



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Sri Lankan Refugees**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 7 February 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 7 February 2013  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Husic, Ed, MP

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

**Mr HUSIC** (Chifley—Government Whip) (12:55): I rise to speak to join the thousands of Australian Tamil constituents in the Chifley electorate—joined by those who live in the electorates of Greenway and Parramatta—to express my utter disbelief at some extraordinary events that unfolded right here in Canberra this week. Earlier in the week, shadow foreign minister Julie Bishop and shadow immigration minister Scott Morrison effectively re-announced not only a short-sighted policy but one that potentially breaches international law. It was not just the re-announcement that was stunning; it was what it overlooked and how that was explained, and I will return to that later.

This coalition policy announced in September last year would see the coalition enact into law a plan to return any asylum seekers arriving here from Sri Lanka who were intercepted at sea, without even assessing or determining their refugee claims. Shortly after this plan was announced, I moved a private member's motion supported by the member for Greenway, Michelle Rowland, to highlight the serious problems associated with this move. I stated at the time that there was absolutely no context provided as to why, out of all the nationalities of asylum seekers arriving here, Sri Lankans have been singled out. The plan by the coalition for a forcible transfer agreement would more than likely breach the refugee convention on nonrefoulement. The coalition's plans were grossly hypocritical given that they had refused to back our transfer agreement with Malaysia on the grounds that Malaysia was not a signatory to the convention, yet here they are, planning to forcibly return people to Sri Lanka, a country that is also not a signatory.

The world has recoiled at the atrocities that have occurred in Sri Lanka during the course of its brutal civil war. It has been estimated that the conflict cost the lives of 100,000 Sinhalese and Tamil civilians between 1972 and 2009. While some might argue that the circumstances are improving in that country, others claim that the path to recognition is a long one. I have previously pointed out that one of our closest allies, the United States, welcomed UN resolutions carried last year calling on Sri Lanka to credibly investigate war crimes that have been alleged to have occurred. The Sri Lankan government, disappointingly, has refused to acknowledge the resolutions that have been carried by the UN.

Let me return to a point I made earlier. In the last few weeks two senior coalition frontbenchers, the shadow foreign minister and the shadow immigration minister, visited Sri Lanka. I actually thought that this might have been a visit to better acquaint themselves with the situation and potentially moderate policy. What has stunned many is not just that they did not do that but some of the reasons they used to justify not doing it. Many Tamil MPs in Sri Lanka who actually met these two frontbenchers are simply staggered by what they have heard this week. Let me quote from one, Sivagnanam Shritharan, who said:

I am very hurt by Julie Bishop's false claims. Spreading lies with no conscience—

His words—

about a race that is being wiped out saddens us. We feel that we have been deceived.

That is contained in a media statement issued today. According to a statement issued via the Tamil Refugee Council, Mr Shritharan, along with other Tamil National Alliance colleagues, said they had spent several hours with both of these frontbenchers. Both denied this week that they were made aware during their trip that the lives of many Tamil asylum seekers would be in danger if the coalition's forcible transfer agreement plan went ahead. Yesterday on ABC radio, Fran Kelly asked shadow minister Julie Bishop about the claims of abuse against Tamils and she replied:

We didn't hear of ongoing Tamil abuse by the Sinhalese, that's the point.

Mr Shritharan said that this claim was untrue and that he and his TNA colleagues had told them about, for example, the arrests of university students and their jailing in rehabilitation camps, the forced removal of Tamils

from their land and houses, the fear that some Tamils live in because of a massive military presence and claims of torture. Mr Shriitharan went on to say:

All those international representatives I have met with in the past four years as a parliamentarian were all unbiased with their questioning and came with an open heart. I felt Julie Bishop and her colleagues were taking sides with the Sri Lankan government. They did not care about Tamil grievances. The actions of people like Julie Bishop hurt us.

... ..

They did not want to understand our reasons.

When they visited Tamil areas, they did not speak to any Tamil civilians.

There is little I need to do to condemn the actions of these two frontbenchers, because they are condemned by their own inaction and by the deep dismay conveyed in the words of those who expected better from them. If a refugee claim fails to have validity it is rejected, and it is right to do so, but international law gives people the right to make the claim, especially if they feel they are under threat.

Australian Tamils who have been resettled here are and who are making a great contribution are right to be outraged, and I stand here today to let them know that I deeply object to these plans and will do all I can to fight them.

Question agreed to.

**Federation Chamber adjourned at 13:00**