have no documentation whatsoever. Yet we know that the Malaysian government takes biometrics and passports on entry and we know the Indonesian government takes a scan of the passport of every single person who comes through that airport, takes biometrics on people who are intercepted in Indonesia—many of whom, we know, later try to enter Australia—and takes biometrics from many countries in the region. Given that, you would have thought that this government would have gone to both of those countries and asked, 'Can we share some information so we can find out who is coming on these boats?' This government was very keen to do a people swap but they cannot even get a data swap on these issues. It is their lack of resolve and lack of thinking these issues through which has got them into problems on every single occasion.

They were dragged kicking and screaming to reopen Nauru and Manus. The situation on Manus, which I have visited, is very challenging—and I suspect the minister may agree that it is a challenging situation. It is more challenging because of the way the government conceived this and how they are seeking to execute it on the ground. I will give them some credit, though—and it is a shame the former minister just left the chamber—because on one issue they actually got something right. When they decided to send people who were coming on boats back to Sri Lanka, guess what happened? The boats stopped coming from Sri Lanka. They seem surprised at this result. If it had been a coalition government, (a) we would have done it earlier and (b) we would have ensured that people were intercepted outside our sea border. But at least the government finally got some wisdom and decided to send people back. What this proves is that if you send people back, the boats stop coming—and, broadly, the government continually refuses to send back arrivals.

The former minister, Minister Bowen, has left the chamber, but I have to say he is demonstrating his political genius. Whether in respect of illegal boat arrivals or cost blow-outs, the previous minister was certainly the worst performing minister for immigration we had seen. But he is looking like an absolute genius against his successor. So the previous minister has trumped everyone—if you want to make yourself look better, appoint the current minister to follow you.

This bloke is the one who has taken things to a whole new level. Within days of getting into the job, he mounted an unprecedented attack on skilled migrants who have come to this country. I look forward to this minister going out into the electorate of Minister Burke, who is also at the table, and explaining to them what this government thinks of skilled migrants; what this government thinks of the people who came and built the Snowy Mountains hydro scheme and built Warragamba Dam. What will they think when this minister comes and says, 'Look, we are happy to see people coming in their thousands and going onto welfare, but if they want to come and get a job and pay taxes and contribute to the economy, it is a different story.' Access Economics attributes \$2.2 billion

over three years to 457 visa holders who arrived in the year 2010-11. This minister is saying this is not something we want—we do not want the benefits of skilled migration to be applied to this country.

Something has happened that I have missed. In 2011 the Prime Minister said 'We've got the settings right with 457 visas' and she then proceeded to hand out over 200,000 of them in subsequent months. Then the previous minister said we had the balance right, just before the current minister came into the chair. I ask the question: what has changed between Minister Bowen and Minister O'Connor? One thing has certainly changed, and that is that the union movement has taken control of the immigration portfolio with the appointment of the latest minister. This is a minister who was there to ensure that the unions continued to cover the Prime Minister's back. That is what Paul Howes said, 'We've got your back, Prime Minister'—and this is the minister who has been installed to make sure he keeps the unions happy. This is his job—it is his responsibility to protect the Prime Minister's back, as he has been doing for years.

I ask the minister whether, when he speaks, he can table the report of the inquiry conducted by his department into the widespread abuses that he alleges. That is all I have been asking him to produce, and so far he has been unable to do so. Yesterday when I asked the minister a question he seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact that the budget for detection onshore—that is, for the people who police our immigration program right across the board—has fallen from \$74.2 million, when this government came to office, to now, this year, \$52.1 million. They are cutting the budget for police. My colleague who follows me will make reference to cuts in the customs area, which this minister knows about all too well.

As someone who has had firsthand experience of what such cuts mean in our community, I can only say when 220 Glock pistols turn up at the Sylvania Waters post office in my electorate that I wish this government were as concerned about its focus on the borders that have allowed people to arrive illegally on boats and allowed guns to come into my community as it seems to be about peptides in sport. If it were as interested in guns coming into our country and border protection failures, maybe our community would be a much safer place. All we have seen is a government that likes to beat its chest over a big announcement, trashing the reputation of Australian sport. Thousands of sports fans all around the country want to support their clubs, but this government is pitting club against club, pitting coach against management, pitting fans against the boards of clubs—that is what we have seen as a result of this government's hairy-chested approach to border protection.

My point is that the government are always big on the announcements but they never stump up on the delivery—whether it is on our borders, or whether it is the immigration program, they are always big on the talk but their record speaks for itself. Let us reflect on the record again—33,656 people have illegally entered on 577 boats under this government. That is a shameful record. The chaos and the cost and the tragedy that has followed from those decisions, and this government's refusal even to admit that they have got it wrong, let alone fix it, will hang around this government's neck from here to election day, and they will be held to account for their appalling failures.