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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

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Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2013-2014

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

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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) (19:56): I thank the member for Throsby for raising the question again. I did digress somewhat, earlier. He raises a very important point, and that is that Australia is not alone in being concerned about temporary worker schemes. Indeed, I can confirm to the honourable member that Canada has quite a similar experience to Australia: very rapid growth in their temporary foreign worker visa scheme and widespread concern that the scheme was being misused to the detriment of Canadians. I am advised that the Canadian response has been to require what is called a 'labour market opinion' before a visa can be issued. Work permits are issued on the basis of that labour market opinion or a confirmation obtained from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, which is a government agency. Once the labour market opinion is approved, the applicant must apply for a work permit—and I can go to the things that are considered. It is considered whether:

the job offer is genuine

the wages and working conditions are comparable to those offered to Canadians working in the occupation

employers conducted reasonable efforts to hire or train Canadians for the job

the foreign worker is filling a labour shortage—

so there has to be a genuine shortage—

the employment of the foreign worker will directly create new job opportunities or help retain jobs for Canadians

the foreign worker will transfer new skills and knowledge to Canadians; and

the hiring of the foreign worker will not affect a labour dispute or the employment of any Canadian worker involved in such a dispute

You can imagine that last one refers specifically to where an employer seeks to bring in a person from overseas while industrial action is taking place, which is prohibited. I quote the Prime Minister of Canada during question time on 7 May this year—that is how recent it is:

Not only has the government indicated for some time that it would be reforming the temporary foreign workers program, but in the budget last year specifically we brought in measures to better match job vacancies with people who are seeking work or in the employment insurance system—

as we know it, unemployment benefits—

We have been very clear. We need to do a better job of matching the demand for EI and the demand for temporary foreign workers. That is precisely what the government has been doing for a year and a half ...

He went on to say:

... the minister brought in changes last year to make sure people who are on EI, employment insurance, get first crack at jobs rather than temporary foreign workers.

That is the Prime Minister of Canada, a conservative prime minister, but one with a high regard for protecting Canadian workers such that he will not allow an important scheme, temporary foreign workers, to displace those Canadian workers. I would also like to quote the Governor of the Bank of Canada, who is currently the Governor-elect of the Bank of England, a very eminent economist and obviously someone who knows something about the Canadian economy. He said:

One doesn't want an overreliance on temporary foreign workers for lower-skilled jobs. Relying too much on temporary employees from abroad distorts wage adjustments that lead to Canadians getting better pay and delays changes that make companies more efficient ... The challenge of a skills shortage is not unique to Canada but the solution is training, not bringing in temporary foreign workers.

That was the Governor of the Bank of Canada referring to how a scheme misused or overused will deny opportunities for young people who need training and need to fill those positions and will distort wages—and not in the right way. It will prevent Canadians getting higher wages and also prevent, as he put it, the economy innovating because they will just find the easy option of finding skilled labour off-the-shelf, if you like, leading to other problems. The minister for immigration in Canada has said that there are concerns about examples of the program not being used as intended, and he went on:

... Canadians must always have first crack at jobs in our economy ... The temporary foreign worker program was intended to fill acute Labor shortages on a temporary basis only, not to displace Canadian workers.

Hear, hear! I think the Conservative Party in Canada absolutely gets it.