



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Australia-China Relations

SPEECH

Monday, 7 December 2020

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 7 December 2020	Source House
Page 115	Proof Yes
Questioner	Responder
Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP	Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (19:35): The Prime Minister spoke on behalf of all Australians last week when he condemned the highly offensive and false image published by a senior official of the People's Republic of China, the PRC. There's been much media coverage since, so I don't plan to add my own personal commentary, but incidents like last week's do give rise to something else: the need for national unity.

The Australia-China relationship is under strain. As we tackle the challenges that lie ahead, it is important we do so from a position of strength. A part of that strength is our unity as a nation—unity that we require on three fronts. First, politically, the Liberal-National government and the Labor opposition should be as one when it comes to addressing the China question. There have been conflicting messages from the Leader of the Opposition and his shadow ministry since last week. But I believe the thinking members of the Labor Party know what's at stake here, and I encourage them to impress upon their leadership the need for bipartisanship when it comes to addressing the China question.

Second, we need unity between government and business. Politics and economics are intertwined. In a free market, liberal democracy, we keep government and business separated. We know, in China, they are steered by the one hand. What we must guard against is economic coercion that pits government against business where our own system risks being used against us. Can I assure the business community in Australia that, here in Canberra, we absolutely get it. The punitive trade measures being imposed by the PRC are part of a larger game. There are times, for reasons of diplomacy, that the language coming out of Canberra may seem more circumspect than you think warranted. But I assure you that we understand what's going on and, to those businesses most impacted, you are not alone. Your government is looking, and continues to look, at ways where we can assist.

We are of course ensuring—as best we can—that the international rules of trade are honoured, that we take action against unfair practices, that we work with industry to diversify markets, that we activate existing free trade agreements and negotiate new ones, and that we build stronger supply chains and improve our sovereign capabilities. But, as businesses, if you think we're missing the point, if you think there's something we should be doing better—we are a democracy—please proactively engage with your own members of parliament. We're on your side, and only by working together can we navigate our way through the current issues.

Third, we need unity among the Australian people—in particular, with the Chinese-Australian community. I reject any attempt on behalf of the PRC to expand the notion of sovereignty beyond territoriality or nationality to include claims based on ethnicity or ancestry. In other words, the PRC does not speak for our 1.2 million Chinese Australians. To all Chinese Australians, I say that the actions of the PRC do not diminish you or the respect that we, your fellow Australians, have for you. You are immensely important members of our local communities and of our nation. When the Australia-China relationship is strained, that can be particularly difficult for Chinese Australians. That is why the rest of us, who do not have a Chinese background, stand shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese-Australian community.

I believe that the greatest challenge we face as a nation is not COVID-19. The greatest challenge we face as a nation is how we address the China question. While a definitive answer to that question may seem elusive at times, there's one thing about which we can be certain: the more we are united as a nation, the more we can tackle the challenges before us from a position of strength.