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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Migration Legislation Amendment (Offshore
Processing and Other Measures) Bill 2011**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 14 August 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Hayes, Chris, MP

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Mr HAYES (Fowler) (15:48): I suppose it is a little bit too much to hope that we could debate the Migration Legislation Amendment (Offshore Processing and Other Measures) Bill 2011 and the Greens amendment without those opposite playing party politics, as it has been a touchstone issue for some time. As they leave the chamber, they must do so with mixed feelings about it.

Yesterday we welcomed the report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers. The panel had the very tough task, quite frankly, over the past six weeks to look at all the options to strengthen our migration policy. They came up with a comprehensive list of recommendations to tackle, once and for all, the issue of people-smuggling, and deter people from getting on leaky boats to make that perilous sea journey to Australia. People-smuggling is a vile criminal enterprise that puts people's lives at risk for a profit motive.

All those in this House should be seized of the view that this is the time to act. We have had enough discussion and consultation. We have certainly had a bellyful of party politics. With the advice from the expert panel, it really is time to get on with the job. Failure to do so means more opportunities for people-smugglers to ply their trade, with, inevitably, more people dying at sea.

Deputy Speaker Scott, as you are well aware, my electorate is the most multicultural in the whole of Australia. Many of my constituents, probably the majority, are either refugees or the descendants of refugees. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, we saw a huge wave of Vietnamese people fleeing persecution, re-education camps and oppression under the Communist regime. Again, in the 1980s, we witnessed the mass exodus of Cambodians escaping the murderous regime of Pol Pot. Since 2003, following the involvement of the coalition of the willing in Iraq, we have seen the flight of Mandaeans, Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics and other Christian minorities from Iraq. The Catholic Church estimates that, since that time, more than one million Christians have fled the country and are now desperately awaiting processing by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in camps in Syria, Jordan and Turkey.

These Vietnamese, Cambodian and Iraqi people make up a large proportion of my electorate. They understand only too well the refugee processing issues confronting this parliament. There are also those with relatives currently in Syria, where only three weeks ago we heard of death squads being deployed to get rid of many of the Christian minorities in Syria, back over the border—back into Iraq. They want to know that, if they line up and apply for refugee status, they will be treated equally.

The recommendations before us go a long way to doing that. They take away the treatment of those who seek to make a perilous journey by boat and who, at the moment, get preferential treatment over those who line up in refugee camps seeking orderly recognition for their refugee status and resettlement in another country. People in my electorate very much understand that. They also understand the unscrupulous nature of people who exploit refugees for profit when they are experiencing a general level of despair.

This morning in Parliament House we had a visit from members of the Assyrian Universal Alliance. They were here to screen a documentary entitled *Defying Deletion*, made by Andre Anton, a young American filmmaker. The film depicts the flight of the Assyrian and other Christian minorities and Mandaeans in Iraq. Many of these minorities were forced to flee their homes in Iraq to live in refugee camps in neighbouring Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey. The current political turmoil in those countries has placed refugees, particularly in Egypt and Syria, in situations which are possibly even more dire than the ones they fled. Many of these people are on very long waiting lists while they seek to migrate to countries which exercise compassion, countries like Australia.

The panel has recommended that we increase our refugee intake from just under 14,000 to 20,000 per annum, a recommendation we accept. The panel goes on to say that we should have an aim of increasing that to 27,000 over the next five years. That can and will save lives. That can and will give a new chance of life to a number

of refugees and their families. That can and will take away the incentive for people who believe that their only option is to take a perilous boat journey to this country.

To put this into some perspective, according to the UNHCR there are currently 43 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced. Of these, 15 million are classified as refugees, 27 million are internally displaced persons and as many as 12 million are regarded as stateless people—in other words, they do not have a country to call home. Australia has constantly been a strong supporter of international efforts to address the protracted refugee situation around the world. As a matter of fact, as we heard today during question time, Australia is one of the top three countries that accepts refugees on a humanitarian basis. The country which takes the largest number is America, followed by Canada and Australia. Each year more than half the refugees accepted for resettlement under the Australian humanitarian program come from situations I have just outlined. The additional 6,250 places each year in the humanitarian program will allow more individuals and their families a new chance of life.

This is obviously a difficult situation for members of both sides of this parliament. I do not think any members coming to this debate will say that they have not had pangs of conscience and felt the emotion associated with it. Representing, as I do, the most multicultural electorate in the country and many people who are themselves refugees or are directly descended from refugees, I certainly have no inhibition in supporting this legislation as the means of making a start to stopping people from taking the perilous journey, for whatever reason, to this country and as a means of taking away the incentive for people to get on boats to afford themselves or their family members preferential status by coming here as irregular maritime entries.

I do not underestimate regional cooperation. It is absolutely essential in establishing a long-term regime to process asylum seekers and to deter people from taking irregular maritime journeys to this country. It is also essential to attack the issue of people smuggling. I am aware, as are many members of this House, that every vessel we read about, whether it arrives at Christmas Island or somewhere else or sinks at sea, represents at a minimum a \$1 million profit for a criminal enterprise. People who are in the business of people smuggling are selling that risk. Refugees pay upfront. They do not take out travel insurance for this journey. They pay somewhere between \$8,000 and \$10,000 before they get on the boat and there is no guarantee of arriving in this country. For criminals involved in people smuggling this is a lucrative enterprise. If they saw more opportunity in peddling drugs, they would probably do that—or prostitution or something else. We need to treat these people for what they are—that is, outright criminals.

And it is not only Australia that is standing up against people smuggling. We have always had a strong view on this, but we need to do it as a region. Through regional cooperation we must shut down these businesses and the people who make their enterprise out of the misery of others. There can be no other way to go about it.

We all remember December 2010, when we watched the tragic deaths at Christmas Island. There, 30 people—men, women and children—lost their lives. Seven weeks ago another boat, which was carrying over 200 people, left Indonesia and capsized and over 100 people died. Ten years ago, 353 people were killed near Ashmore Reef. Now, this week, another vessel is said to be missing with 65 people on board. But people are still prepared to take the risk, and someone out there is prepared to sell them the ticket.

The amendments before us give the immigration minister the power to transfer to a range of designated countries asylum seekers who arrive at various offshore places for processing while ensuring protection from refoulement and maintaining the core protection safeguards as insisted upon by the High Commissioner for Refugees. We should not come in here to play politics on the issue of refugees. Those opposite should not come in here to crow. This parliament should work with the serious objective of doing something constructive about the issue of refugees. We should not come in here and adopt hard means simply because we can; we should come in here to look at the most appropriate methods available to us to deter and stop people smuggling and people being encouraged to come here by boat.

By increasing our humanitarian intake to 20,000 we will show that this country is—as we understand it to be—very compassionate towards genuine refugees and that we will continue to honour our obligations. It is incumbent upon all of us to address the refugee situation with a view to stopping people putting the lives of their families at risk. But we need to do more. We need to work cooperatively within the region. We must ensure that within our region it is understood that people smuggling is a vile, reprehensible, criminal enterprise and that all of us must work together within our region to shut it down. Just as we work together to combat transnational crime such

as drug trafficking: people-trafficking et cetera, we must work together on combined law-enforcement strategies to stop the vile, reprehensible way of life that some people engage in of selling the risk of others losing their lives at sea. (*Time expired*)