



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Customs Tariff Amendment
(2012 Measures No. 1) Bill 2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 15 August 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Hayes, Chris, MP

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Mr HAYES (Fowler) (17:10): I too rise to support the passage of the Customs Tariff Amendment (2012 Measures No. 1) Bill 2012, which makes important amendments to the Customs Tariff Act 1995. In the main, the bill lists the Republic of Serbia as a developing country for the purposes of Australia's tariff preference system. Giving preferential trade status to Serbia is a very good thing to occur. I think it is certainly good to open up trade with a country that has worked very hard to improve its position throughout the Balkan region and Europe.

This bill will allow Serbia to benefit from a reduction in customs duty on a defined range of goods imported into Australia, allowing Serbia to enjoy the same status as other countries that are part of the former Yugoslavia when it comes to trade with Australia. Last year Australia's imports from Serbia were valued around \$11.5 million. Certainly, that is not a big figure considering Australia's dealings elsewhere in that region. Australia's major imports from Serbia include various prepared and preserved fruits and vegetables, electrical distribution and communications equipment as well as arms and ammunition.

Overall, the trade between Australia and the Republic of Serbia at the moment is worth a little over \$14 million. Granted, that figure is not high compared with Australia's, and no doubt Serbia's, level of trade and exchange with other countries. But, importantly, that actually represents a 24 per cent increase over the last year.

The bill will undoubtedly open the door for increasing levels of trade and economic development as well as political cooperation between our two countries. The bill also acknowledges Serbia's recent strong efforts to open up greater economic and political ties with Europe and the rest of the developed world, including Australia. Serbia has recently acquired the status of a candidate for the European Union, which is a testament to the strengthening of the economic position of Serbia and its prospects for future economic development.

Significant progress has also been made in the entire region, once plagued by the horrors of a civil war, to move away from conflict and towards reconciliation and cooperation. Credit must go to the respective leaderships of these countries, as it reflects their determination to focus on the mutual benefit of a prosperous future for the entire Balkans region and its peoples. Clearly, Serbia is one of those countries leading the way in looking to a positive future, through a greater political and economic cooperation within the region, particularly throughout the broader areas of Europe, and also the rest of the world.

I have had the opportunity on a number of occasions to discuss these matters with the Serbian ambassador, Her Excellency Ms Neda Maletic. Her Excellency is a wonderful representative and a strong diplomatic voice for the Serbian community across Australia. She is doing much to further the interests and the welfare of the Serbian community here in Australia, and she has been a very strong advocate for stronger economic and cultural cooperation between our two countries. Through her efforts I have seen great development in our people-to-people relationships.

Together with the ambassador and other members of the parliamentary friendship group for Serbia in this House, earlier this year I had the opportunity to meet with the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia, the Hon. Ivica Dacic. During the meeting we discussed a number of issues of mutual interest to our two countries, but very much to the forefront of the discussion was our mutual cooperation in tackling transnational crime. Given Serbia's location and its position within the Balkans, from an Australian perspective Serbia has a very key role to play in tackling the drug trade that is occurring, since much of it passes through the Balkans or is logistically manipulated through various criminal enterprises that operate out of that region.

The Deputy Prime Minister's visit was highly productive and, for the record, as a consequence of his visit the Australian Federal Police and the Serbian Police signed a memorandum of agreement to cooperate on transnational crime including money laundering and drug trafficking. That was an exercise that concluded well. It also saw Serbia, as a sovereign nation, very much stepping up to the mark and playing a key role in doing

something about the effects of transnational crime, working cooperatively—in this case with the Australian Federal Police and other law enforcement organisations—to help investigate, prosecute and disrupt the actions of organised syndicates operating throughout the region, peddling drugs to the world.

This is an example of the growing strength of Australia's bilateral relationship with Serbia and other countries in the Balkan region. The increased cooperation between our two nations is also providing an opportunity for investment in areas such as education, and one of the other things that was canvassed during our meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister was the fact that Australia's reputation as an education provider is well known and well respected. I genuinely believe that, as a consequence of our improving relationship with the Republic of Serbia and the understanding that has grown between our two countries because of our very significant people-to-people relationships, we as a country will do very well by making the education market available to the young people of Serbia, who will benefit from tertiary and vocational education here in Australia.

The Serbian community indeed makes a great economic, social and cultural contribution to the vibrancy of our multicultural society. I have the honour of representing about five per cent of all people of Serbian origin living in Australia. Representing an electorate with possibly the highest proportion of constituents from a Serbian background has allowed me to witness the many positive contributions that Serbian people have made to their adopted country. Last Sunday, in fact, I attended the 26th Serbian Folkloric Festival at the Bonnyrigg Sports Club. More than 10,000 people attended the three-day festival where more than 1,000 young people performed traditional folkloric dances and songs. I attended the event with the Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Australia and New Zealand, His Grace the Right Reverend Irinej; the Serbian ambassador to Australia, Her Excellency Ms Neda Maletic; various members of parliament, including the Labor member for Liverpool, Paul Lynch, the Liberal member for Smithfield, Andy Rohan, and Nick Lalich, himself a Serbian immigrant who now occupies the elected position of the member for Cabramatta.

As to the event, we could not be anything other than impressed by the hospitality and the warmth with which we were welcomed, but we were also impressed beyond belief by the colour, the vibrancy and the very positive spirit displayed by the Serbian community. As I indicated, there were over 1,000 children who participated in that event. It was very significant to see young people making an effort to follow the traditions and observe the culture of their forebears. Whilst they were very much distinctly Australian kids, they were certainly revelling in the fact that they have a culture that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years, and they sought to demonstrate that through song and dance.

As someone who represents the most multicultural electorate in the whole of Australia, I have to say that this is something that does distinguish us. For people who come to this country to make this their land of opportunity we do not ask them to disregard their culture, their traditions or their religion; what we do ask them to do is be part of our future, and this event was very much a showcase of that. This was a very positive demonstration of Serbian culture and tradition in the context of what has made this country great, and that is immigration.

The Serbian community in my electorate has also made significant contributions in the area of sport. Recently I attended a function organised by the Obilic Basketball Club, a youth sporting organisation based in Cabramatta's PCYC. The community also has two football clubs, part of the Bonnyrigg Sports Club: one is the Bonnyrigg White Eagles Football Club and the other is the Bonnyrigg football club for juniors. Both have recorded significant results in the local and state football league. Many members of the Serbian community greatly contribute to the fabric of Australia and are very proud to be Australian, but they are certainly also very proud of their history, culture and traditions.

This bill will strengthen economic and political cooperation between Australia and Serbia and open the door for mutually beneficial exchange in goods, knowledge and services. Additionally, the bill will reinsert subheading 5308.10.00, which was apparently incorrectly omitted in the Customs Tariff Amendment (2012 Harmonized System Changes) Bill 2011. This subheading applies to coir yarn, which is something I was not aware of before but I now understand is integral to the manufacture of various types of matting and, more particularly, ropes. The bill also corrects a number of technical errors currently in the Customs Tariff Act.

I do apologise to the House for using some of the debating time for this bill to reflect upon the very valuable relationship we have with the Serbian community here in Australia. I think anyone who has that association could not be anything other than proud of the contribution the Serbian people have made to the very fabric of our way of life. I commend the bill to the House.