



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Vietnam: Human Rights

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Keenan, Michael, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
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Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (7.56 pm)—I also rise to support the motion that has been brought to this House by my good friend the member for Cowan. I congratulate him for doing so. The member for Cowan and I would share probably the vast majority of the Vietnamese community in Perth—perhaps along with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who also has a large number of Vietnamese in his electorate. The member for Cowan and I have large Catholic and Buddhist communities in our electorates. Both of those communities take a very keen interest in what is happening in their homeland, particularly with regard to freedom of religion and the persecution that happens in Vietnam against people who just want to practise their religion in peace. The Venerable Thich Quang Do is a great example of that as head of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

I often reflect on Vietnamese migration to Australia. When I was growing up, in the late seventies and early eighties, there were large waves of Vietnamese migrants settling in Perth and there was some community resistance to and trepidation about those new arrivals. They were different from arrivals we had had in the past. I reflect on just how incredibly successful the Vietnamese people have been as Australian migrants. They are incredibly entrepreneurial people. A lot of them started small businesses when they arrived in Perth. Subsequently, the second generation have gone on to become professionals. They are really incredibly successful migrants who have contributed a lot to Australia. It is always worth reflecting on that, I think, when we reflect on new waves of migrants coming to Australia who might be struggling at times and who might meet some community resistance. We can look at the plight of the Vietnamese and think about how successful their migration has been for them and for Australia.

To return to the motion, Thich Quang Do has seen a lot of repression in his life, firstly under the French occupation and subsequently under the current communist regime. The motion moved by the member for Cowan highlights the work of a man who is determined to see an open and more transparent world for the people of Vietnam—a world where people have the right to choose how they worship and the right to choose many of the freedoms that we here in Australia take for granted. Thich Quang Do is the head of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam. He has dedicated his whole life to the plight of his people and the search for religious freedom and democracy in Vietnam. This cause has rendered him very well known throughout the world. He has been celebrated in many instances internationally for his very brave work on human rights in Vietnam. Under the communist regime, Thich Quang Do has been a fierce critic and has subsequently been persecuted for his stance on religious freedom. He was arrested for the first time in 1977, along with other members of his church, because they were deemed to be an obstruction to the work of the government in religious matters. He was tortured and imprisoned and was later charged with disturbing the peace and spreading misinformation.

The communist government, in order to control its people, created their own version of the Buddhist church, something we have seen in other communist regimes, and declared the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam illegal. The state tried to assume control over the church, but they were unable to do so, as Thich Quang Do and other Buddhist leaders stood up for their rights to freedom of worship. Thich Quang Do was subsequently exiled to the place of his birth for 10 years, whilst other members of the church were sent to other parts of the country. This did not deter this very brave man, who continues to take the opportunity to show the rest of the world what is happening in Vietnam and to highlight what happens to people when their basic human rights are taken away.

In 1992, he returned to Saigon to continue his fight for religious freedom. He was again arrested, for the crime of preparing a 44-page document promoting freedom in Vietnam. He was accused of sabotaging government policies and damaging the interests of the state. He was tried in court although the evidence provided by the prosecution was very feeble. He was given a five-year sentence which has rightly been condemned by human rights agencies and by other governments worldwide. In the few seconds I have left, I would like to say that Thich Quang Do has been recognised by world leaders and nominated for the Nobel peace prize—(*Time expired*)