



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**National Swimming and  
Water Safety Framework**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 13 February 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 13 February 2017  
**Page** 861  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

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**Mr THISTLETHWAITE** (Kingsford Smith) (17:14): I move:

That this House:

(1) notes:

(a) that Australians live by the water, and being in and around water is part of our nation's culture and our identity, but this regular exposure to water brings risks that can be fatal;

(b) that so far this summer in Australia, 69 people have drowned on our coastline and in our pools and waterways, and paramedics report responding to 225 drownings or near drownings in November and December 2016;

(c) that in 2015-16, 280 people drowned in Australia, a 5 per cent increase in drownings from 2014#15;

(d) with concern that there is no national approach to swimming and water safety education in Australia, and that:

(i) the water safety education Australian children receive depends on where they live and in some cases on their parents income level;

(ii) not every Australian child is receiving the necessary instruction in swimming and water safety; and

(iii) in some states and territories there is no swimming and water safety program at schools; and

(e) studies have consistently shown a concerning trend in children starting secondary school without the ability to swim and research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less likely to achieve identified benchmarks for water safety competence compared to non-indigenous students and this is also the case for children not born in Australia; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) implement the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework (the Framework) and ensure every child has access to water safety and swimming education by the time they complete primary school with every child given access to instruction in swimming and water safety in accordance with the Framework;

(b) conduct a parliamentary inquiry to investigate why many Australian children are not receiving adequate swimming and water safety education consistent with the Australian Water Safety Strategy and what measures it can adopt to improve access to swimming and water safety education;

(c) establish a national water safety education fund to provide support to the states and territories, water safety organisations and communities to ensure access to swimming pools, accredited trainers and water safety education for schools in communities which lack such facilities and services; and

(d) provide water and surf safety messages in foreign languages via tourism operators, flights, hotels and tours across Australia highlighting the importance of swimming and water safety on beaches, rivers, lakes and swimming pools.

At 8.30 pm on 27 December 2016, two teenage boys, Tui Gallaher and George Lopeti, decided to go for a swim at Maroubra Beach. Almost immediately, the pair were swept into a powerful rip. A passer-by saw the boys in distress and went to rescue them. Seeing his cousin in trouble, Tui told the rescuer to rescue George first. The rescuer did that, and when he went back out to retrieve Tui, he was gone, swept away by one of the most powerful bodies of water in Sydney.

In the ensuing days, I was at the beach, and I met with the rescuers—the police and the surf lifesavers—as they searched, ultimately in vain, for the young boy. I saw his mother collapse in despair on the beach as time ran out for her son. Two days later, Tui's body was discovered by a young surfer. The sad fact of Tui's drowning, and almost every drowning, is that they are preventable with the right training and education.

Already this summer in Australia, 69 people have drowned on our coastline, in our pools and in our waterways. In 2015-16, 280 people drowned in Australia, representing a five per cent increase on drownings in 2014-15. The increase in drownings that we have seen over summer is sure to see another spike this season and is a worrying trend. Australians live by the water. Being in and around water is part of our nation's culture and our identity, but this regular exposure to water brings risks that can be fatal. The challenge is not to avoid being around water but to learn how to live safely around it.

Government has an obligation to ensure Australians are educated in water safety. The statistics indicate we as a nation are not doing enough to prevent drownings in Australia. Every child has the right to learn to swim and be safe around water, but alarmingly, Australia has no national approach to swimming or water safety education. The water safety education that Australian kids receive depends on where they live and, in many cases, on their parents' income. Not every Australian child is receiving the necessary instruction in swimming and water safety. In some states and territories, there is no school-delivered swimming and water safety program, while in others, swimming is an essential part of the school curriculum.

Studies have consistently shown a concerning trend of children starting secondary school without the ability to swim. Research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less likely to achieve identified benchmarks for water safety competence, compared to non-Indigenous students. This is also the case for kids who are not born in Australia. For children engaged in formal swimming lessons, there is much emphasis on stroke technique and a better stroke, but little on teaching water safety survival and basic rescue skills. Quite simply, we are letting our kids down when it comes to teaching swimming and water safety and reducing the rate of drowning.

We do not have a national strategy to teach swimming and water safety. Historically, the Commonwealth has just left the issue to the states. It is time for a national approach to swimming and water safety education. It is time for the Commonwealth government to show leadership and to work with the states to ensure that every Australian child gets the necessary training and education to be safe in and around water. Every child should undertake swimming and water safety education and training by the time they complete primary school. This training should be provided by accredited trainers. The Australian Water Safety Council, made up of organisations like the Royal Life Saving Society, Surf Life Saving Australia, AUSTSWIM and Swimming Australia, recommend that children should receive training consistent with level 4 of the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework, commonly known as Swim and Survive. This is not currently the case.

I am calling on a parliamentary inquiry to be established to inquire into why drownings in Australia are increasing and why we are not implementing the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework. Teaching Australian children to swim and be safe around water is an essential life skill, and no child should miss out on the opportunity to learn to be safe around water.

The Commonwealth should also establish a national water safety education fund which would provide additional funding to states and territories to support schools to ensure students have access to swimming pools and accredited AUSTSWIM trainers. Teaching swimming and water safety is a vital life skill. The Commonwealth must show leadership and work with the states on this important issue.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER ( Mrs Wicks ): Is there a seconder for the motion?

**Ms Claydon:** I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.