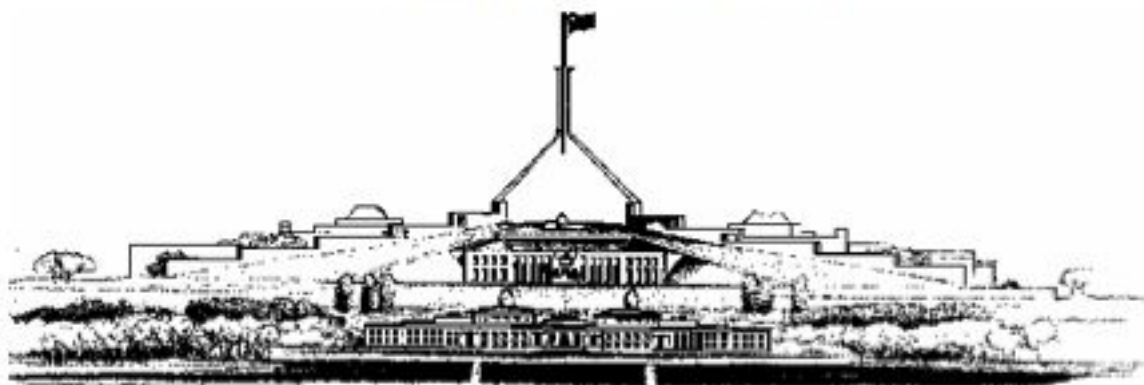




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

BILLS

Treaties Ratification Bill 2012

First Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 13 February 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 13 February 2012
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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (11:09): I present the Treaties Ratification Bill 2012 to the House and in doing so I will proceed to recommend it to the House.

There are a number of agreements that have been signed internationally. With the World Trade Organisation agreement, all signatories to that convention agreed to remove the laws that stopped entry of product into a country, which was referred to as an embargo. We had an embargo on sugar in this country, as did Europe and America. We proceeded to remove—to 'tariffy'—all embargo laws. We moved to a \$200 a tonne tariff protection to replace the embargo, and then it was decided, in the wisdom of the ALP and the Liberal-National Party government, to remove the subsidy, so it was subsequently phased out. The Australian sugar industry now competes against the American sugar industry. The last time I looked we were on \$300 a tonne, America was on \$660 a tonne and the Europeans were on \$1,200 a tonne, indicating that they treated international conventions with absolute contempt.

President Bush and President Obama both said, almost word for word, that if a project contains one dollar of the American taxpayers' money then it will contain 100 per cent American steel. In the case of President Bush, with the aluminium agreement, he mentioned the words 'communities' and 'jobs' five times. Would that I heard someone in this House mention the word 'jobs' or the phrase 'survival of communities', except as a contemptible piece of hypocrisy. Here was a man breaching all of these conventions, flagrantly breaking them all because jobs, livelihoods and communities in America were at stake. His nemesis, the Democrats leader, President Obama, came in and said, with infinitely more aggression and determination than President Bush, exactly the same thing. Whether it is the aluminium agreement launched by the United States or a statement on steel made by the United States these people clearly regard conventions as something they would like to do, but in no way as binding.

In sharp contrast, this place inflicts upon the Australian people agreements that we the people have had no say in whatsoever. To those who say, 'We can't go back and get ratification through a referendum,' that is why we have members of parliament. They are here to represent the will of the people. The will of the people does not get any opportunity to participate in or approve

these agreements, yet they are legally enforceable and binding within our country.

I pay tribute to the Electrical Trades Union, who are closely associated with our party, with four of our candidates in the forthcoming state elections are very active trade union members. They have certainly been backing us—Dean Mighell and Alan Jones were the two main speakers at our conference on the weekend. I thank them because what I am going to read out is very much coming from them. I also thank Rick Brown, who is a prominent adviser to a number of Liberal ministers in this place and who works very closely on these issues, which he feels very passionately about. I thank these people for some of the information and text that I am going to be reading out here. One reason that most Australians feel powerless and disenchanted with politics is that they think governments impose on them laws which affect their daily lives without consultation, let alone getting their prior approval. The way Australia enters into treaties is a good example of why a majority of Australians are entitled to feel the way they do. When it comes to having a say in the contents of a treaty, parliament is virtually presented with a *fait accompli*. It is true that there are disallowance provisions, but this process does not lead to genuine debate and occurs at the end of a process when there are only two choices: agree or disagree—no modification. There is also a committee on treaties, the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, that not only gets involved when it is too late but is an example of shallow tokenism as the government of the day has a majority on the committee.

To enable the representatives of the people to have a genuine say in the formulation and approval of treaties is important for two reasons. Treaties ought to be treated like laws because they have a legally binding effect. They have a direct impact on people, especially when it is a serious impact such as costing people their jobs and costing children job opportunities. Treaties ought to be determined by the parliament after proper debate. This process enables public awareness of what is being proposed and a thorough analysis of the consequences of what is being proposed. Certainly, on occasions there is the odd discussion or consultation involving vested interest groups, usually the ones that are involved with the treaty that will benefit by it—usually overseas corporations. Public awareness of the public engagement process simply does not happen.

Under current processes, unelected public servants have much more involvement in the determination of an outcome than the will of the people as expressed in this place. That is all we are asking for: that the will of the people has the last say.

Over the last few years Australia has signed free trade agreements with Singapore, Thailand and the USA. In each case governments have waxed lyrical about the benefits. Mark Vaile told us that the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement was worth billions of dollars and would create thousands of jobs. He said he would not sign the agreement unless the United States took our sugar, widened our beef and took out dairy products. He signed the agreement and, yes, there was a benefit for dairymen. The benefit was costed out as at one ice-cream a day. The cattle industry will not receive any benefit for eight years and there will be plenty of opportunity for that position to change. But we have always had a pretty good deal from the Americans on beef, so there is not much to be gained there anyway.

These were the only three things that the press mentioned. We have always had free trade arrangements with America, but the three areas in which we do not are these three areas. The benefit for the dairyman is an ice-cream a day, the benefit for beef men will come down in eight years time and, as for the sugar industry, going by Japan, there ain't going to be anything happening there—we will continue with our embargo.

What is the agreement about? As a result of this free trade agreement, apples will be coming in from America and sugar will still be banned from going into America. So we take the apples but they do not take the sugar. We can thank Mark Vaile and the National Party for that brilliant outcome. Again and again, all of the books on McEwen say he was a tough trader. If you went in there you could rest assured that Australia would come out on top, whether it was the agreement with the British people on wheat and later on beef and whether it was the beef agreement with Japan or access for our coal into Japan. In every single case they were up against a tough man. As for Mark Vaile, 'Mark unavailable for comment' was what the press used to say. He is a nice person and I would never denigrate him personally, but the outcomes he achieved for Australia were absolutely disastrous.

Let me be very specific in the last few minutes that I have available to me. Glivec was a wonder drug that you can only get for \$55,000 a year. I had a person who said, 'I am going to die because I cannot afford to pay that.' The Pharmacy Board of Australia put up a terrific fight and were moderately successful. Their power to influence outcomes now has been removed completely, and our power with respect to things like bananas has

been removed completely by an agreement which is very much against the public interest of Australia, and the China agreement will be worse still. *(Time expired)*

Bill read a first time.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott): In accordance with standing order 41(c), the second reading will be made in order of the day for the next sitting.