THE SENATE

BILLS

Migration Amendment (Complementary Protection) Bill 2011

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 19 September 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator IAN MACDONALD (Queensland) (12:32): This is an important debate and I want to support my colleague in what she has said in relation to this bill. Whilst I appreciate that, unlike other treaties, perhaps the refugee convention is not one that is absolute and cannot be derogated from, it seems to me that the government is being a bit hypocritical in bringing forward this bill talking about supporting international covenants and yet is currently in the throes of sending refugee applicants to a country that does not support the refugee convention.

I know Ms Gillard has promised in the past that she would never send any refugees or asylum seekers to a country that did not support the refugee convention, which, like her promise 'There will be no carbon tax under the government I lead', is simply one of those promises that Ms Gillard does not think she has to abide by. So, I wonder why it is that we are taking these steps in legislation and yet it gives government more power in an area where they have proved that they do not really follow the commitments they have made previously and the commitments they have made to the refugee convention.

The other matter I want to raise is that in all of the talk about refugees and asylum seekers and where they will be sent for offshore processing, I do not think it comes through clearly enough that Australia and all Australians support the intake of refugees into this country. We have picked a figure of almost 14,000. Whether that figure is right or wrong is perhaps a question for another debate, but we as a country have said that we will take about 14,000 refugees every year. But the concern with the boat people coming from Malaysia and Indonesia is not about not accepting refugees coming in—all Australians accept that refugees should be allowed into this country—it is really a question about queue jumpers.

There are millions of people living in squalid refugee camps right around the world who have been determined by the UNHCR to be refugees. There is no question about it, they have fled persecution, death and things that put their lives and their families’ lives in danger. But they do not get to Australia because, whilst they wait in these squalid camps right around the world, some other people are coming in ahead of them. The people who are applying may well be refugees and may well have very good cases. They all do, however, seem to be quite wealthy, because we know they are paying people smugglers ten, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars to get here. So they are clearly would-be Australians with plenty of money. Unfortunately, a lot of those existing around the world in the squalid refugee camps do not have a lazy $15,000 they can pull out of their pockets and give to a people smuggler and get to Australia tomorrow. They have to wait, in many cases for years, before they ever get the opportunity of coming to places like Australia. This is part of the debate which, regrettably, gets lost in Australia. Those of us who are interested in the debate should be better aware—and I am surprised that the media does not make this point more often. It is not that the coalition is against refugees; quite the contrary. We welcome refugees in accordance with the rules. But, every time we take a boat person from Malaysia or Indonesia who has paid a lot of money to a criminal to get them here, we are blocking out a genuine refugee who has been patiently waiting their turn in accordance with the rules in some squalid camp somewhere around the world. That person will have to wait another year or another 10 years for every boat person that we allow in, jumping the queue. I think that needs to be better considered by those who are so forceful in advocating the plight of the boat people from Indonesia or Malaysia. With that, I support Senator Cash in her comments on the bill and indicate that I will be opposing it.