



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

**Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade Joint Committee**

Report

SPEECH

Monday, 22 August 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 22 August 2011
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Questioner
Speaker Mr ROBERT

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (10:26): I join the member for Melbourne Ports in providing some comment on the recent review of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade annual report 2009-10 by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. I join him in thanking the secretariat for the wonderful work they have done. The chair of this committee has been far too generous of the state of the current Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under the austere stewardship of the current Minister for Foreign Affairs, the member for Griffith. The department is becoming increasingly focused on Australia's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council to the detriment of so many other areas that it needs to focus on. One of those important areas is our relationship with Indonesia. The live trade debacle was a complete and utter fiasco, attributed in part to a DFAT that, unfortunately, has been utterly put to task by the foreign minister on a range of other matters. I am sure Australia's beef producers will be interested to hear that the foreign minister is far more interested in getting a spot for two years on the UN Security Council than he is in representing the interests of thousands of Australian families in the north of Australia.

Our relationships with our neighbours, such as PNG and Fiji, remain important but again are being left to deteriorate because of the foreign minister's unwavering and unexplainable obsession with getting Australia a two-year seat on the UN Security Council. His actions, frankly, are jeopardising Australia's place within the region and the world, not to put too fine a point on it. The shadow foreign affairs spokesperson, Julie Bishop, stated:

In the absence of a credible explanation, one can only assume it is an ego-driven campaign to satisfy Kevin Rudd's vanity.

These sentiments have been backed up by the recently released Lowy Institute report that is, frankly, damning of DFAT and its minister. The report speaks of a broken department and a grossly inadequate diplomatic footprint with too few international posts and too many bureaucrats in Canberra. Indeed, the report states that Australia has about 89 embassies and consulates compared to the OECD average of over 150. In the light of such numbers the report puts up one can only assume

that Lowy has got it right—that it is grossly and utterly inadequate. Morocco has an embassy in Australia, yet our footprint in Africa is slight, to say the very least.

The report notes that there is exceptionally low foreign language capability. Less than a quarter of DFAT staff speak a second language and less than 10 per cent speak an Asian language. Minister Rudd's obsession with obtaining a place on the UN Security Council is debilitating an already overstretched department, which is failing to meet even basic demands. That is what the Lowy Institute report states. Despite some improvements at the margins, DFAT still faces serious shortfalls. The Lowy report states:

Unless these deficiencies are remedied, our economic, political and security interests could be seriously jeopardised.

Those are frightening words from an independent report looking at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under the stewardship of this Labor government. I repeat, the report says:

Unless these deficiencies are remedied, our economic, political and security interests could be seriously jeopardised.

With 747 Kev flying around the world at twice the rate of any commensurable minister in the history of our nation, we still have an independent report saying that our interests could be seriously jeopardised. The report continues:

For a highly globalised country facing a more challenging external environment, Australia's diplomatic footprint remains too limited.

I am sure Prime Minister Gillard is more than happy for Foreign Minister Rudd to be travelling around the world and, frankly, not in Australia. It takes more than just flying in and flying out, Foreign Minister Rudd, to maintain close relationships with other nation states. The Lowy Institute poll goes on to say the real opportunity far exceeds the \$23 million cost. I commend the report to the House. I ask the government to correct the deficiencies before it is too late. (*Time expired*)