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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

COMMITTEES

Christmas Island Tragedy Committee

Report

SPEECH

Wednesday, 6 July 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP

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Mr MORRISON (Cook) (18:41): The Christmas Island tragedy occurred in the early hours of 15 December 2010 and is still very fresh and very raw in our minds, particularly for those who were there on that day, I have no doubt. It was a terrible tragedy that indelibly scarred the psyche of this nation and reached out through the images on our television screens and portrayed in our newspapers to touch the hearts and minds of Australians right around the country. As I said on that day, the lives of those lost were and remain as precious as our own. Though more than six months have since passed, the events linger with clarity in the minds of those who deal with these matters on a very regular basis but especially in the minds of those who were involved in the rescue and who were called into action in that desperate hour.

The report tabled this week in parliament that we are debating tonight brings some closure, albeit small, to this tragic chapter in our nation's history. The committee found that, given the terrible circumstances—namely, the ferocity of the foul weather that day—there was precious little that anything or anyone could have done differently to change that terrible outcome. It hardly bears thinking of but circumstances could certainly have been even bleaker. Had the boat arrived merely an hour earlier or one kilometre up the coast, there could have been no survivors. I think it is an absolute miracle that lives were saved at all on this occasion.

As it was, though we can never know exactly how many lives perished in those waters on that day, we do know that, against the odds, 42 lives were saved. Twenty-two men, nine women and 11 children were saved by the bravery of Australia's Defence Force, Customs officers, the Australian Federal Police and the residents of Christmas Island, who woke from their beds that terrible morning before dawn to the screams of those people, many of whom ultimately perished. Those rescuers deserve our commendation, and it is only fitting that this report recognises their heroism.

I have been to Christmas Island on several occasions and I have met many people who live on Christmas Island. It is a long way from our mainland and oftentimes, I suspect, those who live on Christmas Island feel a long way from Australia. But on that day they showed the bravery, courage and empathy that Australians are known for around the world. On that day we could not have felt closer to them as fellow Australians and we stood with them in their sorrow and their grief but also we were incredibly proud of the way that our fellow Australians on Christmas Island conducted themselves on that day and the many days that have since followed. The bodies of 30 men, women and children were recovered. Another 20 were missing and presumed dead, and they rest beneath the waves. On that fateful day, the weather off Christmas Island was the worst it had been in the living memory of many locals: 40-knot winds, thunderstorms, and ebbing and pitching waves of three to four metres. Those who have been to Christmas Island will know that, as you look out over Rocky Point, all you can see is a vast sea, and Christmas Island literally juts out of the sea. These sheer and ragged cliffs are basically the first things that the waves hit, with very little to impede their force as they wash across that sea. The conditions on that day rarely occur with that level of ferocity. But even on a still day you can see just how bad it could become in the worst set of conditions. Visibility was poor—you could barely see further than a rugby league field. And at the mercy of those churning seas, there was this wooden boat.

A Customs officer staying at the Mango Tree Lodge near Rocky Point first sighted the vessel at 5.40 am on 15 December. Authorities notified the naval vessel HMAS *Piri e* and the Customs vessel ACV *Triton*, which were sheltering on the leeward side of the island due to the severe weather. They made their way as fast as they possibly could to the scene.

As I said before, Rocky Point is grim on the clearest of days. The committee visited during the inquiry and their report attests to 'a dangerous, steep and slippery sheer rock face, even in good weather'. I have seen that rock face and many other rock faces around that island, and that is a very accurate description. Because of the rough sea, RHIBs were deployed—small inflatable rigid-hulled vessels. Naval and Customs officers were instructed to do all they could to help those in serious distress, and they did—above and beyond the call of duty. For many of those men and women, I suspect that this was a day on which they performed duties which they probably felt

they had been called into naval service to one day potentially perform, and on that day they did not let down their oath, their service, their friends or those who had gone before them in these roles, and most of all they did not let down those who they had been sent to save.

SIEV221 battled huge swells in a futile attempt to reach the island. Then, the engines failed and inevitably the boat drifted towards the rocks. Locals were woken by screams for help. They ran down and stood on those perilous cliffs in the darkness. Local Raymond Murray was first to arrive. He told the inquiry, 'I will never forget seeing a woman holding up a baby, obviously wanting me to take it, and not being able to do anything.'

Some 60 people gathered on the slippery rocks. They threw life jackets into the water as the boat was dashed against the ragged coastline and people were hurled into the sea. Those on shore risked slipping on the sharp, uneven rocks into deep ravines; nevertheless, 'They tried their best to haul people out of the water with ropes tied to life jackets on those struggling to survive a few metres away.' There is only one word appropriate to describe the efforts of those who rendered assistance on that bleak morning, and the report uses it: 'herculean'.

Diesel had spilled in the ocean. As rescuers attempted to drag flailing people from the water, they slipped literally through their grasp. The committee noted that the availability of grenade life rings may have assisted those attempting to get immediate support to those in the water. We cannot know whether these could have resulted in a different outcome, but the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government has accepted advice to acquire this equipment. As my colleague the member for Stirling remarked, without the rescuers there is no question that those 42 people would have perished along with the other 50 lives that were lost.

The report finds no fault with the response by government agencies. It is vital that we acknowledge that here in this place and that those who were involved on that day understand that that is the finding of this report and that that is the view of this parliament. They need to cling to that. They need to know that this place and the members who represent Australians all around this country understand that that was the case. They can have great assurance that on that day they did all they could. There is no surveillance system available to the Australian government that is able to detect wooden hulled boats in such violent seas. The committee examined this extensively and found the intelligence community did all they could, based on the information they had, in relation to the arrival of SIEV221. The inquiry also spoke extensively to the people on the island who had responded. The report notes that many residents may retain horrific images in their memories—I have no doubt—and will grapple with questions and issues which are immensely difficult to cope with. That is why the inquiry recommends the provision of ongoing support not only to survivors but also to rescuers. Our hearts go out to them because these nightmares may remain not only immediately afterwards but also 12 months, five years or 10 years down the track.

There is another darker reality that lurks as we consider these matters in this report where 50 lives were lost—and other colleagues have alluded to it. This is not the first time that the tragedy of people being lost at sea has occurred in the sea lane between Indonesia and Christmas Island. We are aware—and there is credible evidence to suggest—that many other vessels that have left Indonesia have also gone off the radar and vanished somewhere in those millions of square nautical miles of water. Most recently, we are aware that a vessel departed a little more than six months ago with 91 people on board. Those people have never been heard of again. There will be no reports into what happened to them. There will be no inquiries. There will be no memorials. There will be none of that. But their loss is just as significant and relevant to the people here in this place who make decisions on these matters. And I remember another incident about two years ago when 109 people, all Afghans, left Indonesia on a vessel and were never heard of again. So I think we can say with some certainty that hundreds of people have lost their lives. It is our earnest hope that we will lose no more lives, and we need to do all we can to ensure that that is the outcome. No-one in this place would willingly endanger the lives of another, and members of this inquiry were profoundly affected by what they witnessed.

There is much said in this debate and it can get very, very heated. I would like to place on record my thanks to those who are involved most directly in this debate. I refer specifically to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. He and I both understand the moral and human consequences of the decisions that we will take and the positions that we will put forward, and events such as those that occurred at Christmas Island in December last year only reinforce that to all of those who participate in this debate. I think the most significant thing we must do is accept that, at the very least, in our participation in this debate there would be no-one in this place who wants to see harm come to anyone. We would hope that we endeavour to do what is in our national interest in addressing these matters and are very mindful of the moral issues that weigh heavily on officers who participate regularly in these issues.

I place on record my thanks in particular to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and the Minister for Home Affairs. I found their conduct over the course of those very, very difficult days to be outstanding. The minister was very open to our questions and ensured that we were able to get information quickly. In the most disappointing and upsetting of circumstances, that was the one thing where I thought those two ministers in particular engaged with members of the opposition and other members of this place in a very positive and responsible way. I thank them, on behalf of the opposition, for that. Briefings were made available through departmental officials—particularly Mr Carmody from the Customs and Border Protection Service—in circumstances where they had to deal with an unfolding situation. They made themselves available, and we sought not to detain them for long. The key message we sent to them at the time was to let every single one of the persons serving on behalf of the Australian government know that the people in this place were supportive of them and that they should get about their business and not be thinking of what might happen afterwards. I am pleased that in the course of this report and this inquiry their actions have been validated, their integrity has been reinforced and, indeed, their courage has been praised—as it should be. Those who at the time wanted to make different comments about those individuals will, I think, regret that. This report has more than vindicated the actions of our various service men and women, whichever government department or Defence agency they serve. They have performed outstandingly, so I thank them for that. I thank the ministers, again, for the way they have handled this matter. I hope we will not stand here in this place having conducted another inquiry into something of this nature, but we cannot be sure of that. It should only redouble our efforts to ensure that we do not see that happen again.