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SPEECH

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I would like to thank the OECD for inviting me and the European Parliament for hosting us at this High Level Parliamentary Conference on 'Policy Coherence for Development and Migration'. I hope that my Australian accent won't mean even the English speakers need a translator and that my parochial content has wider lessons for the participants.

Since World War II more than 6.5 million people have migrated to Australia. Proportionate to our population, now 21 million, Australia has taken more immigrants over the past half century than almost any country. Along with the United States, Canada and Israel, we have among the world's highest proportion of immigrants and children of immigrants in our population. Our immigrant Diasporas played an immense and positive role in Australian commerce and creativity.

Mass immigration has transformed the character of the Australian people, and transformed it for the better. For there are primarily benefits to immigration. In the fields of economics, politics, culture and sport, immigrants and their children have made Australia a more prosperous, dynamic, innovative and cosmopolitan society.

The transformative effect of migration on Australia rests on two pillars. First, automatic ability to full citizenship after two years of permanent residence. Second, our support for cultural pluralism within a democratic ethos.

Frankly, while I enjoyed the almost evangelical presentation of the businessman from ManPower, Australia is more with Senator Bacci (one of the Member of the European Parliament delegates). There are many reasons to have rational doubts about the unequivocal 'benefits' of circulatory immigration, as expounded by 'ManPower'. Frankly, we Australians see only limited benefits to 'gastarbeiter' guest worker programs.

Positive support for immigration in Australia might be seen as remarkable when we remember that before World War II Australia was an inward-looking nation indeed hostile to immigration, even European immigration. Non-European immigration was banned by the notorious White Australia Policy, implemented in 1901 and not fully abolished until the 1970s. When my own father arrived in

Australia as a refugee from Germany in 1939, he found a country so hostile to immigrants that the Australian immigration officials insisted that he change his name.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, Australia welcomed millions of migrants, mainly from the UK, Italy, Greece, Germany, Malta, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, the Netherlands and other European countries. In the 1960s we began to welcome immigrants from Turkey and Lebanon. In the 1970s, we took in tens of thousands of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia, finally ending the days of White Australia.

Last year prior to global financial crisis we took about 200,000 immigrants a year, from all over the world, primarily as skilled migrants, then business migrants, a family reunion program with finally a category of refugees. We brought in this number of people not out of altruism but primarily for the economic benefit of Australia, especially in areas of skills shortage. Constant refinement of immigration policy is a natural and important debate in Australia where we are constantly seeking current policy coherence on all the various aspects of our immigration policy.

Australia's largest source of immigrants, showing our clear non-discriminatory policy, is still the UK/Ireland, followed by New Zealand, but our other major sources of immigrants these days are China, India, Indonesia, South Africa and the Philippines.

Illegal immigration and people smuggling has been a contentious issue in recent years, as it is in many other countries. Over the past 20 years Australia has seen attempts by people-smugglers based in Indonesia to bring people illegally into Australia by boat. These are mostly people from Middle Eastern countries hoping to claim refugee status when they reach Australia.

Especially in the new government we feel that this problem was exaggerated especially when we consider that boat refugees at their height in 2000 reached around 4,000 arrivals. A visiting minister from the Bundestag pointed to context when he pointed to Germany receiving 350,000 Serb-Croat refugees in the same year.

In 2007-08 Australia took in 13,000 refugees, one of the highest intakes in the world as a proportion of our population. Most of our refugees come from Burma, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Iran, Sri Lanka and a number of African countries. Australian governments believe that these refugees must come through an orderly process, which they will be taken on the basis of need and not on a first-come-first-served basis. However a more coherent approach to migration policy meant that problems of boat people from Indonesia are best resolved by cooperation with Indonesia and assistance with capacity building, from Australia, particularly with close Indonesian provinces. Cowardly populism identified by OECD Deputy-Secretary Mr. Armano in his remarks can be not only nationally divisive; moreover it doesn't solve the problem of unauthorised immigration.

The previous government attempted to deter illegal immigration through what it described as "the Pacific solution." Under this plan, people who were apprehended trying to come to Australia by sea were not allowed to land, but instead were taken to detention centres on remote Pacific islands, such as Nauru and Manus, where they stayed, sometimes for years, while their claims for refugee status were decided. One must remember that the developed world also has major segments of its highly educated population working and living overseas.

My party, which was then in opposition, opposed this plan, which we considered ineffective, inhumane, and probably in breach of our obligations under international law. We do still detain illegal entrants, but only within Australia, and only for the shortest possible time while the claims of detainees are decided. On the other hand, the 'brain drain' issue and the issues just discussed by Jean-Pierre Garson, Australia has one million out of 21 million who are semi-permanently departed.

The Australian immigration system provides for member of the national Parliament to play an important role. The Parliament's standing committee on migration, of which I am chair, holds regular public hearings on the operations of our immigration system. We hear testimony from officials, from refugee advocates and from migrants and refugees themselves. We visit immigration detention centres, and with other permanent non-government agencies help ensure that immigrants and refugees are treated correctly and that their claims are assessed quickly. In addition, individual members of Parliament have the right to bring individual cases to the attention of the Minister for Immigration when the normal avenues of appeal have been exhausted.

Despite the global financial crisis and recent natural disasters it is generally seen that immigration probably will probably continue, albeit at a lower pace.

Michael Danby is the Chair of the Australian Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration.