



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

New Colombo Plan

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 17 August 2015
Page 8602
Questioner
Speaker Prentice, Jane, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan) (12:37): I move:

That this House:

- (1) recognises that travelling and living overseas has been a rite of passage for young Australians for many years and has raised awareness of and respect for foreign cultures;
- (2) acknowledges that the New Colombo Plan (NCP) is an innovative scholarship scheme that supports and encourages Australian students to undertake study and internships in the Indo-Pacific region;
- (3) recognises the success of the NCP's pilot year in 2014, in which 40 scholars and 1,300 mobility students were supported to live, study and undertake work placements in the four pilot locations of Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore;
- (4) notes that in 2015 the NCP has been substantially expanded to offer support to 68 scholars and 3,100 mobility students in more than 32 host locations across the region; and
- (5) acknowledges the Government's ongoing commitment of \$100 million over five years to the NCP.

I congratulate the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, on this initiative, which is administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with the Commonwealth government committing \$100 million over five years to the program.

The concept is straightforward. The New Colombo Plan supports and encourages Australian students to undertake study and internships with many of our near neighbours in the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally, Australian students who have sought study opportunities overseas have tended to study in Europe and North America. The New Colombo Plan seeks to reverse that trend by making it more attractive to study in nations closer to home. It takes its name from the original Colombo Plan of the 1950s, in which the most promising students in the region were offered scholarships to study in Australia. They took with them not just degrees but a better understanding of Australia and links with our nation that served us well in the decades that followed.

But this straightforward concept belies a more complex purpose. At a base level, participating students will have the opportunity to gain knowledge towards their degrees or work experience in a different cultural environment. However, the value of the New Colombo Plan is even much greater than that, because this plan is as much about diplomacy as it is about vocational and higher education. The strength of a nation is not just measured by the size of its economy or the might of its military. Nor is diplomacy only the domain of politicians and diplomats. Strength lies in knowledge, knowledge informs diplomacy and diplomacy takes place everywhere: in boardrooms, at universities, at tourism sites—wherever we interact with people from other nations. The New Colombo Plan recognises that future generations of Australians, thought leaders across all disciplines, need to have a greater understanding of the cultural and linguistic sensibilities of our near neighbours. The world has changed in recent decades and Australia's place in it has changed.

At the turn of the 20th century the US and UK combined to account for around 75 per cent of the value of Australian international trade; however, by 2014 that figure had fallen to just 12 per cent. These days our top 10 Indo-Pacific trading partners account for 60 per cent of the value of Australian trade. This proportion is continuing to grow on the back of our new trade agreements. That is why the New Colombo Plan is so important to Australia's future. It is an investment in the knowledge that our future leaders will need in order to interact with their counterparts in nations in our region. It is an opportunity for them to gain an enhanced understanding of our near neighbours and forge networks and friendships that will last a lifetime and serve our country in the decades to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 2015 is a milestone year for the New Colombo Plan. Following a successful pilot in 2014, this year has been expanded from four to 35 locations—expanding from eastern Pacific Islands states to Pakistan in the west—with more than 4,600 students currently participating. It has recently been announced that a further 5,450 students will participate in the 2016 round, bringing the total number of participating students to more than 10,000 in the first three years of the program. Two weeks ago Minister Bishop was in Malaysia launching their involvement in the plan. This year 150 Australian students will travel to Malaysia to undertake part of their study as well as gain practical experience through internships, mentoring or work placements. It is pleasing that one of our nearest neighbours, Indonesia, is proving to be a particularly popular destination for students under the New Colombo Plan. This month the foreign minister announced that around 1,000 students studied in Indonesia last year, with a similar number expected for next year.

As I said earlier, the New Colombo Plan comes at a cost of \$100 million over five years, but any cost is outweighed by the benefits of the deeper relationships that will be forged with nations in our region, which Australia will continue to profit from for many decades to come. It is a visionary and transformational program and I commend Minister Bishop for her foresight in making it a foreign policy priority of this government. I commend the motion to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Landry): Is the motion seconded?

Mrs Markus: I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.