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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Migration

SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 March 2013

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Questioner
Speaker O'Connor, Brendan, MP

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Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (15:35): The government's immigration program is a very important matter for public debate—

Mr Burke: Not important enough for him to stay in the chamber.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: It is disappointing that the member for Cook has left, because I think he could have learned something from my contribution. That is up to him. It is an important matter because we need to put things in the context of what is going on globally. We have to accept that there are millions of people displaced around the world—over 40 million, of which approximately 15 million may well be recognised as refugees. There have been conflicts in Sri Lanka, there is war in Afghanistan and just recently we have seen tragic conflicts in Syria. History shows that these things will continue to happen, and from time to time there will be pressures on First World nations and refugee convention signatories to take in their fair share. This country is a generous country but of course we want to ensure the efficacy of our immigration system and the efficacy of our border protection.

But there have been challenges, and indeed we are among many First World countries that have seen those challenges in recent times. Those things will increase and decrease over time, but let us remember that the reason why this occurs, in the main, the reason why there are such challenges for First World nations, is that there are people fleeing persecution and we have obligations under international law to assist them where we can and take our fair share—no more, no less.

The member for Cook raised a number of issues that I would like to respond to. Firstly, he indicated that he has the answers to our border protection challenges, and I would have to refute that. He has, of course, and has had for some time, along with the Leader of the Opposition, a three-word slogan, 'Stop the boats'. Let us contemplate exactly what is meant by that particular phrase. The suggestion by the member for Cook is that we can, for example, turn back the boats to Indonesia. Now, what expert, whether it is a maritime expert, a foreign policy expert or a border protection expert, agrees with that contention? I cannot find one. Indeed, the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers that co-authored the Houston report made clear in that report that the notion that you can turn back vessels on the high seas without the cooperation of another sovereign state was impossible—impossible and inoperable; dangerous to the people on those vessels and to our Customs and naval personnel; and undiplomatic. It would enrage and in fact endanger our relationship with Indonesia—so much so that, when the Leader of the Opposition met with the President of Indonesia, he chose not to raise it.

Mr Perrett: He didn't have the ticker.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: Such an important plank of their policy, to turn back the boats, and he did not raise it. He did not have the courage or the confidence that he could reach agreement with the President of Indonesia, so he chose not to raise it at all. The reason for that is not that he just did not have the ticker; it is that deep down he knows that what he is suggesting is not true. The opposition are really working on the big con. They are like snake oil salesmen. They can cure baldness—maybe not the member for Cook! They can cure all sorts of ills. The bigger the con, they hope, the more people will believe it: 'Why would they say it if it's not true?'

The fact is that no experts in this country at all have agreed with the approach of the opposition to turning back the vessels. And I would go further than that. I think that, of the many transit countries, there are two particular transit countries that we really must engage with closely—and this government and my predecessor in particular put enormous effort into doing just that, as does our foreign minister—and they are of course Malaysia and Indonesia. These are the two countries that most people travel through, and Indonesia is quite often the last point of departure for people who come into our waters. It is therefore absolutely vital that we work closely with our neighbours and friends in the region, Indonesia and Malaysia. I can tell you now that, given the efforts by the opposition to traduce the reputation of Malaysia, it would be very difficult for them, in the event they were elected, to properly

engage with the government of Malaysia. The fact that they have put up time and again the notion that they are going to turn the vessels back towards Indonesia, as if it is entirely Indonesia's problem, is quite possibly going to enrage the Indonesians, in my view, and ruin our diplomatic relations with that country. Let me just explain to the opposition, particularly to the member for Cook, who obviously has not had experience in these matters, that that approach is going to make it much more difficult for us to have a regional response to a regional challenge.

What we need to do is to continue to put in place the recommendations of the Houston panel. Let us think about those three people. We have Angus Houston, the former Chief of the Defence Force, appointed by the Howard government and this government to the highest office in our Defence Force, and we have two other eminent Australians: Paris Aristotle, who has dealt with refugee settlement and this area of public policy for well over 20 years; and Michael L'Estrange, who has been the Australian High Commissioner to London and the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and has also held other very significant positions. These three people have 75 years of experience between them on geopolitical matters, matters to do with refugee settlement and matters to do with border protection. But I am supposed to ignore them and listen to the member for Cook? Okay, he was Director of Tourism Australia, but I do not think that actually puts him in a position to advise the government on the best approach to deal with national security. I think if I am going to listen to someone about national security, I should listen to the former Chief of the Defence Force. If I want to talk about refugee settlement and the complications of doing that with countries of origin, transit and destination, I should talk to Paris Aristotle, and to others who understand the difficulties in this complex area of public policy. It is easy to throw around slogans, but Australians understand that this area is complicated.

I have heard a lot of things about how many people have come to this country by boat—and, of course, for anyone to come to this country on a dangerous vessel is not a good thing. I do not want to see anybody endangering their lives. We have seen too many people die at sea, and it did not happen under just this government. There was the SIEVX, where over 400 people died in October 2001—a tragic set of circumstances where so many men, women and children perished. We have seen tragedy too often recently. I saw the aftermath of the tragedy that occurred on 15 December 2010, where the vessel foundered on the rocks on Christmas Island. I arrived on the day of the tragedy. I was there to comfort and assist those who were there on the island, including the islanders themselves, and the AFP and Customs officials. Later I managed to meet and commend formally those naval and Customs personnel who went out in tenders and RIBs and recovered 40 of the 41 people who survived and the dead bodies of those poor souls who lost their lives.

So I do not need to be reminded of how difficult this area is, but I do not think it is helped by suggesting simple solutions that will not work. It is also not helped by sensationalising matters or seeking to cause hysteria. The facts are that since we were elected two in every 100 people have come by an irregular pathway. Two in every 100 people have arrived that way since we were elected in 2007. That is two too many because it is too dangerous to come that way, but that means 98 per cent of people who have come to this country have come through the regular path of migration, and that should not be forgotten because on occasion, when you listen to the commentariat or certainly when you listen to the member for Cook, you could be given the impression that it was the other way round. Two out of every 100 have come here in this manner, and I think that is important to note.

The second thing is that the only way we are going deal quite properly with this matter is by working with our friends in the region. The Bali process is meeting in early April. I will be meeting with my counterparts from countries of origin, transit and destination, and we need to continue to work together to do that. Domestically, we need to implement the recommendations of those three eminent people. I am not going to pretend that this matter can be solved overnight. I have never suggested that. The government has never suggested that. We believe that it is complicated and that it will cause problems for governments from time to time. It caused problems for the Howard government; it has caused problems for this government. There is no point in saying that it has not. But I think to pretend that the solutions are simple is a terribly contemptuous way to treat the Australian people. It is to treat them as fools to suggest that this thing can be solved so simply—so I say that. It is unfortunate that the incendiary language of the member for Cook, in particular, is deployed too often to create anxiety and fear and, dare I say it, bigotry, and that is not helpful at all.

I did not want to raise the issue with respect to 457s because I have never conflated the two matters. I have not conflated the two matters on any occasion that I have spoken publicly. The Leader of the Opposition has chosen to do that and now the member for Cook today has chosen to do that. They should not do that, because they are not matters that should be discussed in the same breath. But the matter has been raised in the MPI by the member for Cook, so I just want to say this: with respect to the 457s I will make it very clear that as a migrant I

support immigration. It should not be that surprising. As a migrant, I think immigration helped build this country and I think immigration will continue to build this country, and that is a good thing. I support the fact—and this is where I do applaud the efforts of the Howard government, not so much this opposition—that two-thirds or thereabouts of the permanent stream of migration is made up of skilled workers. That is a fantastic thing.

I also support as a good thing genuine 457 applicants who seek to become permanent residents while they are onshore—and, in fact, my predecessor made that easier to happen. I support that too. I also support legitimate 457 applicants because they are attending to temporary skill shortages in this country. What this government will never support is the pretence that we respond to shortages that do not exist and thereby displace Australian citizens and permanent residents from getting the jobs first. What is wrong with that? There is nothing wrong with that. We should always put Australian workers first when it comes to training and jobs. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is entirely proper. This is not an inclination by this government; it is an obligation of any federal government to make sure that Australian citizens and permanent residents are given the first opportunities of employment.

In relation to the development of this policy, it is, I know, convenient for the member for Cook and the opposition to think that I came into this portfolio and announced something in a knee-jerk manner. That is the way in which they like to suggest it has happened. Let me make it very clear: the department identified 12 months before that there were issues with the 457 visa. They actually wrote an internal document and provided it to the Ministerial Advisory Council on Skilled Migration, of which employers and unions are a part. They also recommended a series of recommendations that my predecessor referred to the council for consideration. They affirmed all of the recommendations. This was all done last year and early this year by my predecessor. On 23 February, I thanked and congratulated Minister Bowen for his good work in this area. I know it is an inconvenient truth that I did not just drum this up, but that is the reality—good work by the department, affirmed by the advisory council, affirmed by my predecessor, and then I announced it because of the portfolio change.

These reforms are needed to make sure that Australian workers do not lose the opportunities of employment. These reforms are needed so that young people in this country get training rather than people saying that we just have to get the skills from overseas. We will never support the abuse of 457s. We will always accept the legitimate use of temporary skilled labour in this country, and we make no apology for it.