



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE**

**Border Protection**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 14 May 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Perrett, Graham, MP

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**Mr PERRETT** (Moreton) (16:12): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, for recognising me this far away from you. It is a bit unusual for me to be this far away from you.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Are you in your right seat?

**Mr PERRETT**: I am, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been moved—promoted.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Moreton has the call and I recognise his elevation to Deputy Whip.

**Mr PERRETT**: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have heard a range of speakers on this topic, and some interesting ideas from both sides. I will take out the member for Solomon's contribution, because that was just a stitching-together of election slogans. But there were some interesting ideas put forward in this MPI, because it is an important issue.

The world has changed significantly since the Howard government came to power in 1996, and significantly since those years in 1999, 2000 and 2001 when a significant number of boats started heading towards Australia. Let's look at things that have happened. Australia's population has obviously increased—we have now reached 23 million people, and I think that the world's population has reached nine billion. Climate change is recognised by all—leaving aside a few people on the opposite side of the chamber—of the world's serious scientists as being a significant problem. Now, today, there are approximately 46 million displaced people within their own countries—46 million people displaced around the world—and we see it playing out in war in horrible places like Syria; with climate change impacting on many countries both in terms of agricultural production or rising sea levels; and also with some political challenges that have come. Over 15 million people have registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and they are seen to have a legitimate case.

Australia has a proud history of accepting immigrants. We are a nation of immigrants, as you know by looking around at the surnames, religions and backgrounds of people in this chamber. Since the end of World War II, almost six million people have migrated to Australia from other nations. So we do understand migration. We are not a xenophobic nation, even though ever since 1788 we have had an almost pathological fear as a nation of people coming in boats. Whether we are worried about the French that were only a couple of days late, the Russians, the Japanese, the Germans, the Vietnamese or whoever, it seems to be part of Australia's DNA to have a fear of boats, but also to welcome the person from overseas who lives next door to you, even though they seem to be contradictory concepts. In my electorate about one in three people were born overseas, but throughout Australia it is about one in four. I think we are No. 2 in the world in terms of taking refugees in—I think we went past Canada the other day—and it is basically the United States, Australia, Canada and then a fair bit of daylight before you get to anyone that takes any significant numbers. I think some of those Scandinavian countries take 100 or 200 and then it is basically no-one else. You can count the number of countries that do accept refugees on two hands.

In stripping out some of the politics and passion about this topic, it is important to remember that approximately 90 per cent of the asylum seekers who arrived by boat were found to be refugees. It does vary from year to year depending on where the people are coming from, and I think the minister indicated that there had certainly been a change in terms of people coming from Sri Lanka. In terms of people arriving by plane, where there is nowhere near the hysteria, less than 50 per cent of those seeking asylum have been found to have genuine cases. We need to put that in that context. It is a horrible fact that if people are coming because they are starving to death that is not a genuine claim to be a refugee. If you are coming because your island is being covered by waves and you are drowning, you do not have a genuine claim as a refugee. It is a horrible fact that some people do not realise that you must be fleeing extreme persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality or the membership of a particular social group or political opinion. I have certainly got refugees in my electorate that have come both by boat and by plane who have those characteristics—and I particularly mention many of the Vietnamese in my

suburb of Oxley who made that journey and many of the Sudanese in my suburbs of Moorooka and Annerley as well as Hazari throughout my electorate who came for all sorts of different reasons.

That is one of those facts that we do not realise, that we could watch someone starve to death and that will not enliven our treaty obligations given the treaty that we on both sides of the chamber support. I particularly thank the member for Wakefield for touching on that history of bipartisanship in this area—a proud history of bipartisanship in this area—where people did not play the race card. Instead, they played the national interest card: the right thing to do, the Christian thing to do, the 'what would a good neighbour do? thing' That has been the case in the past where we see those figures for the Vietnamese. I had not realised that the actual number of Vietnamese people arriving was so low in terms of those coming by boat—1,700 people throughout the late seventies—but the number of Vietnamese who then came under other programs is obviously much more significant and they continue, as a whole, to make a great contribution to our economy and to our nation.

What to do to set up a situation where we manage this flow, this reality of a changed world? We cannot just put the mirror up and say, 'This is what we did in 2001-02.' As we heard from the minister, that policy was of a time and was flawed at that time. We must accept the advice of the people who know, and that is the Navy, the people who actually go out there on the waves and put their lives at risk. They have said very clearly that it is too dangerous and that we put ADF lives at risk. I have stood in this chamber too many times commemorating the loss of ADF personnel lives, and to think that a political decision could result in more ADF personnel dying scares me horribly. Along with the member for Stirling, who spoke earlier, and the member for Wakefield, I was a part of the joint select committee chaired by Senator Gavin Marshall that looked into the Christmas Island tragedy. We stood on the cliffs at Christmas Island and many of you have seen the footage of that boat breaking up there, except we then had to watch the entire footage and see those young girls drowning—the footage that did not make it onto our news at night. That event was significant because we had the footage, but there are so many other untold stories of lives lost at sea.

Every day that I go for a walk in Canberra I walk through the SIEV X memorial to those 300 other lives that were lost. We need to do all we can as a nation to stop people making that journey in boats, because the reality is that about one in 20 of them will drown. Lots of things motivate people to get into boats, but the reality is that it is about a one in 20 ratio of people drowning at sea. That is why we asked Angus Houston, the former chief of our Defence Force and very well respected by both sides of the chamber, to pull an expert panel together and find out what we should do. All of their recommendations must be in place for the whole suite of measures for us to be able to stop people making those dangerous journeys.

However all of them were supported, apart from the politics that came into play in the Malaysian solution, where we had that dreadful hypocrisy of, 'We will tow boats back to Indonesia, even though they are not a signatory to the UNHCR treaty,' and at the very same time saying, 'We won't send people to Malaysia because they are not a signatory to the UNHCR treaty'. It is that rank hypocrisy from those opposite, where they are prepared to milk this situation for every available vote.