

Tabled Document 4

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ASYLUM SEEKER ARRIVALS – 2011-2012

With respect to asylum seeker arrivals and its impact on the Budget, I think it's important we run through some key facts.

The months leading up to the Prime Minister and the Immigration Minister's announcement on the Malaysian Arrangement saw boat arrivals at: 354 in March (2011), 362 in April and 304 in May.

The first full month after the Government announcement that we would be pursuing an arrangement with Malaysia on asylum seekers and refugees saw: 183 in June, 283 in July and 280 in August.

This was partly the deterrent effect of the Government's announcement alone – the Malaysian Arrangement was never fully implemented.

On the 31st August the High Court handed down a decision that effectively ended offshore processing.

On the 13th October it became clear that the Coalition would not support the passage of the Government's offshore processing legislation – in contrast to the approach taken by the Beazley Labor Opposition in 2001 when it supported Coalition amendments that introduced offshore processing.

This is a really important point.

Despite the Labor Opposition opposing the Howard Government's Pacific Solution, we did support the legislation that allowed the Howard Government to put in place its border protection policies – a total contrast to the negativity and obstructionism of the Opposition that reigns today.

On the 13th October, the Prime Minister said this:

"...I want to be very clear and very frank about this – as a result of the conduct of Mr Abbott, and as a result we are not in a position to implement the arrangement with Malaysia, we are at a real risk of seeing more boats.

"If we do see more boats, whilst we have unused detention capacity now, that will put pressure on the detention network. We will manage that pressure on the detention network, by I do want to indicate we will use existing tools to make arrangements as necessary to manage pressure on the detention network. That is not an immediate issue because there is unused capacity, but we are at real risk as a result of Mr Abbott's conduct of seeing more boats."

Following the collapse of offshore processing in October we saw 895 asylum seekers arrive in November and 854 in December.

The committee will recall that the Prime Minister wrote to the Leader of the Opposition before the reports of over 200 people perishing off the coast of Indonesia before Christmas in 2011.

The weeks that followed saw the Government and Opposition meet to discuss how they could try to reach agreement on re-establishing offshore processing.

For the Government's part, the Minister for Immigration put an offshore processing centre at Nauru on the table, as well as an offer for a review into Temporary Protection Visas.

We were willing to compromise, to negotiate, to put politics aside for the national interest, and even offered the Liberal's own policy – an offshore processing centre in Nauru.

For the Coalition's part, Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison said 'no'. They brought nothing to the table.

The Coalition here has been so negative, it has even said 'no' to its own policy, Nauru.

The Coalition at the time made a call – to put their political interest ahead of the national interest. The Coalition has calculated that they would rather see people continue to risk their lives on the high seas than work with the Government at securing the future of offshore processing, in exactly the same way as the Beazley Opposition did in 2001.

While we have seen more arrivals in 2012, there have been peaks and troughs.

We have seen: 301 in January, 848 in February, 110 in March, and 957 in April.

Madam Chair, when it comes to the impact of asylum seekers on the Budget, the Government has had to make adjustments to the IMA Budgets following last year's Budget – a natural consequence of Tony Abbott's failure to support offshore processing.

We have seen further adjustments made in the 2012-13 Budget.

Managing boat arrivals is expensive. It was expensive under the previous government and it's expensive now.

The only way to reduce these asylum seeker costs is to have fewer people arriving by boat. But the Coalition has made a political call that it rather seeks the political capital of boat arrivals. That is something the Coalition will have to live with.

If the Coalition is truly concerned about the cost of detention and processing boat arrivals, it should get out of the way and allow the Government of the day to implement its border protection policies.

You cannot have it both ways.

You cannot deny the Government of the day, the ability to limit boat arrivals and at the same time attack the Government for the number of boat arrivals.

I think it's important the Committee bear in mind the facts of the last 12 months as it scrutinises the Immigration Department's budget.