



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Asylum Seekers**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 18 October 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 18 October 2010  
**Page** 573  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Keenan, Michael, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr KEENAN** (Stirling) (11.21 am)—I appreciate that the member for Moreton arrived in his office this morning to be told by the Prime Minister's office that he had to come into the Main Committee to defend the indefensible. I really could not take any points out of his speech that would constitute a legitimate defence or a policy rationale for why this Labor government froze asylum claims by people from particular countries in this most discriminatory way. The motion today is about doing something completely indefensible. If the member for Moreton's defence is any guide, then we will not hear much from the government by way of anything sensible about what needs to be done to address this issue. I am very pleased to support the motion by my good friend the member for Cook. Labor's failure to protect our borders is, without doubt, one of their most significant failures since coming to office. I say that because there are areas in which they have changed policy and done things which have turned out to be absolute disasters.

When they came to office in 2007 all they needed to do to maintain a robust system of border protection was just to leave well enough alone and leave in place the system of border protection they inherited from the previous government. If they had done that, if they had not made any changes to that system, then Australia would not subsequently have had this conversation. We would not subsequently have spent a billion dollars of taxpayers' funds. We would not subsequently have had mainland detention centres overflowing with people and we would not have been discussing here today why the government felt the need in the pre-election climate to freeze the asylum claims of particular nationalities in this most discriminatory way.

When Labor came to power they pretended that they cared about border protection but they could not leave it alone. They had to pander to the left wing within their own party and they made changes that weakened the robust system that the Howard government had put in place. Subsequent to that, the changes gave a big green light to people smugglers to go back into business. We have seen borders become incredibly porous, where people smugglers decide who comes to Australia and the circumstances in which they come.

In the years leading up to the change of government, from 2002 to 2007, this problem was essentially solved. We had an average of three boat arrivals per year. The then opposition, led by its then immigration spokesman, the now Prime Minister Julia Gillard, used to go into a fit every time a boat arrived, which happened on average about once every four months. She used to put out press releases saying 'another boat, another policy failure'. That was when there were three boats in a year. We can now have three boats arrive illegally in Australia on one weekend. The government's response is that they do not know how to respond. The only answer they had was a political stunt in the pre-election climate and that was to do this most shameful of things—pick out particular nationalities and freeze their asylum claims rather than dealing in a non-discriminatory way with people who come to Australia and ask for our protection.

Labor's asylum freeze was nothing but a very cynical ploy to pretend that they cared about this issue. They do not have a policy response to this issue; the only thing they could manage was a political response. When it happened, the member for Cook rightly warned that the result would be overflowing mainland detention centres, and that is, of course, exactly what has happened. I think the *Australian* summed it up very well in a cartoon when the government announced it was going to lift this freeze, and that was, 'Look, we have had this test for six months,' and the cartoon said something along the lines of, 'Now we have worked out that the result is that you get a lot more people in detention.' That is exactly what has happened. We have had these overflowing detention centres as a direct result of the government's failure to have a comprehensive policy and instead to deal with it in its way of a quick political fix prior to an election.

Mr Deputy Speaker, there is actually an answer to this. The idea that Australia is going to be subject to the whims of people smugglers controlling our immigration system and that that is forever going to be the case is complete nonsense. If the government had the resolve—the courage—it would implement the coalition's program as contained within the amendments to this motion and drive those people smugglers from business.

The coalition's policy is simple. We know that it works because it has worked in the past to tame the people smugglers. We would reintroduce temporary protection visas, or a form of temporary protection visa; we would go to third country processing, actually in a country that is prepared to host such a facility; and we would turn the boats around. If we were to follow that prescription, we would not need to have this ongoing conversation because the people smugglers would know that the government in Canberra was serious and they would turn their attention to another soft target. *(Time expired)*