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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Thursday, 20 June 2013

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Questioner
Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP

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Mr MORRISON (Cook) (15:53): Today is World Refugee Day and I think it is important that in this place today we acknowledge that. There are 10½ million people classified by the UNHCR as refugees—men, women, children, mums, dads, sisters, brothers, grandparents; 10½ million people under the mandate of the UNHCR under the refugee convention. These are 10½ million people whose lives have been uprooted by violence, by hate and by persecution. There were 12½ million such people 10 years ago when the Howard government was dealing with the issues on our borders to the north. In the most recent report that has been provided by the UNHCR, it is disturbing to note that the most significant increase in that figure to 10.5 million people, in terms of refugees defined by the UNHCR, is the increase out of Syria. I am sure all members of this House would agree about the seriousness of that situation and would be grieved at the situation in Syria and the increase in the numbers of people now being defined as refugees coming out of Syria. There were 19,900 in the previous report, and in this report there are 728,218. These are deeply disturbing numbers. These are numbers that have not played into the things we are seeing to our north, but they are part of the global issue that relates to the matters of world refugees. We have had many debates in this place on this issue, but there is one thing I am sure is true: whatever position you take on how the matters of our border protection should be addressed, I am quite confident that, in this place at least, members of this House come to the issue with a concern for people.

On World Refugee Day, we need to acknowledge that. We may differ, and we do differ—we differ significantly on how this matter should be addressed in terms of our border protection but, putting that matter in its context, the broader global issue is one that I think we all understand and on this day I think that it is important we note it. Important in the debate that follows on from that, when it comes to refugees, is the debate about asylum seekers who are seeking to come to Australia.

The sad truth about the 10½ million people—or 10.4 million in the previous report—that are defined as refugees is that 99 per cent of those around the world will never see a resettlement outcome. One of the things that need to inform this debate is the notion of resettlement in Australia. No matter how many numbers of places there are in Australia, less than one per cent of people are going to be resettled around the world. Resettlement is not the global answer, and anyone who suggests so has very little knowledge of this topic. It does not matter what, frankly, the intake is from Australia: unless it is 10.5 million together with our other major partners who undertake resettlement around the world we are going to fall well short.

The answer to the global refugee problem is over there, but the answer to the issues we are having on our borders is over here. That is the difference in this debate. We can stand as members of this place and we can acknowledge the global humanitarian stain of the issue of refugees, and it has been with us for all time, sadly. We can stand proudly in this place and acknowledge that 700,000 refugees have been resettled in Australia since the Second World War. That is something that we can all commend. We can commend those people who work in our community in the settlement services program, which enjoys bipartisan support in this place. We can commend the work they do trying to resettle legitimate refugees into our community, and helping them on the pathway to a sustainable life here in Australia—a happy life, a safe life, a peaceful life, a prosperous life. That is the thing that Australians should commend themselves on today, because we are a generous nation. But we are not mugs. It is World Refugee Day today but, sadly, every day under this government is People Smugglers' Day.

On the issue of border protection—and that is why I have sought to distinguish these issues very clearly—this is a government that has failed us like none other. I am proud, like other members who sit on this side of the House, and as a member of the Liberal Party in particular, to be part of a party that in 1951 signed the refugee convention under Prime Minister Robert Menzies. There were 1.5 million refugees at that time. There are 10.5 million today. A lot has changed since then and, frankly, a lot has changed as to how the refugee convention is now contorted and interpreted and used—whether it is by advocates or by the smugglers themselves—and how it is interpreted in the courts, which I think goes well beyond the original intention of that document which was signed by the Menzies government. That is a debate that I am sure will continue. That is a debate the coalition participated in and one we have expressed great reservations over. Significantly, the issue we face in this country

is people who move beyond their country of first asylum, their secondary movement from one place into our region and then on to Australia.

The Indochinese refugee crisis was a very different situation, which the father of the House will remember well—he was in this place when the matter was addressed, as part of the Fraser government. It was a genuine regional problem generated from within our region with people directly fleeing from within our region. The Fraser government responded and should be commended for doing that. I am sure that an Abbott government would respond in the same way if we were faced with a similar regional crisis. But we are not faced with a regional crisis; we are faced with a people-smuggling crisis and that is something this government has failed to understand from the outset.

Of course, it was the Howard government that stopped the boats and stopped the business of the people smugglers. I say in response to the Prime Minister, if she wants three words about the Howard government's plan, it is this: it did work. They are the three words she should understand about the stop-the-boats policies of the Howard government: they did work, whether it was turning back the boats where it was safe to do so, whether it was temporary protection visas, whether it was the offshore processing or whether it was establishing the Bali process. The Bali process was focused under the Howard government as a regional deterrence framework, not a regional accommodation framework, which is what we get from the government today. The government has taken that Bali process off course, turning to regional processing hubs and magnets to draw even more people into the region. The coalition have a very different view—that is, deterrence. We believe deterrence works because it did and it will again, and that is the nature of our policy.

The record of this government is that it has taken a different approach. The first immigration minister this government had described as his proudest day the abolition of the Pacific solution, the abolition of temporary protection visas and the turning back of the promise of the then opposition leader, Mr Rudd, who became the Prime Minister. Mr Rudd promised before the 2007 election he would turn boats back and then recanted on that when he came to office and abolished those policies.

In 2007-08 there were 25 people who turned up on three boats, an average of two per month. In November 2007 there were just four people in detention who had arrived by boat. The budget for managing illegal arrivals by boat was \$85 million and 4,706 people received offshore humanitarian visas. After applying offshore, they were granted the visas and, combined with the refugee program, the offshore component of our refugee humanitarian program was over 75 per cent of the total intake. What do we see today? We see 24,824 people have arrived this financial year illegally by boat. We are now at a rate up from two per month to more than 3,000 per month. More than 23,000 people are now in the system. And I expect there are many more since that figure was advised in Senate estimates, who are in the system today and who arrived illegally by boat, up from four when this government started.

The budget is up from \$85 million to \$2.9 billion next year, as we learned today. That is based on an average monthly arrival of 1,000. Today we are operating at an average monthly arrival of over 3,000. So in 10 days time a miracle is going to occur. The number of illegal arrivals to Australia by boat is going to fall by two-thirds in 10 days. That question was put to the Treasurer today. He said he stood by that forecast. It is absurd. That level of delusion and denial by the government on this issue is their greatest area of failure. They simply do not get it. They simply do not believe in the responses that are necessary to address it. It is a failure of resolve. It is a failure of belief in the policies that worked. That is why they abolished them and that is why they will not return them.

Sadly, there is the reduction in those who are receiving offshore humanitarian visas under this government. It fell from over 4,700 in 2007-08 to 714 last year, in 2011-12. Less than half for the first time in our refugee and humanitarian program; the offshore humanitarian program established by the Fraser government, and for the first time less than half those have come from applications offshore. That is a great shame and I think that is a great indictment of the performance of this government.

The minister will tell you that he has increased the intake to 20,000, and so there will be more. But what he neglects to tell people is that the 20,000 figure that the minister is using includes all the visas he would hand out to people who arrive illegally by boat. Now, 25,000 are likely to turn up this financial year, so he is already on a 5,000 deficit for a start. Where that leaves all of those 40,000-odd who are applying around the world for these places in the orderly process I do not know.

But the difference with the coalition policy is this: of the 13,750 visas that we have committed to, not one of those will go to someone who arrives illegally by boat. Not one! Temporary protection visas are not part of that quota. We will not be dipping into the quota for people who are applying offshore, which will include those coming from Syria. It will include those who are still in Iraq, it will include those in Afghanistan, it will include those in Malaysia and it will even include those in Indonesia and in the Thai camps, where many of our members have visited—the member for Brisbane has visited those camps. We will not be dipping into their visas to deal with Labor's mess that they have left on our borders, if we are elected later this year. But this government will. They will continue to take those visas any which way they can.

We know the failures; we know that more than a thousand people are dead. We know there are more people arriving by boats claiming asylum than arrive by plane claiming asylum—that was achieved last year for the first time ever. We know of the asylum freeze under Prime Minister Rudd that laid the platform for the riots that occurred. We know that despite the promises of the then minister that he would come down tough, that just one person, I think, ultimately had their visas rejected. We know about the East Timor farce. We know about the solution that was heralded before the last election—the last time the Prime Minister got agitated about this issue. She goes out there and makes commitments before the election, and we see her doing the same thing today.

We know about the Malaysian people flop, and we know about it because this minister and this government know that they have no policy on the Malaysian people flop. He could tell me, if he can, in his response where the Malaysian government's agreement is to the recommendation from the Houston panel to include the protections they said were necessary to proceed with the agreement. The minister opposite knows this; there is no such agreement. They do not agree to it. I know they do not agree to it because his predecessor told me. His predecessor informed me and the shadow foreign affairs minister that they would not agree to legally-binding protections for people sent to Malaysia. So the Malaysian people swap is a mirage—it does not exist! They have nothing to put on the table when it comes to that issue, other than to wave it around as an excuse to do absolutely nothing. Nothing! Absolutely nothing!

We have the Captain Emad farce—and I could not go through this MPI, of course, without mentioning Captain Emad.

An opposition member: And his family.

Mr MORRISON: He sailed in and he flew out, and the government was none the wiser either way. But his family remains in public housing here in the ACT.

There is the community-dumping policy. But Mr Deputy Speaker, know this: the coalition has the resolve and the coalition has the policies, and it will get done. We cannot afford another three years of the failures under this government; the cost, the chaos and the tragedy that has followed from their decisions. They can go and look their electors in the eye and explain to them the cost, the chaos and the tragedy. After six years, the Australian people have had enough; they want a change and they know that the coalition can deliver that change on 14 September.