



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

**Defence Housing as an
Immigration Detention Facility**

SPEECH

Monday, 21 February 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 21 February 2011 Page 194 Questioner Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (7.40 pm)—There are 18,153 houses available for Defence families right now—15,770 of them are owned or leased by the Defence Housing Authority or DHA, and 2,383 were owned by the Department of Defence as at Halloween last year, 31 October. Of the 2,383 houses owned by the department, 20 per cent or 446 are not being used to house Defence families. They are either vacant, being renovated or being used for other purposes. It may come as a surprise to the people of this nation but those purposes now include housing irregular maritime arrivals—boat people, those seeking refugee status. Indeed, 81 of the Defence houses in Inverbrackie in South Australia are being used for this purpose. This motion therefore calls on the government now, today, to cease using Defence houses as an immigration detention facility, to hand over all house management to the Defence Housing Authority and to state categorically, without equivocation, that Defence houses will be used for Defence personnel, their spouses, families and children and not as detention facilities for the ever increasing number of IMAs.

By way of history, it is a statement of fact that during the 2010 federal election a ministerial submission from the Department of Defence to the then Minister for Defence outlined plans to shift Defence families from their homes in order to house those seeking asylum, or IMAs. The letter was obtained by the *Australian* newspaper. The submission went into significant detail about how this might be accomplished and included time lines, costs and the proposal to transfer Defence land to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Reports suggested that 162 Defence members and their families would have to move to inferior housing to make way for those seeking asylum at Darwin's Berrimah Defence establishment. Clearly, and as was to be expected, this was later refuted by the government.

The government, in shock and denial, said the proposal came from the Department of Defence. It is clearly obvious to even the most casual observer of such matters that the Department of Defence would be the last to propose such an idea without ministerial authority. It is ludicrous and indeed misleading to suggest otherwise. Many have tried in the past to persuade Defence to give up or otherwise sell off surplus land or assets, and those people will testify quite clearly that it is like pushing a very large rock uphill. To think for one moment that Defence would voluntarily suggest that it would give up its land to another department is simply fooling ourselves and treating the Australian people like mugs. The Labor government's defence on the matter during the election campaign was similarly weak. It failed to categorically rule out the prospect of ever using any more Defence housing for accommodating asylum seekers.

I could go on, but let me put on the record, clearly and unequivocally, for the Australian people: the coalition will not move Defence families from their homes in order to house those seeking asylum. I cannot think of anything worse for Defence families and members, their children and their spouses—having already given so much to serve our land and its uniform—than having, in effect, to pay for the Labor government's failed border protection policy by having to leave their homes. The coalition will not put up with it. We will not stand for it. We will fight assiduously against it.

It has long been said, with regard to managing our borders, that the coalition had a problem and created a solution—to the point where, on 24 November 2007, only four children were in detention. That number is now over 600. Where as the current government abandoned the solution and created a massive problem—pull factors that have now pulled over 200 boats and nearly 8,000 people to our shores seeking asylum.

The problem is getting bigger, and there is no solution. In the words of the Prime Minister, in a different life, maybe: 'Another boat, another policy failure.' Every day we hear that the Christmas Island detention facility is at or over capacity. Thousands more people seeking asylum are moved onshore and housed in motels, all at taxpayer expense. It was only a week ago that the Gillard Labor government said that an additional \$290 million would be needed to fund its failed border protection policy, in addition to the \$470 million already budgeted—almost \$¾ billion for a problem they created. Can you imagine what \$¾ billion could actually fund? It could almost fund half the levy this government is going to foist on the Australian population. By comparison, the coalition, in its last year of government, spent less than \$100 million.

This is a failure of this government of the most categorical terms. Defence families, defence land and defence housing are now paying the price for that failure. Given that the Gillard Labor government seems quite unwilling to adopt the coalition's highly successful border protection policies, measures now need to be taken to ensure that defence families are not left to pay for the failures of this government.

Ms Saffin—Like *Tampa*.

Mr ROBERT—It is for this reason that I call on the Gillard Labor government to immediately provide a guarantee—immediately, member for Page—in this parliament to the people of this nation, to all defence personnel and to their families that they will not be required to move from their homes for the purposes of the accommodating of those seeking asylum. Members of the ADF and their families need that level of categorical assurance. They deserve that assurance from this government. After all, we do not know whether or not this policy is still being kicked around in the back halls of Russell Hill and in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

In the middle of last year, when the issue hit the radio waves, the ministerial submission went as far as to list possible sites in Western Australia and Victoria that may be suitable. In fact, none of them are suitable, but the plans were well developed. In July last year it was reported by senior Defence sources that plans were well advanced for Maygar Barracks in Broadmeadow, outside Melbourne, to accept irregular maritime arrivals. At that time a Defence spokesman said:

The government has repeatedly acknowledged that as part of its routine and prudent contingency planning, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship has for some time been exploring additional temporary accommodation options to house families and vulnerable asylum-seekers.

If we cut through all the spin it is quite clear that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and, indeed, this government, knows it is running out of space to house those seeking asylum. They desperately need additional accommodation for the thousands and thousands now being brought to the mainland. If the boats keep coming—and I guarantee you they will, because there is no deterrent; only a massive policy framework that is acting as a magnet to pull them here—there is a very real prospect that this government will run out of options and will seek further defence houses to house those seeking asylum.

That is why this motion calls on the Gillard Labor government to transfer all defence housing stock management to Defence Housing Australia—transfer it all—because this government cannot be trusted to have over 2,300 defence houses that the minister can grab at will, whereas he cannot grab those houses that are currently being owned and run by DHA. The temptation must be removed from this bad government: 2,383 houses owned by Defence, 1,937 occupied, leaving 446 right now—20 per cent—that I am sure this government is eyeing warily and greedily to try to deal with the problem of those seeking asylum, which is getting out of control.

Currently 81 houses in Inverbrackie, South Australia, are being used for this purpose—defence houses being used as a detention centre. Clearly this is the thin end of the wedge. In a question on notice to the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel on 17 November 2010, the minister was asked why the housing stock was not transferred from Defence to DHA. The answer was that 'commercial arrangements did not allow for it'. The real answer, of course—and we all know it—is that if you hand it over to DHA, the Gillard government cannot get its grubby paws on it to use it for ulterior motives other than housing defence families. It is that simple.

The Department of Defence, the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Materiel have recently been in the spotlight over a growing list of scandalous equipment problems that have developed on their watch. Most notable and most parlous is the state of the Royal Australian Navy, where there is no amphibious capability available right now. Can you imagine if Cyclone Yasi had struck Townsville or Cairns and an amphibious ship could not be launched? There would be no hospital facilities offshore, no helicopter facility offshore and no mass movement of transport and goods offshore. This is the state Defence has got into because of what this government has done to it. The last thing we need to do is compound the problems the department is dealing with because this government cannot continue to control its borders.