



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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COASTWATCH

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (7.25 p.m.): When the people of Cairns opened their Cairns Post newspaper on Saturday, 13 March, they were confronted with a screaming four-centimetre headline, "Invasion", above a photograph of a rusted 35-metre vessel grounded at the mouth of Richter's Creek on Holloways Beach in my electorate, just some 12 kilometres north of Cairns City itself. We were stunned to discover that 26 illegal Chinese immigrants had used this means to arrive in Australia. However, we were even more stunned to discover that the local newsagent had become Australia's first line of defence against such arrivals. We read in disbelief that the Australian Customs Service had been alerted to the presence of the illegal immigrants only by the prompt action of newsagent Bruce Sharples, who became suspicious when nine very wet but well-dressed Asians asked for his assistance in calling a maxi taxi to take them to Cairns after other residents told him of the grounded vessel. Even then it took two calls to Customs before they responded to Mr Sharples' alarm. I commend him for his prompt action and perseverance on our behalf. As investigations continued into how this bizarre event occurred, the news only got worse for the Federal Government, whose Coastwatch service has the responsibility for patrolling more than 37,000 kilometres of our coastline.

On 16 March the Courier-Mail revealed major problems with the capacity of Coastwatch to do its job. It stated—

"Coastwatch planned air surveillance of Australia's vulnerable northern coastline last financial year fell short by 4 million sq km, according to a report by the Australian Customs Service.

The Courier-Mail has also learned that:

High-tech radar and infrared equipment used to detect illegal immigrants has been branded unreliable.

The Howard Government rejected a call by the Auditor-General last year for greater co-operation between Coastwatch and other departments.

Coastwatch routinely spent just 5 percent of its time on detecting illegal immigrant vessels."

If technical difficulties alone had been responsible for the failure of Coastwatch, that would be bad enough, but then it was revealed by Transport Minister, Steve Bredhauer, that Queensland's tracking system had identified and reported the boat's location to the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, which alerted Coastwatch on 9 March, 4 days before the Holloways Beach landing. Then came the Weekend Australian report that on 10 March, two days before the landing, the vessel was spotted off Queensland's coast by two shipping pilots who separately reported it to the relevant maritime safety authorities. One of those even suggested that the Coastwatch surveillance plane be sent out to take a look at the suspicious vessel.

While it cannot be said that the Australian media is without political bias, it is rarely unanimous. However, in this instance editorial comment has been consistently and rightly scathing of the Federal Government and its management of coastal surveillance. Queensland will not ignore the deficiencies revealed in Australia's defences and has urged the Federal Government to act.

In response to a question that I asked this morning on the topic, the Premier said—

"I have urged the Commonwealth to increase funding for Defence Force facilities. This is an issue I intend to pursue at the Premiers Conference on 9 April.

...

We have suggested that the Scherger air base near Weipa could be upgraded to a full-time facility for the Air Force and, as I referred to before, Squadron 10 or 11, who are based in Edinburgh in South Australia, could be based there, or perhaps the Army. The naval base on Thursday Island could also be upgraded. There is a small base there of one vessel and I think three support staff. That could certainly be upgraded."

The Premier indicated that Queensland will also be taking certain steps and that he had ordered a review of Queensland's surveillance resources by the Department of Emergency Services. This covers a number of departments including the DPI, Police, Emergency Services and Transport. We are also seeking closer cooperation on the issue with Papua New Guinea.

Senator Amanda Vanstone has rejected the Premier's suggestions, typically playing the man rather than the issue. It will be very interesting to hear the response of the senator and, indeed, the Prime Minister when the results of the current Federal inquiry are at hand. Queenslanders and the people of the Cairns region that I represent will not be content to rely on newsagents, even those as good as Bruce Sharples.
