

NORTHAM IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRE

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.45 pm]: I want to share with members a quote on the website of the Refugee Council of Australia that reads as follows —

We should beware of those politicians who claim to pursue the public cause but simply exploit racial instincts. Fighting against xenophobia must be a top priority for us all.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that in October 2001. I am sure that I am not the only member of this house who was quite shocked and horrified by the reaction and comments of the people at the meeting held at Northam last week in response to the plan to convert the old army barracks into a place for asylum seekers. After seeing that reaction, I went in search of that quote, which I have been aware of for some time, and I managed to locate it on that website. That is what we need to do. As members of Parliament, we are community leaders, and as community leaders we have a duty to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We also have a duty to point out to those who seek to persecute and demonise other people why they are wrong to do so. That is the fight against xenophobia to which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees referred.

I remind honourable members—I am sure it did not escape them—of the tenor of the comments that were made that night. It was said that anyone who tries to arrive in Australia without permission commits an illegal act. It was said also that they—presumably the asylum seekers—would, “Slit your throat in a second”.

Hon Col Holt: Were you up there? Did you go to Northam?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: No, I was not there. Let me make my point and if the member wants to respond, I will be happy to listen to him. It was said that three-metre high fences would not be enough to stop detainees from escaping and that the first thing they would do when they jumped the fence was, “Steal my car and drive to Perth to blend in with their own kind.” We also saw the awful sight of women who are old enough to know better wearing T-shirts that said “bomb their boats” and “sink their boats”.

I want to pay some tributes, because there were some people who were brave enough to go to that meeting and face what must have been an enormous amount of —

Hon Max Trenorden: You’re wrong; it was the vast majority of us, not some.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I want to pay some tributes, Hon Max Trenorden. Let me have my say because I do not have long. The member will have a chance to respond, if not tonight, then at another time.

I pay tribute to the Shire of Northam’s president, Steve Pollard. I know that Councillor Pollard is upset about some aspects of the plan, but at least he had the decency to try to correct what was being said by some people. We also need to pay tribute to some of the officers of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship who went there and argued the case, and to some of the other service providers who argued with the crowd that night. I pay tribute also to some of the locals such as Eric Fox, who pointed out that back in the 1950s—a period through which he lived—he had seen Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians live at exactly the same place and that that had turned out very well. Others have spoken out about the need to avoid mass hysteria, racism and the redneck side of politics. I am not always happy with the characterisation of such comments as just being redneck. It seems to me that some people might wear the label of redneck with a certain amount of pride. It is a bit like referring to domestic violence as a lovers’ tiff. I think we need to really name that behaviour as racist and we need, as community leaders, to argue and fight against it. Unfortunately, the Premier would not go further than calling such behaviour inappropriate. In a report in *The West Australian*, the Premier said —

“It just shows on a sensitive issue like asylum seekers, on what many will see as illegal immigration, this flares the tempers and maybe some of the prejudices that in Australian society,”

...

“I guess many people in the Northam community are feeling the interests of asylum seekers are being put ahead of their interests as local community people.”

What the Premier could have said, what he should have said if he was fulfilling his responsibility as a community leader is, “If you think that these people are illegal immigrants, you are wrong. If you think that the interests of the asylum seekers are being put ahead of yours, you are wrong. If you think it is acceptable to direct your anger at refugees in a way that is clearly an expression of intolerance and lack of compassion, you are wrong.”

Why are they wrong? I will just make a few comments about that. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states —

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

In practical terms that means it is every person's human right to seek asylum in another country where they can get away from the persecution and violence that they fear. It is simply not possible to be an illegal asylum seeker. An asylum seeker is a refugee who has asked the government of another country, in this case Australia, for protection. A refugee is someone who has fled their home country because they fear persecution. They fear persecution for some reasons that should ring very loud bells with people in this chamber. All of us are activists; all of us have set ourselves up as community leaders and all of us are vulnerable in some sense to this kind of persecution—persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, social group membership and, most importantly, political opinions. What are refugees fleeing? They are not just fleeing discrimination; in many cases they are fleeing a fear of injury, torture and even death. What is illegal, at least in terms of international and humanitarian law—I remind honourable members that Australia is a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and therefore we have agreed not to behave in this way—is to force refugees to go back to their home country where they fear harm and persecution.

On that second point about why is it wrong to say that the interests of asylum seekers are being put first, I want to pay a couple more tributes. The first is to some of our leaders in the Kimberley, particularly Elsie Archer, the Shire of Derby – West Kimberley president, who actually applauded the decision to send asylum seekers to Curtin detention centre. In response to the Premier saying it is too remote and too harsh she said, “We live here; it is a great place. We can air-condition the dongas.”

Even the National Party's own leader knows that having such a facility at Northam will be a boost to a flagging economy. It is not hard to sell the benefits of these things, if we put our minds to it. Fancy being able to go to a local business and ask, “How would you cope if we expand the demand for your services by 20 per cent?” People will jump at that opportunity if that is the way it is presented to them. We all know that the commonwealth picks up all the costs and the Premier knows this, so all he was left to talk about was security issues.

Just look at the record of the people who are here: 90 per cent of the refugees who arrived by boat have been recognised as genuine refugees. That means they are not economic migrants, they are not terrorists in disguise and they are not queue jumpers. Overwhelmingly, these are people who have fled persecution. Compare that with other asylum seekers, and I am talking about only asylum seekers, not overstayers. Somewhere in the region of 96 per cent of asylum seekers come by air and only 20 per cent of their claims are accepted.

In conclusion, let me quote Frank Brennan, who has become a famous and very articulate advocate for refugees and asylum seekers. What he expresses is exactly what I wanted to convey to members and what I hope every one of us will go out and try and espouse in our own communities. He says —

Let's maintain hope that decency and democracy are not antithetical to each other even in an age of terror and uncertainty.