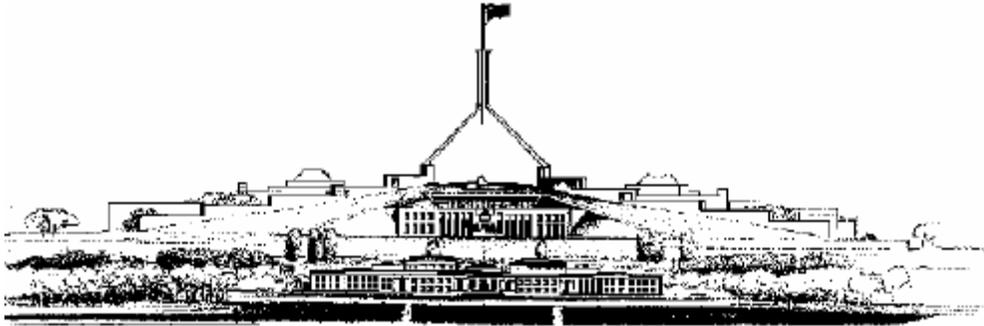




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Mr PRICE (Chifley) (8:25 PM) —I am pleased to speak in this appropriations debate, and I thought I would start my contribution by reminding the House of an article in the Blacktown *City Sun*. It concerns Valentia Gythalovesa, a 16-year-old student from Blacktown Girls High School, who unfortunately has been in detention at Villawood Detention Centre since 7 March this year. I am pleased to say that **Bernie David**, a Blacktown solicitor, is representing this student pro bono. I commend him because he also represented Sylvester Aben, a student from Rooty Hill High School, who was also in detention at Villawood Detention Centre. I am pleased to say that the students at Rooty Hill High galvanised me into action in trying to get him released from the detention centre. I went out to visit Sylvester and his mother who, although they are in detention, actually came to Australia legally. They were not illegals in Australia when they first came here. Sylvester is a 14-year-old student and, I have to say, a great guy. He has spent 10 of his 14 years in Australia. He is more Australian than Filipino. For all the cultural connection he has with the Philippines, which is his country of birth, you may as well send him to Saudi Arabia.

I am absolutely delighted that we were successful in getting Sylvester out of Villawood Detention Centre. It is a horrible detention centre. I have been there a couple of times. The irony, though is that, because he has been in the detention centre for some months, he has been charged an accommodation charge which needs to be paid prior to his status being sorted out. There are some unanswered questions in this case. He and his family—his mum and dad—came here legally. His father was undertaking studies. He completed those studies and eventually returned to the Philippines with a view to lodging appropriate papers for the family. Those papers were never lodged. He is actually working on a contract in PNG for the Australian government.

The point I am making is that Sylvester is as Australian as my children are. All his values, all his mates and all his norms are Australian. Not only am I pleased that he is out of Villawood Detention Centre but also I am grateful for the ongoing representation **Bernie David** provides. I regret that my colleague the honourable member for Greenway has not met with the same success with Valentia. But I do hope, in a most genuine way, that she is successful in getting her out of detention and that she speaks up in the party caucus room and in any subsequent debate in the House for a more humane system that does not have young children and teenagers locked up in detention when we know their health and security do not require it. I look forward to hearing from the honourable member for Greenway. Having wished her success in the quest to get Valentia out, I hope that she might be so moved as to question her government's approach.

One thing that the member for Greenway and I share, in the Blacktown LGA, is the largest Filipino population in Australia. I am inordinately proud of that fact. They are wonderful people. They make great Australian citizens and are such diligent workers. But I have to say that amongst the more elderly Filipinos there has been great concern and consternation caused by the detention of Australian citizens—that is, people who have come to this country, become permanent residents and become Australian citizens but who then get locked up by the department in detention centres and, in the case of Solon Alvarez, are actually deported from Australia.

Many of the elderly Filipinos who first came here were in fact refugees from a very corrupt Marcos regime. Indeed, **Bernie David** himself, as a human rights advocate in the Philippines, was locked up under the Marcos regime. These elderly Filipinos do not understand how it is possible for Australian citizens to be locked up in detention centres when, as in the case of Solon Alvarez, not only did the Department of Foreign Affairs know that she was an Australian citizen but in fact so did the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. What sort of a country is Australia where we have a department that locks up Australian citizens in detention centres—in some cases, as we know, both in the Solon Alvarez case and in the case of Cornelia Rau, where they are suffering severe mental illness? What sort of a country is it where we give the head of the department a gong—for locking up Australian people in detention centres and, in the case of Solon Alvarez, an Australian citizen originally from the Philippines, actually deporting them?

We know—it is on the public record—that there are 200 other cases that are subject to an inquiry. And we know that Mr Palmer, charged with inquiring into them, does not have the resources or the time to make any recommendations. Mr Deputy Speaker Baldwin, I do not apologise to you and I do not apologise to government members when I say that I think this is absolutely outrageous. We need to get to the bottom of it. We need to have a transparent, open process that fully examines all these cases. I hope that, at the end of it, it will not be the case that we give gongs to more individuals in the department of immigration as a result of their handling of these things. I would hope that there will be no officer who is accountable and responsible for these 200 cases, as well as the two that I have mentioned, who gets a promotion as a result of it—and we know that that is the form of this government.

But I say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to all other honourable members: there are elderly Filipinos in my community who are genuinely perplexed, genuinely concerned. And, I might say, there is a level of fear that if it can happen to Cornelia Rau, if it can happen to Solon Alvarez, then perhaps it can happen to them. I think we need to treat this seriously. I think we need to get to the bottom of it. I sincerely believe that we need to have the royal commission that Laurie Ferguson, the shadow minister, has called for. We need to have an inquiry with power, transparency and authority to get to the very bottom of it.

In the same edition of the *Blacktown Sun*, I was reminded of a quote that I made one week after being elected in 1991. I will read it to you—and please forgive me for indulging myself. It said:

Chifley MP Roger Price, in his job for less than one week, said his major priority was a public senior high school in Mt Druitt. "Before I finish, it's the one goal I want to achieve," he said.

At that stage, of course, I was always very proud that I had been part of a campaign to have the first ever public senior high school established in my electorate. That was St Marys Senior High School, and what an outstanding institution that is. It actually attracts students from private schools to do years 11 and 12 and has outstanding results academically as well as for those who want to go into the world of work.

I am also pleased to say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we did get that senior high school for Mount Druitt: it is Chifley senior high school. It has the best senior campus, I think, in Australia and, although it is only about three years old, I think it is going to make a significant contribution to developing the potential of young people. I have got a terrific crop of young people in my electorate. I believe they are going to benefit from it inordinately. Whilst I am on that subject, there are some differences between the government and the opposition in relation to training. We believe that one of the most important things you can do for the country is to develop the skills of our Australian citizens, not only those who are already in work but also those who are out of work and in particular our young people.

I am pleased to say that I am interested in having more school based apprenticeships. Already the Labor Party have said that we want to encourage more people to complete apprenticeships by offering them a completion allowance: \$1,000 in the middle of their apprenticeship and \$1,000 upon its completion. In relation to school based apprenticeships—and I am sure the honourable member for Kingsford Smith will agree with me—question time after question time we get lectured about our lack of interest in it. Well, I must say the federal government provides only 20 school based apprenticeships for my electorate and it is not dissimilar in surrounding electorates. In Western Sydney we have a disproportionately high number of people who see the world of work and TAFE as a way of enhancing their skills. It works out to be not much more than one apprenticeship per high school. I think you would agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that is a pretty poor performance. On Friday, I will be having a meeting in my office and I have invited a variety of people to that meeting with a view to exploring how we can increase the number of school based apprenticeships in my electorate.

Talking about being lectured to, one of the other refrains of the government is that Australian interest rates are historically low. That is true; they are historically low. But what the government never says is that Australia's interest rates are amongst the highest in the developed world. In fact, we have the second highest interest rates in the developed world. I have a chart here, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am happy to table that for the convenience of honourable members. I seek leave to table the chart.

Leave granted.

Mr PRICE—It shows quite clearly that, with our interest rates in Australia at slightly above seven per cent, they are much higher than in the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Austria, France, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, Spain, Finland, the Netherlands and Japan, all of which have lower interest rates.

When the government talks about interest rates under Labor being 17 per cent, that is true. But what is not said is that the percentage of the mortgage in terms of people's earnings was even smaller then, even under a 17 per cent rate, than it is today. But we all know we are never going to return to the interest rates at that level and that is a good thing. I must say that during the last election campaign it was the case that many people, listening to the government's rhetoric, expected there would be low interest rates and no rate increase. Even though there has been a very modest rate increase of 0.25 per cent, it has hurt a lot of people. It has hurt a lot of people in my electorate because they are battlers and they are so proud to get into their homes but even a small increase, given the prices that people pay for homes today, hurts. The Reserve Bank was speculating about the need to increase interest rates by a further quarter of a per cent. That would have hurt new home buyers even more. It is interesting to speculate—and I guess that is all we can do—that interest rates are going to rise in the future, but by how much?

I also want to mention in this debate on the appropriation bills some of the issues that are of concern particularly

in terms of our trade performance. Although the Prime Minister, as we heard today, says that our trade performance is impressive, when you look at the record there are areas for concern. We have at the moment Australia's largest ever current account deficit—\$15.4 billion for the March quarter, more than seven per cent of GDP. That is a quite alarming figure. We have had a record 42 monthly trade deficits in a row—I repeat: a record 42 monthly trade deficits in a row. We have had four years in a row of net exports detracting from economic growth, not adding to but detracting. There has been flat-lining of export volume since 2001 and an export growth rate of 5.3 per cent—that sounds pretty healthy but it is less than half of Labor's export growth at 10.8 per cent. The performance on manufactured exports was even weaker. It was 3.7 per cent under the Howard government compared to 13.7 per cent achieved under Labor.

Who will ever forget the debt trucks in 1996? What we are told in question time is that we should not worry about debt because government debt has been substantially reduced. That is true; I do not argue it. But the truth is that we have a record foreign debt of \$425 billion. Mr Deputy Speaker, if you want to translate that into what it means in your electorate, my electorate, that of the member for Melbourne Ports or that of the member for Kingsford Smith, it means that for every man, woman and child Australia owes \$21,056. It is private debt, but it is still there. When we look at our export performance, just to service that debt each year is \$20 billion.

Mrs Gash —It is not a government debt.

Mr PRICE —It is not a government debt—I agree with the honourable member for Gilmore. But what she says is: 'It doesn't matter.'

Mrs Gash interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Baldwin)—Order! The member will be heard in silence.

Mr PRICE —I think it is fair enough. I accept the point that the honourable member for Gilmore is making. I have a regard for the honourable member for Gilmore.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER —Unfortunately, the member does not have the right to rule in that direction. He will get on with his speech.

Mr PRICE —But is the member for Gilmore saying that \$500 billion is okay or \$1,000 billion is okay? It is private debt. We have to service that debt as a nation and it costs us \$20 billion. In other words, it is 20 parliament houses every year. We have to find the money that it took to construct this Parliament House 20 times every year and it is growing at an extraordinary rate every month.

There were other matters that I wanted to raise—for example, the fact that Blacktown council mayor Leo Kelly is very concerned that, notwithstanding the fact that the council runs 22 child-care centres, not one dollar has been announced to assist them. *(Time expired)*