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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Border Protection

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Eggleston, Sen Alan

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Senator EGGLESTON (Western Australia) (4.48 pm)—The whole issue of what happened recently in Indonesia has to be regarded as being of the gravest significance to our relationship with Indonesia. As a result of the bungled handling of the refugee situation there, last weekend we saw the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, cancel a state visit to Australia. That is a very serious matter indeed. Indonesia is our closest neighbour and we have had a very long and sometimes stormy relationship. It has had its ups and downs and we have worked very hard to improve that relationship in recent years. But, as I said, last weekend we had the President of Indonesia cancelling a state visit to this country. That was no doubt a result of the fact that the President regarded the way he and his country had been treated by the Rudd government as less than satisfactory.

Whether or not the government is prepared to accept it, it is quite obvious that Mr Rudd has been very clumsy in his handling of Indonesia and he has obviously deeply offended the Indonesian government. Mr Rudd claims and somewhat trades on the fact that he is an Asian specialist. He claims a special relationship with China. He speaks Mandarin, as we all know. Yet we hear that these days the Chinese government say they much preferred dealing with Mr Howard because, although Mr Howard did not speak Mandarin, he had a very simple and straightforward view of the relationship with China. It was very businesslike and they could deal with him and trust that what he had to say was a bond which would be followed through.

Here we have Mr Rudd causing a ruction in our relationship with this very important country of Indonesia, our closest neighbour, with a population of 220 million, to the point that the President cancelled a state visit. I can only express great concern that this relationship has been damaged and that the very significant degree of engagement which the Howard government established with Indonesia on people smuggling may well be compromised by the actions of the Rudd government during the recent episode where a boatload of people were left for nearly a month on a ship in the Riau Islands.

The government denies that there was any sort of special deal with Indonesia over how these people would be handled, but I recall hearing that they would

be off the boat and into some sort of assessment facility within a very short time. Quite obviously, there was more to that arrangement than we were told publicly and the Indonesians feel let down by the failure of the Rudd government to honour an agreement, even if we do not know the full details of it. There are 42 million refugees in the world, I am told. It is an awfully large number of people. Australia has always had a responsible policy on refugees within the context of our controlled immigration policy.

Australia has never had an open door. In recent years we have developed a policy based on skills and we have taken, variously, between 80,000 and 150,000 immigrants a year. We also take around 15,000 refugees, who we accept from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees camps, where these people are assessed in terms of their identity—it is very important to know who they are—and in terms of their criminal records and their security records. That is a very orderly way of taking refugees, and Australia in fact takes a higher percentage of refugees in its overall migration program than many other countries in the world. So we have a very fine and respectable program and record there.

But something has changed in the last few years. If you look at the records of boat arrivals, it is very interesting. In the early part of the 2000s there were in fact no boats. In 2002-03, for example, there were no boats and no refugees arriving by sea. In 2003-04 there were three boats with 82 people. In 2004-05, still during the Howard government, there were no boats, no refugees. In 2005-06 there were eight boats, 61 refugees. In 2006-07 there were four boats. In 2007-08, there were three boats. But then you come through to 2008-09, when there were 22 boats with 1,039 people, and so far this year 22 boats and 1,029 people. So obviously something is different and that difference has to be the approach of the Rudd government.

The Rudd government's policies on our borders are obviously weaker in terms of border protection, and the people smugglers who make a business of bringing people to Australia in boats obviously think that under the Rudd government it is going to be easier to get these people to Australia and that there will be a better opportunity for refugees to come in by irregular means. This is very sad, because of course those journeys over the ocean in small boats are very dangerous. Lots

of people drown and it is certainly not good for the government to have weakened our border protection policies. I think the Rudd government has a lot to answer for in that regard.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Hurley)—Order! The time for discussion has now concluded.