



Speech by

Mr S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK

Hansard 4 August 1998

IMMIGRATION

Mr ROBERTSON (Sunnybank—ALP) (12.19 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, firstly allow me to congratulate you on your elevation to that position and ask you to pass on my congratulations to the Speaker on his elevation. I rise today to also congratulate the Federal Labor Leader, Kim Beazley, for his contribution yesterday to encourage all Australians to engage in a mature, reasoned and factual debate about immigration and the direction that we as a nation should be taking in both the short and long terms. Mr Beazley's contribution demonstrated that there is at least one political leader in this nation who has both the ability and the courage to raise important issues without resorting to ignorant and prejudiced hyperbole, to raise issues and argue a position using facts rather than fantasy or fallacy, to admit that all the answers are not readily apparent and to argue that, through mature discussion involving all sections of our community, we can reach a consensus on the right direction for our nation.

The central point made by Mr Beazley should not be lost on any thinking Australian, that is, that we need to understand that there will be significant challenges ahead for Government, industry and the broader community arising out of an increasing proportion of Australians who will have reached retirement age. It makes little sense to argue for a population freeze in which immigration numbers should not exceed the number of Australians who leave the country if a greater percentage of our population are to become retirees. To quote the Federal Labor Leader—

"We need to think about how we guarantee a sufficient critical mass of employed people to ease what will be a mounting fiscal burden on future generations."

In other words, we need to keep Australia young.

This is not a new challenge. It is a challenge that has been understood by Labor since at least the early 1980s. That is why Labor and the trade union movement had the vision to introduce compulsory occupational superannuation for all Australian workers, despite the objection of the Liberal and National Parties and their recent attempts to wind back the universality of occupational superannuation provisions. That is why Labor was and continues to be committed to a universal health care system contributed to by all Australians during the course of their working lives, a system which, again, the current Federal Liberal/National Party Government is committed to winding back.

Given falling birth rates in Australia, given the increasing longevity of Australians and the impact that that has on our health system, and given that an increasing proportion of Australians are over the age of 60 and the impact that that has on our social security system, we must look long and hard at developing a bipartisan population policy. Part of that debate must necessarily involve a debate about immigration levels. If we all take a step back from our respective political allegiances for a moment, there can surely be no disagreement about the necessity for such a debate by any member of this House—at least I hope that is the case.

I have spoken in this place before about my disappointment at the use of immigration as a political football and the consequences of that in terms of social cohesion and Australia's hard-won reputation as a caring and compassionate nation. For the past 10 years, ever since Prime Minister Howard destroyed the broad political bipartisanship on immigration policy that had existed in Australia since at least the 1960s, Australia's reputation has suffered. This absence of bipartisanship has provided succour to those in the community who see immigration in simple racial terms, which has, in turn, led to a campaign to discredit multiculturalism both as a definition of policy and a direction of policy.

Let no-one in this House misunderstand: irresponsible outbursts on immigration do have an impact. They have an impact on those Australians who have come from other parts of the world, who may look different, sound different or have a different cultural history and different customs from the dominant British or European culture that most of us in this place share. Emotive outbursts against immigration out of ignorance or for short-term political gain empower people in our community to vent their prejudices by verbally and even physically abusing their fellow Australians. That fact is rarely acknowledged by those who provoke the outburst. They retreat into denial. They claim that they have never witnessed such verbal or physical abuse; therefore, it does not occur. Of course they have not witnessed the consequences of their own ignorance and prejudice—the abuse is often subtle, it is often unseen, and, sadly, it is often deliberately ignored. But the fact remains that the abuse is still there and it hurts and offends those fellow Australians who may look, sound or act differently from the majority of us.

There are those who defend their right to abuse as exercising their right to free speech. Let there be no mistake: I am a defender of free speech. It is central to a healthy, robust democracy. It has been a proud tradition in Australia since European settlement commenced over 200 years ago. However, I do not believe that implicit in a right to free speech is a right to abuse, a right to offend or a right to be irresponsible. The right to free speech can be protected only if that right is not abused, is framed within the values that we as a community aspire to protect and nurture, and respects the rights of fellow citizens. As Kim Beazley said yesterday—

"Forgive me if I can't see these last two years as the Prime Minister's cheery unexpurgated good—a new climate of free speech, or whatever he wants to call it. We have always had free speech— what we didn't have was official sanction for discourtesy. It is hardly an advance that we have that sanction today."

I find it strange that a number of politicians who have used immigration levels for short-term political gain often represent electorates in regional Queensland. They lament the decline in towns caused by the closure of services such as banks or the lack of employment opportunities for young people and understandably rail against the doctrine of economic rationalism. That point was developed in a speech today by my friend the member for Woodridge. But, at the same time, those members hardly roll out the welcome mat to migrants who could well contribute to arrest the decline in the communities they have been elected to represent. Perhaps some of those members could explain to me how they expect their communities to benefit from the skills and resources that are brought to this country by entrepreneurs under the business migration scheme when they go out of their way to make these migrants feel unwelcome. That is the impact of narrow and inaccurate statements such as "Australia is in danger of being overrun by Asians."

Beazley is right when he says that immigration cannot be looked at in isolation. It must be part of an overall analysis of population policy that must include Australia's infrastructure needs, environmental considerations and regional development. If regional development relies at least in part on repopulation, then some politicians in this place and elsewhere may wish to be a bit more circumspect in some of their more extreme statements. There is no doubt that the Federal Labor Leader is taking a risk, but it is a risk worth taking. It is a risk that must be taken. It is a risk that should be taken not only by political leaders but also by leaders in all sections of the community. If we are to embark on this debate—a debate that could take some time to exhaust itself—then there must be a responsibility on all participants, even our political opponents, to enter the debate committed to arguing on the basis of fact and committed to reason and respect. To do otherwise may advance narrow, short-term political agendas but will in the end do Australia a great disservice.

The Federal Labor Leader, Kim Beazley, should be congratulated on his bold initiative and his political courage. It is a welcome circuit-breaker from the narrow, reactionary and unfortunate debate Australia has suffered over the past two years. Kim Beazley has continued the proud tradition within the Labor Party of being a forward-thinking party that cares about Australia's future and seeks to engage all Australians in important and essential debates about our nation's direction. Most of all, he has demonstrated a quality that has been sadly lacking in Australia over the past two years: leadership.
