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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Wednesday, 20 November 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker Perrett, Graham, MP	Question No.

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (16:13): Much emotion comes into this debate in Australia, both inside and outside this chamber. I want to be clear about a couple of things. I shifted my views on this topic after taking part in the Christmas Island tragedy inquiry. That process, during which I watched the footage of young people drowning, really hardened my heart, I guess, in terms of understanding how tough this has to be when you are in government and dealing with those people that come across the sea. Obviously no-one would want to have statistics where you have one in 20 people drowning—no-one on either side of the chamber. I would never suggest that. I have seen people stand up in this chamber and cry when talking about this, because it is quite an emotional thing. I remember the member for North Sydney saying:

I will never ever support a people swap where you can send a 13-year-old child unaccompanied to a country without supervision—never. It will be over my dead body. How dare people?

I remember that particularly, and I quote that from the *Hansard*. It is an emotional topic.

Let us be realistic about this. We do not want one in 20 people drowning. Politically, it works for any party to make sure that the Australian people are not concerned about the number of those who are coming across the sea. They are not illegal. Let us get that straight. We signed a treaty, and while we are still a signatory to that treaty they are not illegal. I refute that suggestion every time I hear the Prime Minister say it. This is why I deliberately use the words from the second verse of the Australian national anthem, which refers to them as the people 'who've come across the seas'. Every time we sing that second verse we should remember that. Anyone who is a parent would know that we would do whatever we could to put our children in a safer place—whatever we could! In fact, there are seven million Australians who did that; they put their children in a better place.

While preparing for this debate, I thought it appropriate to go back to some of the recommendations of the expert panel on asylum seekers. I did hear Minister Morrison quoting some of the words of Angus Houston in the media lately. As people might recall, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, Paris Aristotle and Professor Michael L'Estrange prepared this report for the government. I return to their recommendations. The first recommendation talks about broad characteristics which both sides of the chamber would agree on. I tick both sides for that. Recommendation 2 says 'increase Australia's humanitarian program', which we did, from 13,750 up to 20,000, with a commitment at the election to go to 26,000. We are now on this side of the chamber. Obviously, those opposite are committed to decreasing it to 13,750.

Let us look at some of the other recommendations. Recommendation 3 talks about regional cooperation. That is a big focus. I think you have to put a black mark in the copybook of those opposite for that one. Recommendation 4 talks about bilateral cooperation on asylum seeker issues with Indonesia. Today Indonesia just downgraded their relationship with Australia—so a big cross through that recommendation. Recommendation 5 says 'develop its vitally important cooperation with Malaysia on asylum seekers'. The quote I read out was about the debate on the Malaysian people swap. I have a vague recollection that those opposite actually voted with the Greens to knock it off—but maybe I am misremembering that.

Mr Conroy: You're not, mate.

Mr PERRETT: That is what happened. People who have made speeches today on this issue sat with the Greens to knock off that people swap because Malaysia was not a signatory to the UN convention on looking after asylum seekers. They sat with the Greens on that policy. Then it comes out today—

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr PERRETT: Well, my understanding from the media is that we have had unaccompanied minors sent to Nauru, when the minister is actually the guardian of those minors. It is a difficult job, I would imagine, to be the

minister making that decision. How can you look after the best interests of those children by sending them to Manus Island or to Nauru or, if it does come about, into an Indonesian program? That has been reported in the media. The reality is that we have had 225 years of people coming across the seas to this country, and there has been an irrational fear of other people coming from across the seas ever since that started. (*Time expired*)