



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Deaths by Drowning

SPEECH

Monday, 7 November 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

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Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (10:28): Australians live by the water. Being in and around the water is part of our nation's culture and our identity. But regular exposure to water brings risks that can be fatal. Unfortunately, over the last year the number of fatalities around the water in Australia increased. We have actually gone backwards over the last year when it comes to preventing drownings in Australia. The Royal Life Saving report on national drownings revealed in September 2016 that the number of drownings in Australia increased from 267 deaths in 2014-15 to 280 in 2015-16. For a nation like Australia, this simply is not good enough.

As acknowledged in this motion, a quarter of all drownings occurred in inland waterways such as rivers, creeks and dams; 86 per cent of all drowning deaths were males; and, indeed, every incidence of drowning has a wider impact on families, rescuers and communities. More broadly, the impact of drowning is greatest among children under five, in coastal and inland waterways, and among those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Alcohol and/or drugs are known to be a factor in 34 per cent of drowning deaths, and males are four times as likely to drown as females.

In my electorate of Kingsford Smith, rock fishing has proven to be a particularly deadly pastime—17 rock fishermen have died in Sydney's east over the last decade. This stretch of coastal waterway that I represent is the most dangerous in the country when it comes to rock fishing fatalities. In fact, I was walking along Maroubra Beach just last week, going out to the Malabar Headland, and there, emblazoned on the sign as you walk out to Malabar Headland, is the number 03—three rock fishing deaths had occurred right at that position over the course of the last 12 months.

Royal Life Saving estimates that 20 per cent of kids across Australia—approximately 3½ thousand—miss out on swimming lessons every year. Unfortunately this is a statistic that is getting worse. Teaching swimming and water safety to kids actually does work. It works. Analysis of drowning deaths in recent years indicates that children in the five- to 14-year age cohort are the least likely to drown of all the age cohorts, and many believe that is because they are the ones who are getting access to swimming lessons whilst they are at school. We know that teaching swimming and water safety actually works and prevents drowning deaths, particularly with kids. But we are finding in Australia, the anecdotal evidence in particular, that fewer and fewer kids are getting access to swimming lessons at school. Some schools are completely pulling out of providing swimming lessons for kids in Australia.

In some states, swimming lessons are not part of the school curriculum, and they definitely should be. These are essential skills that we need to teach our kids: how to be safe around water, how to enter and exit water, how to provide support for someone who may be in a drowning situation and, importantly, the basics of resuscitation and rescue. That is why, during the last election campaign, Labor announced that if we were elected we would provide additional funding to ensure that Australian kids were given access to swimming lessons from a young age. Our aim was to implement the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework to ensure that every child completes level 4 of the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework by the time that they complete primary school to ensure that they get that basic foundation in water safety skills for the future. We would have devoted \$30 million to this program over the forward estimates.

Other speakers on the Liberal side have said that the government is devoting \$3½ million to a project to increase the number of kids getting exposure to swimming lessons. It is not good enough. It is simply not enough. It is a drop in the ocean when it comes to the problem that we are facing and to the fact that, in Victoria, no kids in school get access to swimming lessons. We need a national approach. There is no national approach at the moment, and that is what Labor's policy was aimed at—ensuring that the federal government was working with the states, providing them access to an equity fund that would ensure that all kids got access to swimming lessons. Only when we do this will we see a reduction in the number of drownings.