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MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

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Speaker Bernardi, Sen Cory

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Senator BERNARDI (South Australia) (4.29 pm)—Let me start my contribution to this debate by saying I agree with some aspects of what Senator Moore said. Firstly, the government have been entirely consistent for their period of office and that is consistently wrong in their approach to how they are treating refugees and protecting Australia's borders. There is ample evidence of that which I will get to shortly. Also Senator Moore claimed that the process that the refugees or unauthorised arrivals in this country were undergoing was in full accordance with the law. She is absolutely right. It is in accordance with the law because this government changed the law. It changed the law that stopped the boats from coming and stopped providing incentives for people smugglers and for unauthorised arrivals to try to get to this country. That was offshore processing and temporary protection visas.

This government changed the law and the boats started coming in overwhelming record numbers. What Senator Moore failed to address—and may have inadvertently misstated the position on—is the fact that we are complying with our international obligations to the point that the first safe port of call for people seeking refuge is to arrive in our country. To my knowledge, none of the people coming on these boats first arrives in Australia without going through another nation. If they are fleeing Afghanistan, they go to Pakistan or Malaysia, and they normally end up in Indonesia. They pay their tens of thousands of dollars to the people smugglers right along the way. They dispose of their identity documents if they have them and then they hop on a boat to come to Australia.

That is not a legitimate claim for asylum in my book if you have travelled through three other countries and paid your way. You are not fleeing oppression in Indonesia. You are not fleeing the Taliban. You are just seeking to get to Australia by not waiting in the appropriate refugee camps that are available in many places. Every one of these people that jumps the queue by paying the money and claiming asylum in this country stops a person who is doing the right thing and is appropriately putting themselves through the proper system, a person who probably cannot afford to pay the people smugglers and fuel their outrageous trade. That is enough of addressing Senator Moore's concerns.

The Labor Party are caught in a very inconvenient truth. I recall the day when the facility on Christmas Island was built and it was derided and mocked by the Labor Party as a white elephant. Yet the detention centre on Christmas Island has never been fuller. The minister himself has acknowledged there were over 3,000 people in that facility when it was only built for 2,500. The results are stark. Last week they came back to haunt all Australians because last week buildings were damaged there, fires were lit. There were violent approaches to the Australian Federal Police by the people that are detained on Christmas Island. There were seven days of riots—250 of these people set buildings on fire and threw makeshift explosives at police and still this government will not condemn them. Nearly 200 Australian Federal Police officers had to be flown in and quell the rioting. They had to deliver tear gas ammunition and more police to the island through the Royal Australian Air Force. A number of these asylum seekers escaped. According to the Prime Minister that is okay because they are on an island; they cannot go anywhere. Tell that to the poor residents of Christmas Island. Yet just today we have learned that an official head count still cannot account for all the people. There must be some hiding around Christmas Island. This government do not even know where they are.

The facts are that detention centres right across this country are full to overflowing. There is no offshore processing anymore. There have been three boats in the last five days. The most recent of them hopped onto the Christmas Island bypass lane and received its escort directly into Darwin. This is outrageous. It is a catastrophic policy failure not just because Australia's borders are being breached without authority and, despite what Senator Moore says, without a legitimate claim to asylum because it is not the first safe port of call. What is happening is the outrageous waste of taxpayers' money in dealing with these problems, the fact that people being forced to put their lives in jeopardy are encouraged to do it. You want to talk about the pull factor. The pull factor is the great way of life we have in this country and this government's lax way of dealing with their policy failures.

The other concerns that I know many Australians share are in the words of Mr Bowen, the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, about the processing of claims of the rioters. He said:

... a small group of detainees have made it clear that they would continue violent action until they were granted visas. Of course, we cannot enter into those sorts of discussions. We do not let that sort of behaviour influence our consideration of visa applications.

I have two responses to that. The first is 'nonsense' and the second is 'you should'. It is nonsense because people on the *Oceanic Viking* were blackmailing the previous Rudd government saying, 'Unless we get a special deal we are not coming off and we are going to go on a hunger strike.' Did they get a special deal? Yes, they certainly did. We all forget the emotional blackmail that was played against the government and the government folded. I would like to play cards against this government because they are hopeless.

The second part of Minister Bowen's statement is:

We do not let that sort of behaviour influence our consideration of visa applications.

I am telling you that you should. You should let it influence it because if people are prepared to throw bombs at police whilst they are in detention being assessed for security concerns, if they are prepared to escape from lawful detainment, if they are prepared to break the law to get here, if they are prepared to set fire to buildings and hurt their fellow refugees or asylum seekers, are they really the type of people we want to have in this country? That is a legitimate question, and I know it is one that many people ask, yet we do not have an answer or any embracing of this legitimate question by this government. We simply have an approach that we can build more detention centres or asylum centres, however you want to describe them. We will provide the welcome mat for more people to get in with people smugglers and ply their vile trade.

There is no question there are many legitimate refugees in the world, and many countries are struggling with this precise issue. But Australia had this issue solved. We had an orderly assessment process under the previous government and that was changed, on an ideological whim, by this government and it has proved to be a catastrophic failure. We know they do not have the will, the strength or the courage to actually change it back. We know they have the rhetoric. We know they have their plan for the East Timor regional detention centre, but, of course, that is not going to come to fruition because Kevin 11—sorry, Mr Rudd—is responsible for negotiating it and he does not want a bar of it. So we know it is another flawed and failed policy smokescreen to divert attention from the catastrophic failure of this government to secure Australia's borders. You want to have a sensible debate on this but the first part of having a sensible debate is admitting there is a problem. (*Time expired*)