



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2013-2014

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Tuesday, 4 June 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker O'Connor, Brendan, MP

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Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (19:43): I thank the honourable member for his important question in relation to the temporary skilled stream, the 457 scheme. It is an important scheme.

As the government made clear when we foreshadowed reforms—indeed, when I foreshadowed reforms on 23 February this year—we made clear that this was, to a large extent, a culmination of work that had been undertaken by the department to identify deficiencies in the scheme and to identify abuses that occurred. Most of those cases were not necessarily unlawful or illegal abuses, they were more abuse of the intent of the scheme. By that I mean, of course, that there had not been any demonstrable way to establish whether there were shortages or not before some employers sought labour from overseas without looking within their own communities.

I do not think was really the genesis of the scheme when it was created. I think it was always intended that the scheme would be one to respond to legitimate skill shortages in sectors and regions where they existed. But over time I think there had been a lack of compliance, and for that reason my predecessor, the member for McMahon, received information from the department insofar as options available for reform. With that brief, as an incoming minister, I realised it was important to act on those reforms because I thought it really critical that we get the integrity of this scheme right.

We have a situation where immigration is absolutely vital and critical to this nation's economic, social and cultural success. Immigration has helped build this country. As a migrant, I feel I have been privileged by coming here as a young child with parents who came here to work and to find a place where their children could have opportunities. That is this place. Australia is probably the best example of migration being a success by the diversity and richness of our society, which has been continually enhanced by immigration and that is why to a large extent we have a bipartisan position on immigration levels.

We have a non-discriminatory immigration intake. We also generally have a bipartisan position on the proportion of those permanent migrants who come to reunite families and also the two-thirds that come here via the permanent skill stream. That is important. So too are the other mechanisms we use to provide labour to sectors of our economy whether it is the holiday-maker visa, whether it is the student visa or indeed whether it is the 457 scheme, which is absolutely important. But to maintain confidence in such a scheme, it is absolutely vital that there are sufficient oversights and sufficient things in place to prevent contraventions of the scheme. This is a very important area. What we do not want to see are any improper practices in areas of immigration or in employment law. What we do not want to see is a lack of confidence by the public in such a scheme.

These reforms as advised by the department were very important. The honourable member raises a really important question about what does it mean for prospective employees—that is, young kids who would get jobs in his jobs? What options do workers who may be currently unemployed have available to them?

How do we ensure that we provide the labour that our employees need without intentionally or unintentionally displacing those opportunities? The way we do that is to ensure that the 457 scheme is used when there are genuine shortages. There has been sufficient evidence to suggest that is not the case. As I referred to already, the Migration Council of Australia has indicated that 15 per cent of employers who responded in a survey said they have no problems finding local employees but they do not avail themselves of that opportunity and they go directly to overseas opportunities. We saw also seven per cent of applicants' employment conditions being cut. *(Time expired)*