



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Monday, 18 October 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Owens, Julie, MP

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Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (9.41 pm)—My grievance is with the way in which the immigration debate in this country has been boiled down to a simple tally of boat arrivals. I live in one of the most diverse parts of Sydney. I live in Parramatta, right in the geographic centre of Sydney, in a community which has come from the world and settled where I live. Quite a significant number of refugees, over many decades, have settled there as well. I know them well. I know them to be great contributors. I know more recent arrivals and I know their stories. So when I talk about boat arrivals today—even though I am not going to refer so much to the personal stories, I am going to talk about the numbers and the problems around the world—I do want to remind the House that we are talking about people who have travelled terrible paths of fear, loss of family, violence and sometimes torture before finding themselves on a leaky boat seeking a safe place to live.

I am concerned in particular at the growing level of fear of what is a relatively small number of arrivals on Australian soil. I would like, in the time I have here, to inject some facts, some evidence and some relevance into this debate. Australia in 2009 had a net migration of around 160,000 people; the humanitarian stream was about 12,000 and of those about 2,000 arrived by boat. So the number of people arriving by boat was under one per cent of total migration. Yet these people had about 100 per cent of the public's and media's attention. Sections of our community respond with such fear at a relatively small number of boats, but I just want to point out that many other places in the world find themselves in considerably different circumstances. I wonder how we would respond in Australia if, like Pakistan, we were hosting 1.8 million refugees, mostly from Afghanistan. We had 2,000 arrivals in 2009 by boat. Pakistan had 1.8 million people flocking across its border. Now that is a refugee problem. Again, in saying that, I am well aware that it is the refugees themselves who face the greatest problem.

In 2009 Syria was host to 1.1 million Iraqi refugees, making it the second-largest refugee host country in the world. Iran hosted 980,000 refugees—large by our scale but small for Iran which earlier, with an open border policy, hosted close to five million Afghanis. Jordan hosted 500,000 refugees; Chad, 330,000; Tanzania, 321,000; and 320,000 refugees flocked across Kenya's border. In that year 2,000 people arrived by boat on Australian shores.

The economic and social load from hosting refugees is overwhelmingly carried by developing countries, who hosted nearly 80 per cent of the global refugee population. In the Asia-Pacific region, our neighbours host around one-third of all the refugees in the world. In 2009 just 1.6 per cent of the asylum applications received across the 44 industrialised nations came to Australia. We ranked 16th overall and 21st on a per capita basis. Overwhelmingly, the burden of the world refugee problem is hosted by developing and Third World countries. A relatively small percentage of refugees go to industrialised nations, and Australia is well down the list in terms of how many we receive.

If you have listened to some of the debate recently, you might believe that somehow the number of boats that arrive in Australia is simply a matter of what happens within Australia. I would like to point out that the number of refugees in the world rises and falls with conflict. At the moment, there are around 45 million displaced people around the world, and some think that is a profoundly understated number. About 15 million of those people are recognised as refugees, and just one per cent of those refugees will be resettled in a third country. In about mid-2005, there was a relative outbreak of peace and the number of refugees in the world reduced from about 15 million to eight million. Eight and a half million Afghans went home in that year. The boats stopped arriving in Australia, but they also stopped arriving in Canada, Europe and the US. To suggest that boats stopped arriving in the US because of changes in Australia's immigration law is clearly nonsense. Boats stopped arriving in countries such as the US, Canada and Australia because they stopped leaving places of conflict.

When we talk about people smugglers, we are of course talking about criminals. They are people who break laws; they do not necessarily sit down every day and study them. They do not care that the boat floats, so I am sure they do not have a particular care about the quality of life of their customer—or victim, depending on how you see it—when they arrive in their country of destination. Again, Australia and the other countries around the

world receive more refugees, we receive more boats, when war breaks out, and those numbers decline as peace breaks out. Asylum seeker numbers go up and down for all sorts of reasons to do with world circumstances.

Asylum seeker numbers have gone up and down during the terms of individual governments. After the introduction of temporary protection visas, for example—which are hailed as a great reducer of arrivals—arrivals did not decrease. In 1998 there were 200 arrivals on 17 boats. Following the introduction of TPVs, by late 2001 the number of maritime arrivals had increased to 5,516. So the number went up from 200 to 5,516 in the first three years after the introduction of the temporary protection visas. I am not suggesting that the numbers went up because of the temporary protection visas; it is simply that you do not stop a war in a foreign country, and you do not stop people fleeing persecution, fear and violence, with an immigration regulation in Australia. You stop it with peace, not with immigration regulation.

In the two years after the introduction of TPVs, there were 8,455 irregular arrivals on 94 boats. Between 1999 and 2007, over 10,000 of those people were granted TPVs and 90 per cent of them were eventually granted permanent visas. Only three per cent of those people granted temporary protection visas departed Australia. But TPVs also did not allow for family reunions or enable refugees to travel freely, and there is anecdotal evidence that women and children who had not seen their partners and fathers made the dangerous journey to Australia by boat because it was the only way they could actually see their family members.

The other myth is that offshore processing works, where Australia intercepts a boat and transfers it to an Australian-run processing centre elsewhere, most recently in Nauru. Again, the boats declined between 2001 and 2006 right across the world. Again, it is nonsense to assume that the number of boats travelling to the US and Canada declined because Australia processed its asylum seekers in Nauru. The boats stopped coming because 8½ million Afghans went home and there was a decrease in the number of refugees around the world from around 15 million to eight million in those years.

By the way, in those years when the Pacific solution was seen as the answer, Denmark experienced its lowest level of asylum seeker applications since 1983, New Zealand recorded its lowest level since 1998, the United Kingdom recorded its lowest level since 1989, Norway recorded its lowest level since 1997, France recorded its lowest level since 1998 and the UNHCR suggested that the big fall in asylum seekers was due to improved conditions in some source countries, such as the easing of conflicts in Afghanistan and the Balkans. In those years, Canada and the United States experienced a 47 per cent decrease in asylum seekers and Europe experienced a 54 per cent decrease. In other words, many countries all around the world who did not have a Pacific solution experienced the same kind of a reduction in numbers that Australia experienced.

There is considerable fear in my community and in communities across the country of people arriving by boat. I hope that today, in the short period of time I have had, I have helped explain a little bit about what drives people to flee their own communities and seek safe haven here. Only one per cent of refugees around the world will be resettled in third countries. The queue is very, very long for people to find a way into a safe country. I wish all those who arrive here well. I wish them happy and safe futures. *(Time expired)*