



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Asylum Seekers

SPEECH

Tuesday, 22 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 22 March 2011
Page 1452
Questioner
Speaker Eggleston, Sen Alan

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator EGGLESTON (Western Australia) (4.48 pm)—The Gillard government has failed miserably to protect our shores from the scourge of people smugglers. Yesterday the 215th illegal boat since the Gillard government took office was intercepted in Australian waters. At this rate, our northern waters will soon rival the English Channel as one of the busiest sea lanes in the world, the Indian Ocean having become the express lane on the highway for illegal boats. As I said, the Gillard government has failed to protect our borders. As other speakers have also said, it has failed to make even the slightest inroad into reducing the number of people landing illegally on our shores. Since the Gillard government took office, more than 10,000 illegal immigrants have arrived in this country by boat.

For months now we have heard talk of a regional solution. Kevin Rudd first raised this and approached the government of Indonesia about setting up a regional facility in East Timor to process illegal migrants, but nothing has come of that. It is a farce. It is something that is not going to happen. As a consequence of Labor's failure, our detention centre is stretched beyond its capacity. The recent riots on Christmas Island outraged Australians and left this small, normally idyllic community wondering what its government had done to cause this riot to be foisted upon them. Since taking office, the government last year suffered a cost blow-out of more than \$1 billion in detention centre running costs, a sevenfold increase over the costs during the period of the Howard government. A significant amount of this cost has been for the addition of a staggering 4,900 beds to detention centres at a cost of some \$400,000. If only this were 4,900 new hospital beds, 4,900 new police officers or 4,900 new teachers, but sadly it is not. It is a waste, in effect, of 4,900 beds for illegal queue jumpers. More boats, more spending, less protection and less control—that is the Gillard government's approach to border protection.

This contrasts very starkly with the reasonable and respected policies the Howard government developed over its 11 years in power. When the coalition government left office, just four people who had arrived illegally by boat were in detention. Today that figure is more than 6,300, including more than 1,000 children. In the last five years of the Howard government just 18 boats entered Australian waters illegally. Compare that figure to the armada of boats

that is now coming down from Indonesia to Christmas Island.

The question we have to ask ourselves, and which has been alluded to by other speakers, is whether it is push or pull factors that are contributing to the growing tide of illegal boats. To my mind it is very much pull factors. The changes the Labor regime has made to our previously highly effective border protection policies have meant that those policies and the protection of our borders have collapsed under the Rudd and Gillard governments. As it stands, people smugglers know that they can get people to pay large amounts of money for a seat on a boat to Australia knowing full well that once on our shores there is a very good chance that they will stay here and have access to our state provided health, education and housing services, which is one of the reasons why people find it attractive to come to Australia.

I suggest that the return of temporary protection visas, or TPVs, utilised to great effect by the Howard government, would be a responsible and considered approach the present government could take to reverse its current policy failure. But both the Gillard government, and the Rudd government before it, have indicated that they have no intention of reintroducing temporary protection visas, in spite of the great success they brought. Under the temporary protection visa policy, persons who are fleeing from persecution in their homelands could come to Australia until the situation in their homelands improved and then they were returned to their own countries. This occurred with refugees from Kosovo and also from East Timor.

One of the other effects of the influx of great numbers of illegal refugees has been that the number of humanitarian migrants that Australia takes has been reduced because the number of refugees per annum is taken off the total of our refugee intake of some 15,000 people per year.

There is no doubt that Australia is rolling out the welcome mat and the people smugglers are lining up to bring more and more refugees here on the promise of permanent residency under the soft policies of the ALP government. The Australian people expect their government to protect their borders. This government is not doing that.