



Speech by

GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

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ILLEGAL REFUGEES

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (7.21 p.m.): The recent arrival of a larger number of boat people on our shores and the Commonwealth Government's response puts Australia in a dilemma. On the one hand, we need to protect our borders from smugglers, including those who traffic in people. On the other hand, we are a humanitarian, democratic society committed to human rights and related international conventions, as well as playing our part in the processing and settlement of legitimate refugees. There are currently roughly 23 million refugees in the world, and the number is continuing to rise. While many come from areas experiencing war and conflict, others escape conditions of persecution or discrimination which are more subtle. This does not mean that their need to find a home elsewhere is not just as great.

Jason Koutsouki's report in the Age on 16 February this year reported that—

"... the arrest of more than 3500 people trying to enter Australia illegally by boat since January last year—1200 in November alone—and the media reaction that followed, has created the common misconception that our borders are suddenly under siege from foreign invaders."

The recent wave of boat arrivals is the largest ever to reach our shores in such a short time. Just 3,227 illegal boat arrivals came between 1989 and 1998. However, let us have a closer look at all illegal arrivals.

The Commonwealth reports that boat arrivals make up only a small percentage of the 53,143 people living in Australia illegally, most of whom arrived via our airports. Most of these people overstay their visas—be they tourist, temporary resident or student visas— and are among the millions who come here each year. Compared to the USA and the UK, our apparent illegal entry problems appear insignificant. The USA illegal entry population is growing by some 275,000 each year. Last year, there were in excess of 51,500 people seeking political asylum in the UK. The cost to Australia in the 1998-99 financial year of locating, removing and detaining people who arrived illegally and those working illegally was \$128m. It will be more in the next financial year.

The Commonwealth Government utilises the capabilities of Coastwatch, the Navy and Customs to ensure border controls. On 25 November last year the Federal Parliament passed the Border Protection Bill, which provides for interception, boarding, searching and chasing ships in Australian or international waters and requesting aircraft to land for boarding and searching. In addition, the Commonwealth has introduced penalties for people smugglers, including a 20-year jail term and fines of up to \$220,000.

Honourable members will be interested to know that boats are by no means the only way in which people try to come to Australia unlawfully. In the last financial year, in excess of 2,000 people were refused entry at Australia's airports. This year's figure is not yet available, but obviously a jump in numbers is expected. In the same year, over 3,500 people were admitted to Australia's immigration detention centres, only 26% of whom were boat people. The Commonwealth's efforts to prevent and deal with unlawful entry must be supported, particularly those aimed at smugglers who are profiting from human misery. The more recent arrivals of boat people from the Middle East is a new development for our country. People are fleeing repressive regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is highly likely that many boat people will definitely be legitimate refugees.

We as a nation have international obligations under the 1951 convention and the 1967 protocols relating to the status of refugees to permit anyone who is likely to suffer persecution in his or her own country to lodge an application for asylum and be provided with protection. We also need to recognise that, no matter how many illegal arrivals we get, there is an international dilemma. So many people are on the move, many fleeing persecutions. Most regrettable, of course, is the negative image of Australia projected overseas as a result of the Commonwealth Government's response. We should have learnt from previous experiences with the waves of refugees we have successfully settled. Refugees are the most motivated citizens, because they have nowhere to go but forward. If treated well by us, they are grateful and put a lot of effort into contributing to their new country.

Time expired.
