



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

**India**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 9 February 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Page** 838  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Bishop, Julie, MP

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**Question No.**

**Ms JULIE BISHOP** (Curtin) (3.58 pm)—India is the world's largest democracy in terms of population and its elections are often described as the single biggest human event on earth, with more than 400 million people casting votes at the last election. It is forecast to be the world's most populous nation by 2030 and is a rapidly emerging economic and military powerhouse. Currently the 12th largest economy in the world and ranked only behind Japan and China in Asia, India has huge potential for future growth.

One of the key drivers of economic growth has been India's large pool of well-educated and highly skilled workers. For example, India has established a significant presence globally in the software and technology sectors. As a former Minister for Education, Science and Training, I can attest to the fact that it has long been one of Australia's proudest boasts that we have welcomed thousands and thousands of students from around the world to our educational institutions. I have always believed that educational exchanges are one of the best ways to build stronger links between nations. It is a form of public diplomacy that over time enhances the understanding of the ideals, values and aspirations of our country.

Student exchanges should be one of the most powerful tools in our diplomatic efforts. Providing educational services can also be important in terms of economic growth in developing countries. Indian students are a welcome presence on our university campuses, in our educational institutions and throughout our communities. People of Indian background and ethnicity have long made an enduring contribution to many aspects of life in the great tapestry of Australian society, with more than 450,000 people of Indian heritage living in Australia. It is the great value of student exchange and our deep respect for Indian people and their culture that makes these attacks against Indian students all the more heartbreaking and soul destroying.

In a number of incidents, there have been reports of racist taunts. Racism is abhorrent to the vast majority of Australians. We are horrified at these reports and condemn them in the strongest possible terms. Australia is not a racist nation. Australia has welcomed and embraced people from all around the world. That does not mean there are no individuals in this country with a twisted view of the world who harbour irrational prejudice against those of different ethnicity.

During a meeting this week with Indian High Commissioner Singh, I expressed on behalf of the coalition our deep sympathy and condolences, particularly with regard to those young people who have lost their lives or been seriously injured in the spate of attacks. I find it impossible to comprehend the psyche of those who have committed these crimes. The police have been working hard to respond to the spate of attacks and I must thank the minister for the briefing given by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on the many positive steps taken by governments in Australia.

Reforms are also underway in the education sector, where steps can be taken to reduce the numbers of at-risk Indian students in Australia. However, it is also important for national, state and community leaders to re-articulate the values of Australian society. It is illegal in this country to discriminate against anyone on the basis of their race, religion or gender, amongst other things. Those laws are the formal implementation of the national rejection of racism. The perpetrators of these crimes must face the full force of the law. A strong message must be sent by our police and our judiciary that racially motivated violence is utterly unacceptable in this country. The cowards who lurk in dark places at night waiting for the vulnerable to stray into their web must get the message loud and clear that their behaviour will not be tolerated and that they will not get away with it.

It is deeply troubling to read of the distress that these attacks are causing to people in India and that it is impacting more broadly on our bilateral relations with a valued friend. No-one should underestimate the level of concern within India about these attacks. Indian authorities have naturally urged for the welfare and protection of their students in Australia to be given the highest priority. There is a need for urgent action to be taken on this issue and for it to be considered a priority. People in India must be reassured that we do not take the issue lightly. That is why it is important for there to be open lines of communication between everyone involved in the response to this issue. State police and state governments must maintain open lines of communication with

the Australian government and with the Indian authorities to reassure them that action is being taken and that concrete steps are being implemented to increase the security of Indian nationals.

I am concerned that many Indian students, particularly in Victoria, are working and living in high-risk situations. They live in areas of increased crime and work in jobs late at night, when crimes involving drugs and alcohol are more prevalent. It is also vital for Indian students to take all possible precautions with regard to their personal safety—the types of precautions that people should take in any large city anywhere in the world. Crime is an unfortunate aspect to life in large cities, and if people can take any additional steps to improve their personal security I strongly urge them to do so. It is my sincere hope that these attacks stop, that the criminals and cowards realise the damage they are causing not only to individuals but to the nation as a whole. I am not hopeful that an appeal to reason will penetrate the fog of immorality that surrounds these people. However, they should know that a coordinated response is underway, and I urge the state and federal authorities to take all possible action to resolve this situation.

While the damage to our bilateral relations will take some time to heal, some time to subside, we must continue to take a long-term view of our relationship with India. There is much that we have in common in terms of shared values and shared aspirations. We share a tradition of parliamentary democracy, membership of the Commonwealth and a passion for the national sport of cricket. The Commonwealth countries, including Australia, look forward to the Commonwealth Games being held in India, reflecting the passion for sport that our countries share.

India can play an important role in regional stability. It is a lead member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which was established in 1985 to promote economic and social development in the region, an area of vital and strategic interest to Australia. It can be a constructive force in Afghanistan, as that country struggles to emerge from the yoke of oppression. I note recent statements by the Indian government of its preparedness to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan in support of the NATO led forces.

India is a growing economic, political and strategic megademocracy, although it sometimes seems Australia is yet to fully come to terms with its global significance and what a deeper and stronger relationship could mean to Australia's national interest. Rory Metcalf of the Lowy Institute observed of the India-Australia relationship:

There is just so much potential there, and it is probably the only relationship Australia has with a major power that is far less than its potential.

While the attacks on Indian students have been rightly condemned by Australian political and community leaders, there is no doubt that the relationship has been severely tested. This is a very difficult issue. It will need to be resolved.

There is another ongoing and unnecessary thorn in the relationship that, if removed, would help overall efforts to build a stronger bilateral relationship. The minister referred to Australia being a key supplier of the resources India needs for economic growth and its energy demands. But there is a thorn in the relationship, being the Rudd government's decision to overturn the Howard government's agreement to sell uranium to India, subject to appropriate safeguards, to help it use low-emission nuclear power for its growing population. The Labor government is refusing to support India in its quest to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by selling Australian uranium to support India's expanded nuclear energy capability.

It is not in Australia's national interest because it sends a message to India that Australia does not trust it to be a recipient of our uranium even though the United States and Canada, amongst others, have agreed to sell uranium and nuclear power technology to India. India has an exemplary record in nonproliferation. It is only able to join the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state, which India believes to be discriminatory because some existing signatories have larger nuclear weapon stockpiles.

Labor uses the excuse that it does not sell uranium to any country outside the 1967 nuclear non-proliferation treaty. That is disingenuous: a Labor government sold uranium to France in the 1980s before France was a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. It is a missed opportunity for Australia with our large uranium reserves as it has shut us out of a huge export market, a market that is growing and that would underpin more Australian jobs, particularly with the recent lifting of the ban on uranium mining in my home state of Western Australia. Indian officials were told by the Rudd government that the real reason for the ban was internal Labor Party politics. I believe it is time for the Labor Party to put Australia's national interests ahead of its dated dogma.

Australia should maintain a long-term focus on India, but in order for our two countries to realise the potential of our bilateral relations we must resolve tensions in the relationship. The attacks on Indian students must stop. Australia will not rest until this happens. That is the message we must send to reassure our friends in India and to Indians living in Australia. It is a message that we must send to those who are responsible for these attacks.