



GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy

13 February 2006

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (5.30 p.m.)—I rise today to draw the attention of the parliament and the Australian people to ongoing concerns about the delivery of Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy, IHSS, services by the consortium led by the Australian College of Languages in New South Wales, particularly in the Newcastle and Hunter region. It must be understood that these are very specific services. They are for refugees who are not queue jumpers. They are for refugees who have no choice but to be resettled because of war and persecution. These are people that Australia has agreed to welcome to our shores as our share of taking those who desperately need humanitarian settlement.

Regrettably, this is the third time since September last year that I have spoken about the appalling way in which the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy is being administered and implemented in my electorate of Newcastle. In September I criticised the tender process for excluding regional communities. Regional communities cannot tender for the new three tenders in New South Wales without hanging on the coat-tails of a major company. That means genuine community participation and local solutions are marginalised in the tender requirements.

The successful tenderer for these services surprised me. I was concerned because ACL had no operational experience or reputation in the Newcastle and Hunter region. But, worse, they had no previous experience at all in delivering intensive IHSS services anywhere in Australia, so you do have to wonder what criteria were used for them to gain the contract. You have to wonder too if it was on price alone. In estimates today Labor senator Senator Hurley asked for a copy of the criteria. We look forward to seeing them and measuring them against what ACL are actually delivering. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs said in estimates today that it is the construction of the tender that gets you the successful bid and that if you say how good you will be at exercising the contract then DIMA will basically take your word for it. Apparently, you do not need to have a track record or any experience. Try getting a job that way!

Apparently the corporate sector can see extensive advantage from DIMA's inability to draw up contracts, tender documents or criteria in a proper and rigorous way. Within days of taking up the IHSS contract, ACL was sold for

\$55.7 million to another large private company, IBT Education. I guess that was a cheap price, given that that just one tender for my area is worth \$27.5 million. Significantly, IBT cited ACL's strong contractual relationship with the Australian government, including the two new five-year contracts to supply IHSS services, as a factor which made them an attractive acquisition. At the time of the acquisition, IBT believed that at the end of the current five-year contract ACL would be well placed to extend its reach into the 2008 to 2013 contract round. I hope not, because in the first month it could not get it right and six months later it is still not getting it right—and please spare the people who need their services until it can get it right. But perhaps IBT's chairman, Trevor Flugge, has been too distracted of late by his role as former Chairman of the Australian Wheat Board to note the serious problems that ACL was having in meeting contractual obligations with the Australian government. Clearly, IBT's acquisition of ACL was aimed at creating significant value for IBT shareholders. I think it is very sad to see the dawning of a new era in Australia whereby the provision of essential, critical and compassionate refugee services is deemed to be just an attractive, profit-making enterprise. I think that is quite shameful.

When I wrote to the then Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Mr Cobb, last year he assured me that I should not worry and that everything would be fine. I asked for a guarantee, but he instead said that he had confidence in the new model to 'improve both the quality and the accessibility of services provided to humanitarian entrants'. He went on to say that, while entrants will continue to receive the same range of services, the new model significantly strengthens case and service coordination. That is not the Newcastle experience in terms of case and service coordination.

In November last year, I again raised concerns about delivery of the services in Newcastle and some specific cases. All those cases went to inadequate service delivery: families of 10 given food that even a family of four in Australia would not be able to survive on for 10 days; people being given a 000 phone number to use if there are emergencies even though they could not speak English; no accessibility to ACL with even health workers making eight phone calls and then giving up in despair after their failure to contact ACL coordinators; and people being put into accommodation without any say in that accommodation and being asked to sign a lease when they did not even know what it was. That was all totally unacceptable, but that was the way it was happening. But Minister Cobb, after I made my speech and as late as December 2005, continued to express 'full confidence in the settlement services provided to new refugees and humanitarian arrivals to Australia'. No wonder they had to shift him! We have had the death of a two-year-old, and today we see an appalling story of a double amputee refugee who was very poorly accommodated and certainly not given assistance consistent with his physical needs. The minister says there is full accountability for this when IHSS services are contracted out to the private sector, but I am afraid that is what is missing: we do not see any accountability at this stage.

Also in estimates today, some questions were raised with DIMA—estimates are continuing at the moment; I would like to have waited until they had answered all those questions before speaking today—about other cases in Newcastle. One case involves two women who came to Australia under special 204 visas for people who have been persecuted or tortured and deemed by the UN as ‘women at risk’. These two women were dropped off in an area that was most unsuitable for them. They had previously been subjected to brutal assaults in a bush setting. Where were they placed in the city of Newcastle? It was a bush setting. They had no personal hygiene products; they did not have enough food; and they had no way of getting help. They were found wandering the streets by a local Christian preacher who arranged to unite them with fellow refugees and volunteers. As a result of that case, DIMA said that they would attend to these concerns. I have to say to DIMA that no-one has attended to it. Those people are still waiting for the sorts of IHSS services that DIMA said would be provided. It is time that DIMA became much more engaged in this process.

Today in answers to estimates questions, DIMA gave some figures on all staffing levels. I can only say that they were appalling. Wollongong has a staffing level of one—that is not acceptable. The staffing level at Newcastle has been increased, but only after departmental inquiries were made and attention was drawn to this matter in parliament. The staffing levels remain too low. Refugees need intense services for their first three months of life in Australia.

DIMA also talked about ‘rumblings’. In a community like Newcastle there will be rumblings, because you cannot get away with things. If you are doing a bad job, we will know about it. DIMA also talked today in estimates about 80 people turning up to a community meeting. Almost six months after the program began, ACL decided to have a community meeting to seek volunteers and community participants. I have talked to people—genuine people who know about these problems and want to help—who went to that meeting. They are appalled that the restrictions on volunteers are so extensive: you cannot go into people’s homes; you can only visit these refugees three or four times. That is not exactly what these volunteers were thinking. They were thinking of establishing a genuine relationship with people who are to become our neighbours and friends. I think the 80 people who turned up to that meeting were slightly discouraged by the way it proceeded.

DIMA also talked about people declining to meet with them. At the moment with DIMA there is not a lot of trust. Certainly DIMA have a great responsibility to come to people and allow them to put forward their views and to get some real answers. DIMA need to assure us that they are following up on these services and that some change will happen. Sadly, at this stage nothing seems to have changed. DIMA can keep giving us assurances. They can investigate and say that the stories do not match—but these instances are still happening and need some proper investigation.

I look forward to meeting with the CEO of ACL next week. I do not know whether Hawker Britton will be there to manage the PR responses on the day but I do not appreciate PR firms being called in to manage critical members of parliament. I like direct contact, and I wish ACL had been more direct with me. I also hope that ACL are not using the IHSS funds to pay for Hawker Britton's services. Overall, these services are not being delivered well. They need absolute attention and scrutiny or we are going to end up with social problems in our communities. Refugees are already traumatised. They do not deserve to develop additional anger and resentment as a result of their treatment in Australia. They need to be welcomed with warmth and compassion and to be given full access to well considered and professional services. *(Time expired)*