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National Security

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker O'Connor, Brendan, MP

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Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (16:29): I rise to speak on this matter of public importance. Firstly, I can assure the House that I will not be taking lectures on compassion from the member for Cook, who chose to suggest that we should not have allowed a child to go to his father's funeral in Sydney. I will not be taking any lectures from the member for Cook on how we deal with people compassionately. I certainly will not be taking lectures from the opposition on national security when the opposition, for the entire period of this parliamentary term, have done everything they possibly can to avoid listening to the experts in relation to border protection, refugee settlement and diplomacy.

We brought together three eminent Australians—the former Chief of the Australian Defence Force, appointed by the Howard government and, indeed, appointed by our government; the eminent diplomat, the former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and former High Commissioner of Britain, Michael L'Estrange; and someone who has had over a quarter of a century of understanding in refugee settlement, Paris Aristotle—to come from different perspectives to forge some recommendations so that we could reduce the chances of and deter people endangering their lives by getting on unseaworthy vessels, leading, as we have seen in many cases, to maritime tragedies.

What we would expect from an opposition on matters of national security—if this is a matter of national security, and I believe it is—is a level of bipartisanship that we have not seen to date. For that reason, the Leader of the Opposition will, I believe, go down in history as the most relentlessly negative opposition leader we have ever seen. The opposition leader in this place will do anything and everything if it is in his political interests, and he has shown that time and time again. How can you possibly refute and refuse to accept the experts' evidence on how we should approach these things? Even if there is any doubt on the other side about some of these matters—even if they have some doubts, for example, with respect to the Malaysian arrangement—why would they not allow it to be implemented to see what would happen, given the tragedies we have seen subsequently?

It seems to me that the opposition will say anything and do anything that is in its own interests. Just as it failed to respond to the experts during the global financial crisis by rejecting decisions made by government, it is now refusing to listen to the experts in relation to this very complex area of public policy; experts like the former Defence Force chief. If as the Immigration minister I have to take advice in relation to these matters I will be taking advice from Angus Houston, not from the member for Cook, if you do not mind.

The problem is that that Leader of the Opposition seems to be taking advice from the member for Cook, and that is a tragedy. We can talk all we like about what we will do with people in our community—and what we have chosen to do in the detention network is ensure people are detained either on bridging visas or in community detention—but, ultimately, we need to find a long-term, sustainable, regional solution to what is a complex problem. The first point of call has to be the Bali process so that we have countries of origin, transit and destination involved. The second is trying innovative approaches like the in-principle agreement we had with Malaysia, so we could see what would happen if we had a capacity to return or transfer arrivals to the transit country.

It is quite extraordinary that the opposition leader effectively says yes to a country that says no—Indonesia—and says no to a country that says yes—Malaysia. Why would he do that? Why, if someone were offered a solution to transfer arrivals to a transit country, would they say no when that country says yes? Why would they say yes to a country like Indonesia that says no to receiving people by returning back the boats? Why would they do that? Because they do not want to see something succeed. What they want to see happen is more boats. What the member for Cook and the opposition leader want to see, as they rub their hands, is more boats arriving in our waters. That is why they have chosen to not accept the recommendations by the expert panel in relation to these matters, including the Malaysia arrangement. It is the height of cynicism and negativity to go down that path.

If this were some simple municipal matter, some small domestic reform or initiative, then that would be something we could perhaps accept in the partisan nature of our parliamentary process. But this is a matter of

national interest. This is a national security matter. Yet the opposition leader thinks it is entirely proper that he refuse to accept the way in which the government should proceed as advised by our national security and law enforcement agencies, and by the expert panel convened by this government. This will never be forgotten, I can assure you, Deputy Speaker, by those who will look back and say: 'What an extraordinarily reckless opposition leader. What an extraordinarily dishonest opposition that refuses to accept the advice of those experts.' It is extraordinary behaviour to refuse to accept such advice.

In relation to the other efforts made by the member for Cook to demonise and vilify certain people, to scare our communities by making all sorts of wild allegations about people on bridging visas, this is the lowest of the low we could ever see in this place. When they start to demonise and vilify people and scare our community, we can see this is an opposition that wants to run a fear campaign and frighten our community. I have not forgotten the member for Cook's efforts to scare people by saying we needed a register of people in our community. Notwithstanding the fact that these have gone through identity, security and health assessments, we need a register! I remember Senator Abetz following that commentary by the member for Cook, saying, 'It is not exactly the same as child sex offenders, but we need a register.' Fancy comparing people on bridging visas—in many cases genuine asylum seekers—with sex offenders! That is the level of the debate that has been conducted by the opposition in relation to these matters, and the opposition should collectively hang their heads in shame. It is a disgraceful act, it is a disgraceful form of behaviour. Is it any wonder that there are members opposite who are ashamed of the way the opposition are conducting themselves in relation to these matters.

This is a very important area of public debate but it goes to what really can be done and what really can be committed to by the opposition. We recall that before the last election the opposition leader had 'Stop the boats' as his slogan; that was his policy. That is all he had and he has had it for three years. But as we get closer to the election and he sees a chance that he may win the election—in fact he is already celebrating that he has won the election—he is trying to work out how he is going to stop the boats with a slogan. How can we stop the boats with a slogan?

Opposition members interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas): Order! There are too many interjections on my left, and some members are not in their seats.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: What we have watched in recent times is the opposition leader and the member for Cook and indeed the member for Stirling walk away from this commitment. First it was three months. Fran Kelly in 2010 asked the Leader of the Opposition: 'So if you have not stopped them in three months?' He said: 'Oh, I think in three months we will make a very big difference.' Then it was between six and 12 months in October last year when he was asked: 'Can you be more specific? Would that be 12 months or six months?' The opposition leader said, 'Well, within those time frames.' Then it was 'a few months' again on 21 February this year. Then the member for Cook could not say when or how they would stop the boats. He said on 13 March in an interview on 2GB: 'I believe we can get back to the outcome that the Howard government achieved. I do not put any time frames on it and I am not about to. I am not about to make such forecasts. I would like to see it happen as soon as possible.' This is the new slogan of the opposition—it is 'Stop the boats as soon as we possibly can' or 'Stop the boats but I can't put a time frame on it' or 'Stop the boats because we would just like to do so'. The fact is that they have walked away from their slogan because as they get closer to the election they realise they have nothing in place to stop the vessels and they have not listened to the experts and they have not engaged with the region effectively.

As I talk about engagement with the region, let us think about what the shadow minister, the member for Cook, has done in his dealings with the region. Can you imagine a person who wants to be minister for immigration—although I am told he may not want to be minister for immigration; I hear that he is pleading to get out of the portfolio just in case they win. But just imagine this if we can. Let us imagine that you want to be minister for immigration and you need the region's support. Why don't you fly to a foreign country like Malaysia, stand on Malaysian soil, call a press conference and abuse the reputation of that country? That is effectively what the member for Cook did. He thought, 'What is a good idea? How do I get a regional solution to this regional problem? I think I'll fly to Malaysia, call a press conference and abuse of Malaysian government.' That is effectively what the member for Cook did when he visited Malaysia.

And what did the opposition leader do in relation to Indonesia? He has got a 'turn back the boats' policy. He meets the president of Indonesia, and does he raise the issue? He did not even ask the question: will you accept turning back the boats? Do you know why he did not ask the question, Deputy Speaker? Because he knows the answer is no. So here you have an opposition leader who says no to the country that is yes and yes to the country that says no. Why does he do that? Because he wants the policy to fail, he wants to see more boats because he works on his base political interests, motivated for personal gain—not motivated in the national interest, motivated for the wrong reasons, for the wrong purposes. Indeed, the opposition has shown its disregard for the national interest the entire time of this parliamentary term.

There must be a point where the opposition has to come clean about its policy, because stopping the boats ain't enough. All the qualifications and inconsistencies they come up with, all the assertions they make, they have absolutely no basis for putting them forward. The member for Stirling talks about stopping the boats. He may say that but you actually have to explain it. Let us think about it. We have no regional architecture in place; we have abused the Malaysian government—

Mr Keenan interjecting—

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: The member for Stirling will get his go in a minute.

Honourable members interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Stirling will have his opportunity. It is far too noisy in this place, from both sides of the chamber.

Mr Keenan interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Stirling will stop interjecting.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: The fact is that this opposition has done everything it possibly can to stymie the expert advice that was provided to the government in order for us to see a reduction in people dying at sea, people coming to our shores, people getting onto vessels in circumstances where they should not. That is the most important element of all. It seems to me that when the consequences are so tragic then it really is incumbent upon the parliament to come together.

We have had an opportunity on a number of occasions in this parliamentary term for the parliament to come together to reduce the chances of people dying at sea—men, women and children perishing at sea. It seems to me that we can talk about fiscal costs, and they are important, and we can talk about all sorts of costs. But what about the human cost of not stopping these vessels? Therefore, it seems to me entirely proper that the parliament—that is, the opposition and the government—rely upon the expert advice that has been provided to us and try that approach. Even if the opposition in some cases does not agree with all the recommendations or even if the opposition thinks that this may not be entirely effective, why would they not give it a go? This is in the end about not only whether we can protect our borders but whether we can protect people, particularly children, endangering their lives at sea.

I call upon the opposition to rethink its position in refusing to support eminent Australians' views about these matters. I think it is absolutely critical that we do that. The fear-mongering that is continuing to be conducted by the opposition should cease. It is not leadership to scare the community, it is not leadership to frighten people in their homes, it is not leadership to demonise vulnerable people.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas): Order! Before I call the member for Stirling, I would say to the member for Indi and the member for Braddon that, if they wish to continue their private discussion, they can continue it outside the chamber, not across the chamber.