



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Tuesday, 18 September 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP

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Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (16:30): If there is any shame to be had with respect to this issue, the shame should be directed towards the members of the coalition, who continue to play politics with an issue that concerns the lives of real people. The time to play politics is over. Let me assure members opposite that in my discussions with people in my electorate they continue to tell me that they wish the politics in respect of this issue would end and that the parties would work together to try to find meaningful solutions to try to resolve what is indeed a national and an international problem.

The people in my electorate are sick and tired of the politics. When this House broke up for the winter recess just a few weeks ago and we were at a deadlock with respect to this very issue, the one message that came back to me time and time again was that people wished that the House had continued to debate the issue until a resolution had been reached. In doing that, what they did not want to see was any more lives being lost in respect of the very issue we are debating. They wanted to see the people-smuggling business ended and they wanted to see the people smugglers brought to account. The community is indeed sick and tired of the politics associated with this issue. With respect to the comments from the members opposite it is clear once again that that is all they are really doing. The community is not interested in rhetoric. The community is interested in the matter being resolved in a responsible way and not having the coalition come into this chamber, as they have done again today, playing their political stunts with respect to this MPI.

The motion itself seems to be at odds with what it is saying. On the one hand it talks about the failure of the government to implement policies and on the other hand it fails to acknowledge that the very policies they would like to see us implement—policies that might be effective—were blocked by the members opposite. So, if we are going to implement a full suite of policies, we can only do so with the support of other members of this House, and that support was simply not forthcoming when the government tried to implement policies such as the Malaysia agreement, which I will come to again later on.

It is also interesting that if you talk about a full suite of policies—and the Minister for Home Affairs made this point very well when he went through the recommendations of the expert panel—and you go through the 22 recommendations one at a time you start to see that for most of those recommendations there was no support forthcoming from members opposite. You want a full suite of policies, and the House has one presented to it by an independent expert panel, and who opposes it? The members opposite. Again, I will come back to some of that a bit later on.

It just highlights the shallow arguments and the double standards put forward by the members opposite. They are prepared to come into this House, as they have done again today, and talk about perhaps two of their critical policy areas that they argue the government should have adopted as part of the policy response to this issue. The first is that we should be turning back the boats. With respect to that issue, the coalition have shown that they have no regard whatsoever for the lives of the people on board those boats, let alone the lives of the Australian Defence Force personnel who would be required to do this. In fact, the issue of turning back the boats was considered by the expert panel and it was rejected on the basis that there are not adequate conditions in place to enable that to occur safely.

The other issue they talk about with respect to their policies—and the policies that they believe are the full suite of policies that we did not implement—is the issue of temporary protection visas. With respect to the issue of temporary protection visas, again, it was notable that the independent expert panel did not recommend the reintroduction of temporary protection visas. It is also notable that, at the time that the Howard government had those policies in place, temporary protection visas afforded only a three-year protection process. They did not provide any access to services in this country for people on them and nor did they provide for the family reunion sponsorship program that was in place at the time. As a result of not having those provisions attached to TPVs, we saw families, including women and young children, try to make the dangerous journey of coming to Australia. We also saw lives lost possibly as a result of having that very policy in place. But I highlight that it

was interesting that, of all the 22 recommendations the independent expert panel put to the government, TPVs were not one, and nor was turning back the boats, given that we do not have the appropriate conditions in place right now. Yet members opposite continue to come in here and say that they are the policies we should have adopted. It is interesting that, in saying that, they are rejecting the advice of the independent panel.

The independent panel was put together and commissioned by this government when the deadlock was reached. It was an independent panel made up of Angus Houston, Paris Aristotle and Michael L'Estrange, people who I believe members from all sides of this House would have the utmost respect for. I have never heard members opposite criticise the ability or competence of any of the members of the expert panel. Yet those opposite do not accept that their recommendations are appropriate. They say we should ignore the recommendations of the expert panel. In fact, if my recollection is correct, even before the expert panel handed down its findings the members opposite said that they would ignore its recommendations, because they knew better.

In the six weeks the expert panel was given to do its job, it consulted widely with every major sector in the country—government departments, NGOs, refugee communities and academics. Indeed, I understand that it received some 550 written submissions. That is how much effort they put into putting together a policy that was going to be effective, before bringing it back to the government.

I would like to quote from the foreword of the report of the expert panel:

We believe that the only viable way forward is one that shifts the balance of risk and incentive in favour of regular migration pathways ...

That is exactly what the panel did in their recommendations and yet members opposite again choose to ignore that. I highlight that amongst their recommendations the panel recommended increasing to 20,000 places the humanitarian program we have in this country, developing bilateral cooperation on asylum seeker issues with Indonesia and Malaysia, developing legislation to support the transfer of people to regional processing arrangements, including on Nauru and Manus Island, and reviewing the refugee status determination and joint operational guidelines for managing search and rescue activities in the region. That sums up the key recommendations that I might have time to speak to.

The point I make about the work of the independent panel is that their formula was very simple: you create incentives for people to follow due process; you create disincentives for those who do not. The issue here is that, whilst the coalition come into the House and attack the government for this policy, what they are really doing is attacking the work of the independent panel, because they are attacking the 22 recommendations which were put forward to the parliament and which the government has in fact adopted. If you are going to criticise the government, then bear in mind, members opposite, that what you are really doing is criticising the work of the independent panel, who put their time and effort into developing a comprehensive policy that I believe deals with all of the issues.

I want to bring to the House's attention some of the facts. At the moment we are dealing with over 42 million people who are displaced around the world. Of those, about 3.6 million are in the Asia-Pacific region; 15 million are defined as refugees and one million are asylum seekers. That is the nature of the problem that we are dealing with. We are also dealing with a problem where most of the people come to this country from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iran—all countries which are in turmoil and conflict right now and all countries from which most of us, if we were living there, would dearly love to get away. This is an issue that deals with the lives of real people, who are often traumatised as a result of where they are living and by their journey to this country. Those people are often women and children. The issue needs to be dealt with in a responsible way, and that is what this government is doing. (*Time expired*)