



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Tuesday, 19 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) (5.15 pm)—I find this matter of public importance debate rather sad, I have to say.

Mr Keenan—Do you? What a shame!

Ms OWENS—Yes, I do. I live in an area of great diversity and I know a number of people—

Mr Keenan interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—The member for Stirling might get to go and talk to some of his constituents very soon if he is not careful.

Ms OWENS—who over the last 30 years have come here as refugees, many of them on boats. I know families who have been separated from their two-year-old child by armed men and do not know where she is. They now live in Australia, and they do not know where she is. I know a man who, along with his four brothers and sisters, was granted refugee status. They are all now citizens, but they are citizens of five different countries—they have not been together as a family for over 10 years. I know a man who had to pick up the body of his 17-year-old sister, and the description of her injuries should not even be in a person's mind as a description, let alone as a memory. We are, of course, talking about people here. We are well and truly talking about people, and as we talk about boats and snipe at each other I think it is worth remembering that.

I think it is also worth remembering that, in spite of the differences in the way each side of politics has approached the issue of refugees and in spite of the bad record at times of both sides of politics over the last 20 years, as a nation we subscribe to the UN convention and that nobody is suggesting that we reduce the number of people we ultimately accept under the humanitarian program. We have been accepting around 12,000 people—give or take a few—for quite a few decades, and we have done it well. As I understand it, neither side is talking at this point about reducing the number; we are simply sniping at each other about how the people got here. So I think we should just take a step back and recognise that the things we agree on are essentially the key issues here and that we do actually agree on a great deal.

We as a nation have had had moments of great nobility in this debate as well as some terrible moments. We have had times when the greater characteristics of humanity have won the day and times when our less noble characteristics have won the day. There was a time during World War II when we, like many countries in the world, turned back boatloads of Jews; we told them to go back to Germany. We all did that, and after that time we—along with many nations—decided that we would never let that happen again. We were one of the nations that fought hard to establish the UN convention. It was established in 1951, and we took 12,000 refugees from Eastern Europe quite soon afterwards.

Then there was the time in the 1970s under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. He is not a person I have a great regard for in many areas, but I have a great regard for him in this area. He was the person who led Australia through a time when we received one boat from Vietnam every eight days for over a year and a half. Malcolm Fraser led this nation by saying, 'We will not fear this; we will accept this and we will handle this,' and we did and we did it well. The Vietnamese refugees who live in my community and no doubt in yours are great Australians, and they were our first boat people.

There have of course been times when we have not been as noble as that. Again, we on both sides of politics have had moments when we have not been as compassionate and generous as we could have been. I believe that we can afford to be generous in this. I believe that we can afford to allow our more noble characteristics to surface in this argument, because I know, as you know, that the number of refugees Australia takes every year is achievable and supportable and that we have been doing it for a long time. We have been taking around 12,000 refugees on the humanitarian visa, and relative to the rest of the rest of the world the number of refugees is actually very, very small. When people who are broken as a result of war, of violence, of torture and of fear

have fled their country and sought another place and arrived on our shores by plane or by boat or via resettlement, decent people have put out their hand out to help.

I believe we can afford to be decent, because the number of people coming to our shores is actually relatively small. There are 45 million displaced people in the world at the moment, and about 15 million of those are refugees. Less than one per cent of those will be resettled in Third World countries, and Australia is one of a handful of countries that allow the resettlement of people from a third country. By the way, my calculation of that figure of 15 million refugees is that, for every 2,500 of them, one tries to get to Australia by boat in our heaviest year—one in 2,500 tries to get to Australia.

Mr Keenan—And they take the place of somebody who could have come here legally.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Stirling has had his turn.

Ms OWENS—We have had surges and drops in the number of people coming to Australia by boat for as long as we can remember. We had a surge in the 1970s with the Vietnamese, we had a surge in the 1980s, and then it dropped again. Then we had a surge in the 1990s, when there was a war in Iraq and people fleeing the Taliban, and then we had a drop again. We have a surge again now because of conflict in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The key thing that drives people fleeing to somewhere is that they are fleeing from somewhere. When there is a war, people flee; when peace breaks out, they stop fleeing. So when war breaks out there is a surge in people moving around the world. There is a surge in people moving around the world everywhere, by the way—it is not just here. This notion that the 45 million displaced people in the world are all looking to come to Australia is just not accurate. As I said, of 2,500 people who qualify as refugees, one seeks to come to Australia by boat in our heaviest year.

Imagine if we hosted the number that Pakistan hosts: 1.8 million refugees fled across the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan—1.8 million. Now that is a refugee problem. Mind you, it is a bigger problem for the refugees who have lost their families and their homes and are living with grief and unbearable loss and sometimes physical trauma as well. Syria has 1.1 million Iraqi refugees, making it the second largest refugee-hosting country in the world. Iran has 980,000 and there have been times when Iran has hosted over three million Afghans. Jordan has 500,000, Chad 330,000, and Tanzania 321,000, and 320,000 refugees flocked across Kenya's border. The load from hosting these refugees, and again members opposite know this as well as we do, is overwhelmingly carried by developing nations—not by Australia by any means but by developing countries, who hosted nearly 80 per cent of the global refugee population last year. Forty-nine of the least developed countries in the world host nearly one-fifth of the world's refugees.

We play a very important role as one of about a dozen countries that accept refugees from Third World countries, and it is in the nation's interest and in our best behaviour to ensure that the Australian people understand and respect the value of that refugee program. The behaviour today and these motions that stir up fear, suspicion and hate do not serve our interests well.

Mr Keenan—What rubbish! Where do you get your moral superiority from?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Stirling is warned!

Ms OWENS—In 2009 we received 6,170 applications, which is 1.6 per cent of the 370,000 applications received across the industrialised nations. We were ranked 16th and 21st overall.

There are some great myths about how policy influences the number of boat arrivals, and the minister dealt with some of them. But the last time that Afghanistan was at the top of the list of refugee source countries was in 2001, when we also had a surge here. Afghans lodged asylum claims in 39 of the 44 industrialised countries last year. It is incredibly common. Worldwide there were 380,000 asylum claims lodged in industrialised countries. The United States received 50,000 applications, Canada 30,000, the European Union 250,000, and France over 40,000 asylum claims. The UK and Germany had 30,000 claims each. Other EU countries received more than 10,000 asylum claims each and Australia received 6,000 claims. The increase in the number of claims occurred all around the world. Virtually every industrialised country had an increase in claims in the same way that Australia did. It is just common sense. People flee to somewhere when they flee from somewhere, and they flee to other industrialised countries in far, far greater numbers than they flee to Australia. Again I would like to remind the House that we generally agree on the numbers of refugees that we should be accepting and that we are today

talking about some of the most disadvantaged and broken people that you can imagine, and I would ask us to respect that. *(Time expired)*