



Condolence Motion for Victims of Japanese Disasters

Main Committee of the House of Representatives

22 March 2011

Sharon Grierson MP

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (9.29 pm)—I add my voice to the condolences that have been made here in this parliament to the people of Japan. I think it was a devastating tragedy and it does seem that it has been, for us, a summer and now an autumn and, for them, a winter and spring that will be forever remembered. We always hope that it will be remembered for the resilience and the generosity and the spirit of people to survive and to go on and support each other.

I would like to draw attention to a matter that affected my electorate. At the time of this tragedy there were 45 young exchange students from Kesenuma—an area in Japan that was seriously affected by the tidal wave and earthquake—who were being hosted by the Hunter Christian School and the Maitland Christian School; 25 were junior high school students and 20 were senior high school students. They were due to go back last Friday, and you can understand that these young students really wanted to go home to their families. Unfortunately, they were not all able to contact their families to learn whether their families were all right and what would happen when they returned.

The parents who were hosting these children and the principal of Hunter Christian School, Boyd Allen, contacted me and expressed the community's concern. Dr Lee Fong also emailed me seeking my help. The key message was that, if it was in the best interests of the students and if it was the decision made by the Japanese authorities that the students should stay for a period, the community and the school were very willing to host them. They were particularly concerned because of the uncertainty facing these students.

I was then able to contact the office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kevin Rudd. His actions were wonderfully helpful to us. The Japanese Embassy here became involved straightaway through Minister Mori and coordinated with the Consulate and Consul-General in Sydney. Their response was wonderful. They instantly deferred the student's return to Japan for 24 hours just to make sure that every student had arrangements in place.

It is times like that that you know why you are a Member of Parliament and that you can actually manage some human dramas and ease emotions and give some comfort. The Consul-General, the Japanese Embassy here and the Foreign Affairs

Minister and staff went to an extreme effort to make sure that every student would be accommodated when they returned. Most of the 45 students and three teachers returned to Tokyo to have families greet them. Those who could not be greeted by family had arrangements made with the Kesennuma education department and the local councils to make sure that every student was met.

In that frantic time—a very short window of opportunity—some people in Newcastle asked, ‘How can these children go back home?’ That is not our decision. If they were Australian children in a similar dilemma, we would want the Australian authorities to make that decision. But we had the comfort and assurance of knowing that that decision was made at the highest level, and that reassurance gave us great comfort. The Consul-General has given me an undertaking that he will follow up on the post-return settling-in of those 45 students.

It was wonderful to see the networks kick in. A person teaching in Japan contacted his mother, Jenny Brannon, straightaway to send a message to one of the children who had not been able to contact her family to say that her family were okay. It was very heart-warming and good for her to know what arrangements should be made for her and that she would have to go to a certain place. It was lovely to see the internet connections of Newcastle people contacting each other all over Japan.

I hope that after those young people return, Facebook and social networks will help them to keep in touch with us. It was wonderful that the Newcastle community said, ‘No matter what, those students have a place at any time in Newcastle. But we also hope, of course, that they are returning to a situation that is bearable and will be manageable for them and that it will allow them to enjoy their youth. It is rather hard to think of the children and young people in Japan and the burden they will carry.

There is such respect for the elderly, and we have seen so many elderly people coping with the aftermath this disaster. In Japan, aged care is by exception; elders are revered and looked after by their families.

To see stories of recovery and survival lifts the spirit. But to know that the Japanese people are dealing with a calamity from a nuclear power station is shattering for all of us. We can only hope that there will be some satisfactory resolution to these matters. It is good to see the world rally and I hope that will be carried through for a long time. Our relationship with Japan is one that we prize. Mr Deputy Speaker Slipper, you and I were there together, and their generosity and warmth in sharing with us their history, their present and their future were something that we really appreciated and respected.

So I join the House in this condolence motion tonight.