



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Enterprise Migration Agreements
SPEECH

Tuesday, 29 May 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Owens, Julie, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (16:30): Once again, I am rising to speak on one of the more unusual matters of public importance that you would see in this parliament, an MPI about something both sides of the House agree on and an MPI about something that the government committed to over a year ago and has worked for in consultation with unions and business.

The opposition themselves said earlier today they were widely briefed on the enterprise migration agreements and that they agreed with them. The government has just announced one. There is a government commitment to it and yet we have an MPI about it. It is not an MPI about how good it is—and it is a good thing—but an MPI about somehow there is uncertainty about something both sides agree on and something that the government has committed to and spent a year developing.

This should be quite unusual but, unfortunately, it is not. The only uncertainty that comes into this issue comes from this MPI itself where, once again, we have the opposition getting up and trying to spread as much fear as they can, trying to give the impression that things are not as they should be and that people have the right to feel afraid. Again, let me repeat: the enterprise migration agreements are something both sides of this House agree on, something that has been worked on since Gary Gray chaired the National Resources Sector Employment Taskforce back in 2010 and something that was announced in May 2011. Now, a year later, the first of the major enterprise migration agreements has been announced. The government is committed to it and we have an MPI of this nature.

But the silliness goes further than that. The first speaker, the member for Cook, was talking as if he had discovered a whodunnit. Who did it? Did the butler do it? But there is no body here. It is hard to have a whodunnit when there is no body. You can speculate as much as you like about who might have done what to whom but there is no body here. The enterprise migration agreements are government policy. We have announced the first one. We are committed to it. It was an absolute nonsense of a speech.

The member for Groom introduced a whole new conspiracy, that somehow the fact that the resources minister was flying to Western Australia must be something to do with a leadership challenge. That is one of the most extraordinary ones I have ever heard yet. The resources minister flying to Western Australia—where there are mines, where there is gas, where there is iron ore, where there is coal, where there are resources—might be something to do with something other than the fact that he is Minister for Resources and Energy and Western Australia is full of resources. What nonsense. And then the member said that the minister was flying to Perth on a public plane in the seat behind the member for Groom, in secret. A secret flight on a public plane in full view of everyone to a state with lots of resources? Wow, it must be a conspiracy. There must be something wrong going on here. But this is the length that the opposition has to go to in trying to make this MPI stick. Both sides of politics agree on this enterprise migration agreement issue. In order to make the MPI stick, they have to invent a whole range of things. They have also said that we have been happily abolishing 457 visas, and yet there has been 56,000 of them to April this year.

This is a ridiculous MPI. It is absolutely ridiculous, particularly when we are absolutely the government of jobs, absolutely the government of growth. There is a pipeline of half a trillion dollars in investment flowing into this country. It is the biggest flow of investment into this country that we have ever seen. It is of massive proportions, extraordinary proportions, and the opposition says that is a sign of how badly we are doing. We are doing so badly that we have got the biggest investment pipeline that we have ever seen flowing into this country. That brings with it absolute challenges.

A resources boom has within it its own barrier to growth because it grows to a point that it needs skilled labour that it can no longer get. It actually eats up the available skilled labour quite quickly. It has its own capping mechanism if governments do not work with the various sectors to ease the way for growth. This government has been doing that. We are the government that created over 700,000 new training places. We are the government

that has been investing in trade training schools. We are the government that is making it possible for people to go to TAFE and to get HECS style funding. We are the ones that have given additional funding to universities. In my electorate alone, we have seen a 17 per cent increase in the enrolment of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. We are the government that did this.

I sat on that side of this chamber for the last three years of the Howard government and I listened time after time to the reports of the Governor of the Reserve Bank about the fact that the previous government did not invest sufficiently in skills. I sat there and watched the Howard government introduce the 457 visas without the appropriate protections. I saw the exploitation. I heard from people in my electorate who had been employed on those visas as they were, who were being paid near slave wages, who had their passports confiscated and who were in fear of being immediately deported if they complained. I saw that. We all saw that. We saw how badly the Howard government responded to the resources boom and the needs that there were for a skilled workforce.

They failed to train Australians, and they failed to respond to the needs of the sector; instead they allowed a 457 regime that was so easily exploited and which, in parallel to Work Choices—which drove down Australian wages—allowed the standards of Australians to be undermined by underpayment and by low standards under the 457. We are the government who are committed to making the 457 visa system work. We are the ones who sat down and made sure that businesses employing workers from overseas were doing so on the same conditions as Australians. We were the ones who introduced the rules that made that system work. And we are the ones who realised early on that for these extremely large-scale projects you need a one-on-one approach to negotiating how the workforce issues will be dealt with in the long term.

The enterprise migration agreements are incredibly good at that. They recognise that in boom times like this we have massive construction needs, which are essentially short-term jobs, and that the need for skilled workers will peak extraordinarily but then, as the project is completed, will settle into a lower number of long-term, good-quality operational jobs. We are the ones who recognised that we need to negotiate one-on-one to smooth those bumps out for companies for projects like the Roy Hill.

This enterprise migration agreement does all of the things that we would expect it to do. It ensures that the Roy Hill project provides training for Australians—real training for real jobs—for the long-term jobs of Australians. It ensures that Indigenous people are catered for, that there are real jobs for the Indigenous people living locally. It ensures that there are over 6,000 Australian jobs on this project—that is a lot of jobs. But it does allow the Roy Hill project to bring in the workers for the construction phase, within a certain band of skill level so that the construction can go ahead, because that needs a massive 8½ thousand workers.

This is a good agreement. It is an agreement that protects the interests of Australians. It is an agreement that makes sure that workers who come in from elsewhere in the world are employed on the market rate and at the same conditions and standards that Australian workers are working on. It ensures that the company pays the costs for those workers to get to and from Australia. But it also guarantees that the company is investing in training Australian workers for the future, and making sure that the local Indigenous people have a place to share the benefits of this project.

It is a good agreement, and both sides agree that it is a good agreement.

Ms Saffin: So what are we debating?

Ms OWENS: So, what the hell are we doing here talking about uncertainty for something that we both agree on? More waste of time! (*Time expired*)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas): Order! The discussion is now concluded.