



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2010-2011

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2010-2011

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 24 February 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP	Question No.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (11.33 am)—It has been a long time since poor Kevin was knifed, when the government had lost its way but, as we look at Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2010-2011 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2010-2011, building on appropriation bills Nos 1 and 2 coming from supply for the budget, ‘lost its way’ continues to be a mantra shouted strongly and loudly. The budget and indeed the appropriations continue to have lost their way.

There is no finer example of this than looking at the continual disaster that is Labor’s border protection policies and suite of policies that, in August 2008, wound back some of the most effective protections to ward off the scourge of people smugglers, to the point where over 200 boats and over 9,000 irregular maritime arrivals have come to our shores.

What is most vexing is not that people are paying people smugglers so that they can come here to seek a better freedom but that those who sit behind razor wire right now in some of the most desperate conditions in the world are being locked out of Australia because of the current IMAs. It has been said in the parliament in recent days that if you are in an Afghani refugee camp on the border with one of its neighbours you have a one in 10 chance of your asylum application being picked up through the normal channels. If you jump on a boat and pay a people smuggler, that figure rises to 97 per cent. How the government continues its hollow rhetoric that there are no pull factors is beyond me.

I see in Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2010-2011 that there is \$290 million extra for the running costs in the blow-out this year for offshore asylum seeker management. In Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2010-2011 there is \$152.8 million in additional capital expenditure for the establishment of the Northam detention centre and the Inverbrackie detention centre previously announced by the government. History is always an interesting witness. On 8 February 2008, Senator Evans said:

The Pacific solution was a cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful exercise introduced on the eve of a Federal election by the Howard Government.

Is this senator kidding me? He then said that the entire project cost a staggering \$289 million. That \$289 million was from the period September 2001 to June 2007 for the Nauru and Manus OPCs whereby the number of boats dropped from an extraordinary number to three a year. There are something like three a week at present. That was \$289 million over seven years. Here we are looking at a \$290 million in blow-out costs for six months, not seven years. Indeed the total, as a statement of fact, for this financial year alone for the asylum seeker debacle is a \$750 million blow-out, and the total blow-out in the budgets since Labor watered down the effective border security measures has been \$1.4 billion—fact. At the current rate, by the end of the 2011-12 financial year, the amount of money by which the budget will have blown out because of Labor’s failures in this space will be a staggering \$1.9 billion. That is almost getting up to the amount of the failed pink batts policy, Green Loans, solar and other programs, where the waste and mismanagement have been staggering. We are heading towards \$1.9 billion; \$1.4 billion is where we are at.

Surprisingly, those figures are quite close to the amount that will be raised by the new tax the government is seeking to put on Australians. When we speak about the flood levy, which I and my colleagues will certainly vote against, I am reminded that communities around the country continue with great spirit and great goodwill to do whatever they can. Last Saturday night I was at a community concert in Paradise Point where the council to their credit had put on Popera in the Park. Thousands and thousands of people attended. The goal was to raise \$15,000. The major sponsor was the local Bendigo Bank. The chairman, Ann Glenister, did a wonderful job, with the bank coming there and joining the community. The community raised \$33,000, with all the money bypassing the state Labor government and going directly to the Mayor of Lockyer Valley. That is the spirit of a generous Australian community. However, the more I hear about the flood levy and the tax, the more I see people disappointed that that spirit has not been fostered but has indeed been dampened.

As we look at these appropriation bills, especially in the area of asylum seeker failures, we need look no further than Defence, with a strategic reform program building on the last Hawke-Keating Labor governments where they had a Defence reform program building on the last disaster under Gough Whitlam, who despised Defence in the extreme. The SRP was saving \$20 billion over 10 years. It is now simply about cuts. And the cuts are damaging operational capability. In typical spin style, Labor said that the strategic reform program was not about cutting and it would not impact operational capability, and that it is about streamlining, efficiency and effectiveness.

In the last financial year, Navy handed back \$200 million in maintenance funds. Yet now we cannot put an amphibious ship in the water, with *Tobruk*, *Kanimbla* and *Manoora* completely out of action. Could you imagine if Cyclone Yasi had hit Cairns? We would have had tens of thousands of refugees. Where is the offshore medical facility, where is the offshore helicopter-carrying facility, where is the capacity for stores and food and water offshore? They are not there.

The minister should be sacked for negligence in not allowing a full naval amphibious capability to be available when we knew we were entering the cyclone season and we knew that weather patterns were changing from El Nino. When the full horror of the lack of amphibious capability was produced to the Australian people, the minister had the hide, the audacity and the temerity to blame the department—‘The department did not keep me informed. The department has pulled the wool over my eyes.’ I thought that under the Westminster system the minister is accountable, but not this minister. The department is at fault. He even went so far as to release some of the advice he had received to show how much the department was at fault. This minister is not responsible; he is just the minister.

Now we have no amphibious capability, no ability to respond to disasters overseas, no capacity in countries in our immediate area where Australian citizens may need assistance, no offshore helicopter capability, no stores, no ability to carry a battalion group, nothing. The two previous Labor ministers over the last 3½ years failed to ensure that the SRP was not a series of cuts. They failed to ensure that it was simply about efficiency. They have failed and capability is being impacted. As I look at the budget I am deeply concerned as to where this is going in terms of the waste and the management and where it will end. In terms of my brief comments, I will simply leave it there and call on the government to address these failures, especially the failure in border protection. The amount of money needed to deal with their continual failures keeps racking up.