



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Ebola

SPEECH

Monday, 27 October 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

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Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (11:50): The Ebola outbreak in West Africa is a looming humanitarian disaster. The World Health Organization declared overnight that the number of cases of Ebola has risen to 10,141, with the death toll reaching 4,992. Eight countries have been hit by the virus since its outbreak in December last year and some predict that the number of Ebola cases will reach 1.4 million by 2015.

About three weeks ago, Catherine King, the shadow spokesperson for Labor on health, and I met with representatives of Medecins Sans Frontieres here in Canberra. We met with a couple of nurses who have been working in West Africa, Australians who have been volunteering their time to help out with this looming disaster. They described the Ebola outbreak and what they saw, and the people whom they treated, as a tsunami that comes every day. Hundreds of people turn up to the clinics in the mornings with symptoms of Ebola, only to be turned away from the clinics by health officials. These health officials expressed their disappointment and heartbreak at having to turn people away who come with the symptoms simply because there are not enough specialist medical staff and treatment facilities on the ground to deal with the numbers coming every day. That is why Ebola is spreading. That is why we are facing 1.4 million people being infected by 2015, with enormous ramifications for the rest of the world if it gets outside Africa and, in particular, for the world economy. The world economy would grind to a halt if Ebola got to places like China or South-East Asia where population densities are so high. That is why Australia needs to be doing more.

Labor has supported the Abbott government's \$18 million contribution but money alone is not enough. Experts say very clearly that experienced personnel are needed on the ground, too. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution on 18 September 2014, which calls on all nations to:

... facilitate the delivery of assistance, including qualified, specialised and trained personnel and supplies, in response to the Ebola outbreak will.

Australia co-sponsored that resolution. We were the ones who put the resolution to the United Nations Security Council but we have gone on to completely ignore the call for more resources on the ground. You can picture this resolution going through the United Nations Security Council and then the UN official saying, 'We have passed the resolution. Let's sit down and talk about what we can do to meet this resolution, the resolution which was co-sponsored by Australia.' And then you see Australia tippy toeing out of the room, trying to hide from the fact that we have a responsibility to act.

The International Monetary Fund, the President of the United States and the President of Sierra Leone have called on Australia to do more. The President of Sierra Leone said this month in a letter to our Prime Minister, Tony Abbott:

While we are doing everything possible to stop the outbreak, further support is urgently needed from your friendly government to scale up our national response with ... education efforts, as well as infection control measures.

That response from the President of Sierra Leone is really a desperate plea for assistance from the Australian government. The Public Health Association of Australia has called for Australia to do more, as has the Australian Medical Association and Medecins Sans Frontieres. Even Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of *The Australian* has said:

... I do really think the government has not done enough here.

When Greg Sheridan is on the back of the government, you know something is wrong. Australia needs to be doing more. We have expert AUSMAT medical teams which are trained and specialise in infection control. They can be deployed quickly. In respect of the evacuation plan issue, I find it a convenient excuse on behalf of the government. No-one is suggesting that we would ever put Australians at risk but at the same time I cannot accept

that the United Kingdom or the USA would reject a plea from Australia for one of our medical staff to be treated in their facilities.