



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Federation Chamber

BILLS

Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2017-2018

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Thursday, 15 June 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (11:43): That was a terrific performance from the member for Blaxland. However, after the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era of foreign policy, I am baffled that the Labor Party actually has the hide to stand and suggest that the coalition has not driven the agenda on trade. In that era, of course, Kevin Rudd was the indefinite spokesperson for foreign affairs, and his greatest contribution was this intellectual argument about the specificities of the Asia-Pacific architecture. It was absolutely academic; there was no real action.

Conversely, what you have from the coalition is action. What you have from the coalition is the penning and the signing of free trade agreements. What you have in the foreign minister is somebody who has beaten the drum for years on the importance of not just political diplomacy—which is what the Labor Party only ever thinks about—but also economic diplomacy, which unlocks the economic potential for Australia, particularly with its Asian partners.

I am actually here today to ask the minister a question about the New Colombo Plan, and I do so as somebody who first went to Asia at the age of 13 with my father on business. My first major stint up there was at 18. I was living and breathing up there, speaking the language of greater China, at the age of 21. So with 20-plus years of experience in international business, I cannot tell you how important it is that economic diplomacy is put at the centre of our agenda, and, if you look at even those 30 years since I first visited Asia, how things have changed for Australia, as to the role that Australia now plays within the Asia-Pacific region, investing in the relationships that we have today, and the leadership role that Australia takes in certain debates.

Australia knows its place in the world. We know we are a middle power and we are often relied on to play a key regional role when needed. We do not set the agenda for other nations, but we offer assistance and we reinforce the region's stability. There is perhaps no better incubator for our role than the New Colombo Plan. Originally conceived by Minister Julie Bishop when minister for education under the Howard government, this signature coalition initiative aims to boost knowledge and understanding of the Indo-Pacific within Australia by supporting Australian undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 28 to gain work experience and to study in overseas communities across the region.

Since its inception as a pilot program in 2014, the government's New Colombo Plan has funded around 17½ thousand young Australians. Just one of these is Caleb Mattiske, a student at the University of the Sunshine Coast—the greatest region in Australia, I might add. This student went to South Korea for his New Colombo Plan experience and, when you speak to Caleb, now that he has returned, you hear the aspirations of a young Australian with a truly global outlook, and this is precisely what our nation needs to build our future on.

One of the features of the New Colombo Plan that excites me the most is the fact that work experience is included, which ties back to the minister's view on the importance of economic diplomacy—that each of these young Australians should actually get their hands dirty and work side by side in the host nation. This is the very experience that will lead them to be leaders in industry or government or academia in the future.

I know this from my own personal experience. When you have young Australians up in Asia, you realise the leadership role they play. There is something in our DNA as Australians—something in our culture. It is our adaptability as Australians. That is why, the world over, you see Australian expats leading the way, across many industries, and it is why the New Colombo Plan is so important. That is why I ask the minister today to explain the New Colombo Plan and what it really means to Australia.