



Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2011-2012
Consideration in Detail
Immigration
16 June 2011
Sharon Grierson MP

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (11:44): I rise to draw attention to the appropriations, particularly in the Immigration and Citizenship area. In doing so, I think I speak for all members of parliament in saying how important the Department of Immigration and Citizenship is to us in our daily dealings with our constituents.

I take this opportunity to draw to the attention of the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship the wonderful work of Ralph Harwood, who is our ministerial contact in the New South Wales parliamentary and ministerial liaison section in the DIAC office in Parramatta. I praise Ralph particularly for his professional expertise, his timely, accurate and detailed advice and for the fact that he is always willing to canvass all options with my staff and me so that we can give the best advice to the many people needing assistance.

In my electorate a lot of humanitarian services contracts have been delivered. That has not been an easy ride. Settling almost 1,000 African refugees in an electorate like Newcastle has been a challenging task and one that has been well embraced by the community—but it has not been without problems.

The minister is aware that earlier this year, after the Social Justice Council of the Catholic diocese of Maitland-Newcastle approached me and brought to my attention some serious matters regarding the delivery of those contracts, I asked the department to investigate those concerns through the minister.

However, it was not until I actually sat with the Rwandan and Congolese families who were newly arrived in my electorate—I sat with them for

2½ hours; it was a devastating 2½ hours—that I heard of their distress, saw their depression, saw their destroyed morale, saw their damaged confidence and saw that their belief in the strength and greatness of this country was at risk.

I brought the matter to the attention of the minister, who took very strong, direct and immediate action. It has been recorded in the parliament that the minister instigated an independent inquiry conducted by Ernst and Young.

I would like the minister to detail for me how that has progressed and how it will deliver settlement services that we can have confidence in, that are value for money and that absolutely marry with the outcomes and expectations that a good government would have?

Mr BOWEN (McMahon—Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) (11:47): I thank the honourable member for Newcastle. She raises a very important matter, which I would have thought would be important to members on both sides of the House. I place on record, as I have previously, my thanks to the member for Newcastle for the way that she has handled these matters.

She rang me, as I recall, in early April to raise with me directly her concerns about settlement services in Newcastle. I asked her to put her concerns in writing, which she did the next day. I received those the next day. Within a week we had instigated an independent review for which Ernst and Young was engaged.

As I have said previously, the Ernst and Young report does not make for pretty reading. We have let people down. We have settled refugees in Australia but have not supplied them with the support that they need. That is a cause of great regret for the government, for me and, I know, for the member for Newcastle. It is important that we recognise and acknowledge that, and take steps to make sure it does not happen again.

In relation to the matters in Newcastle, it is important to note—I do not do this by way of excuse—that they occurred under a contract which is not currently in force. They occurred under a contract which was entered into in 2005 and which was replaced early this year. The contract management provisions and the terms of the contract have

been significantly improved since then, which I am pleased about, but I am not yet satisfied that all action has been taken to ensure that what happened in Newcastle is not repeated across the board. I am satisfied that it is occurring, but there is more work to do.

Departmental officers have now completed property inspections of all short- and long-term properties in Newcastle. The inspections found that most clients in long-term accommodation were well settled and living in well-maintained properties. We have moved people out of inappropriate properties. There have been some instances where we offered to move people, but the families, because they have been to some degree settled, have requested to stay there and, in those instances, we have taken measures to ensure that those properties are safe and improved as much as they can be while they are being occupied.

I have commissioned Mr David Richmond, who is well known to many honourable members, who played an integral role in contract management in the Sydney Olympics, to engage a review of contract management within my department and ensure that all necessary measures are in place. He has begun his inquiry. He has had individual meetings with senior DIAC executives, and key stakeholders are further being scheduled.

I envisage him reporting to me over coming months about how my department can improve its contract management—because it clearly needed to be improved—resulting from this inquiry.

In addition, the department has engaged a firm to undertake a forensic audit of the housing provider which provided the services in Newcastle under the former contract. That company no longer provides services in Newcastle, although it does provide services elsewhere in Australia under contract, so it is important that that forensic audit take place.

I am advised that that process has begun. In addition, I put on record that we will reserve the right to take further action depending on the results of that forensic audit. Some matters have been referred to New South Wales Police for investigation of potential criminal conduct. I have no further update on that; that is now a matter for the police. If I were in a position to update the House further I would, and if I am in a position to update the House further I will, but I am not in a position to do that at the moment because the police inquiry is underway, as I understand it.

These are serious matters. This is a matter that I have focused on and will continue to focus on. We have also instigated an audit of all property across the country that we resettle refugees in, and that will take some time. It is a large task but it is a necessary task, because I do not want to receive another call from another member on either side of the House bringing to my attention matters such as the member for Newcastle brought to my attention.

I want to make sure that we know about it straightaway and that we are dealing with it in an appropriate manner, and I am confident that that will be the case. It is important that when we settle refugees we settle them well. Australia has a well-regarded refugee settlement program. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has said it is the best in the world, and I take that as a very good thing. But it is also important that, where errors are brought to our attention, we deal with those, and that is exactly what we are doing.