



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MOTIONS**

**Prime Minister**

**Attempted Censure**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 15 June 2015**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 15 June 2015  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Burke, Tony, MP

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

**Mr BURKE** (Watson—Manager of Opposition Business) (14:43): I seek leave to move a motion of censure against the Prime Minister.

Leave not granted.

**Mr BURKE:** I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the Member for Watson from moving the following motion forthwith:

That the House censures the Prime Minister for leading a chaotic Government in which the:

- (1) Minister for Foreign Affairs having flatly denied that the Government had paid criminal people smugglers to transport asylum seekers on unsafe boats refused to answer questions today on the same matter, citing intelligence, security and operational matters;
- (2) Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Immigration, the Attorney-General and the Prime Minister are disagreeing with each other as to whether the Government paid criminal people smugglers to transport asylum seekers on unsafe boats; and
- (3) Government is providing a cash incentive for criminal people smugglers to make voyages to Australia by failing to deny reports that criminal people smugglers could be paid \$30,000 US dollars if they can make it to an Australian vessel.

We have no choice but to suspend standing orders when we have a situation where that man is physically incapable of answering a question, and it is a question that matters because it is a question with an answer that ricochets around the networks in Indonesia, an answer that either shuts down an incentive—the way some of his fellow ministers have tried to do—or else allows a story to fester that somehow there has been a shift of late, and now people who have been described by both sides of politics in the worst possible terms may well be able to get Australian taxpayers' money to keep people on a leaky boat.

Australian taxpayers have a right to know where their money is spent. Australian taxpayers have a right to know in particular if their money is going to the most vile trade that both sides of this chamber have made the strongest comments against. Both sides have made the strongest comments against it.

Honourable members interjecting—

**Mr BURKE:** I hear the shouting from those opposite, who do not want to suspend standing orders. They do not want a debate that might draw in what they did in Malaysia. They do not want a debate that might draw together the decisions that they made when they voted with the Greens, because, every time they cite the number of drownings, they neglect to reflect on the fact that about half of them occurred—about half of those lives were lost—after they had decided to be part of the blocking of the arrangement with Malaysia. Those opposite do not want an honest debate on this. No wonder the slogans do not make it past three words. No wonder they do not want their own record of how they behaved in opposition to be exposed in any way.

But now we have a new measure, where the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection was last week prepared to give an answer in a way that the Prime Minister is not. Admittedly, he was willing to use the vocabulary that the Prime Minister was previously committed to. His answer was the word 'no'. But when asked directly at a media conference on Tuesday whether officials had recently paid the crew and captain of a boat carrying asylum seekers to take them from Australia—whether or not Australian taxpayers' money had been

handed over to these people—the immigration minister was willing to shut down the story straightaway and say no.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs was willing, when asked by a journalist, 'Do Australian authorities pay the captain and crew of people-smuggling boats to turn them back to Indonesia?'—the foreign minister back then was willing—to answer, 'No.' And the Attorney-General, in the Senate today, has been willing to make similar comments. But, as long as the Prime Minister of this country refuses to shut it down, stories of incentives around Indonesia will continue to run, and Australian taxpayers will quite rightly ask: where on earth is their money being handed over to by Australian officials?

We had the bizarre situation—and this is why we need to stop question time and have a serious debate—where the foreign minister, when asked whether or not she answered honestly last week, said:

I can inform the House I will not comment on intelligence, security or operational matters.

I have to say: other people will be commenting on intelligence after a comment like that, because what the foreign minister is doing is saying by her answer today that she stepped out of line last week. If her answer to the parliament today is in any way accurate, then the immigration minister gave intelligence information in front of television cameras. If the foreign minister's answer today is at all accurate, then she herself, in front of the media, provided answers that were actually meant to be classified. They cannot have it both ways. Bizarrely, of all the different concepts within the parliament, here is one where they reckon parliamentary privilege means that you are allowed to say less inside this room than you are allowed to say outside it—that somehow you must not say it in the parliament, you must not let it get into those *Hansard* records; just say it in front of a TV camera! That is the right approach! And that is the approach that those opposite have chosen to take.

If the foreign minister's answer today is in any way accurate, then last week we saw a gross level of irresponsibility from those opposite. But, if the answers they gave last week were in any way accurate, what we are seeing now is appalling behaviour from the Prime Minister of this country. Three of the members of his own cabinet, all of whom would attend meetings of the National Security Committee, have been willing to give answers, and yet the Prime Minister is not willing to provide the same sort of information. We have a situation where we have no choice but to set aside the ordinary debate of parliament, because this is not simply some mistake that someone might have made at a media conference. This is something that this Prime Minister has claimed is an absolute cornerstone of his prime ministership, and yet he will not let people know if he has done exactly what he used to rail against. He has said:

If you pay a people-smuggler, ... that's doing the wrong thing, not the right thing, and we shouldn't encourage it.

I have to say: US\$30,000 would count as an encouragement. If they are serious at all when they talk about the drownings argument being something significant, then you do not pay people to keep them on a leaky boat. You do not pay people to keep them in a situation where every other piece of rhetoric has said that that would put their lives at risk.

This parliament has to be able to have a situation where we can ask a question and get something approaching an answer, because—let us not forget—these are hardly questions of difficult detail. We asked the immigration minister, 'Immigration Minister, do you agree with yourself?' and he did not know how to answer. We asked the foreign minister, 'Foreign Minister, do you agree with yourself?' and she said, 'I mustn't answer that.' What we have across there is a government that is in absolute chaos. They have leaks from their National Security Committee. They now have leaks from their own question time briefs appearing online today. We now have a situation where they cannot hold the line even within the ranks of their own National Security Committee.

This is a situation where this parliament must shut down question time and have an open debate, because the Prime Minister will not be able to respond to this resolution with a three-word slogan, but it could do with a one-word answer. A one-word answer will settle this—a one-word answer that Australian taxpayers have a right to know. Everyone who is an Australian taxpayer, even if they have to put up with a Treasurer who is not up to it, at least has a right to know whether or not Australian officials have been authorised to act in this way and whether or not people smugglers are now going to wonder, if they make the voyage and start on their pathway, whether they have a choice where either they get turned back, in which case they can get the \$30,000, or they make it through. It is a no-lose situation, and if it is not happening a simple answer from the Prime Minister would shut it

down well. It is a prime ministerial answer he used to be completely capable of giving. Who would have thought that this bloke would get to the point where he could not anymore say the word 'no'?

The SPEAKER: Is the motion seconded?