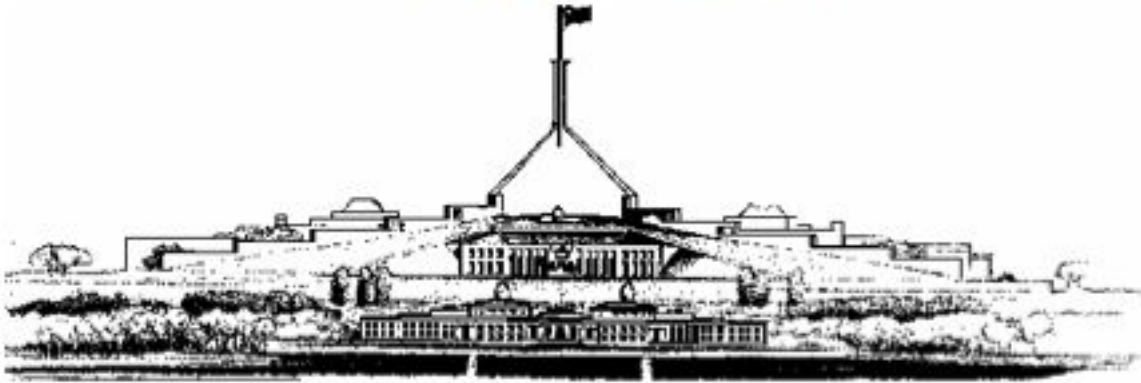




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Sri Lanka**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 10 September 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 10 September 2009  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Murphy, John, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr MURPHY** (Lowe) (4.45 pm)—Today I speak again about the horrific humanitarian disaster in the north of Sri Lanka. The hundreds of thousands of innocent Tamils displaced by the military offensive are living in camps in appalling conditions. Moreover, foreign media channels have reported horrifying evidence of the worst violations of human rights, including starvation, rape, killings and torture. International agencies are calling for full access to these camps in order to provide life-saving treatment and medical supplies and to allow free and independent media access.

To date, the Sri Lankan government has arrogantly refused free media and humanitarian access to these camps. Why is the Sri Lankan government hiding from the truth? Surely providing unimpeded media and humanitarian access to these camps would provide a perfect opportunity for the Sri Lankan government to demonstrate that it is doing all it can to alleviate the suffering of the Tamil people. Clearly, the Sri Lankan government does not want the truth revealed.

Further, I am horrified to learn that a Sri Lankan journalist, Mr J S Tissainayagam, was detained for five months without charge in 2008 and has since been convicted and sentenced by the Colombo High Court to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment. Mr. Tissainayagam was convicted on three counts under Sri Lanka's prevention of terrorism acts law for publishing an online magazine, which the prosecution claimed provoked racism and incited violence. The court found that the publication defamed the Sri Lankan government. Further, it was alleged that Mr Tissainayagam received money from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to fund the website. The fact, as established by Reporters Without Borders, is that the website had actually been funded by a German aid project. The articles written by Mr Tissainayagam were published three years earlier, in 2006, and contained a critical report on the Sri Lankan army's conduct against the LTTE and civilians. Mr Tissainayagam accused the army of withholding food and other supplies from Tamil areas as a tool of war.

What an appalling assault on free speech by the Sri Lankan government. Australia, as a country that asserts the rights to freedom of speech and freedom of expression, including views on all matters of public policy, the behaviour of the Sri Lankan government is

in direct conflict with our values as well as those of other democratic nations and, as such, must be loudly and publicly condemned. On World Press Freedom Day, on 3 May 2009, the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, expressed his serious concern about countries that do not allow free press and even highlighted the example of Mr Tissainayagam as a case in point. President Obama said:

In every corner of the globe there are journalists in jail or being actively harassed: from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, Burma to Uzbekistan, Cuba to Eritrea. Emblematic examples of this distressing reality are figures like J S Tissainayagam in Sri Lanka.

In a further assault on freedom of speech, an Australian United Nations official, Mr James Elder, was recently ordered by the Sri Lankan government to leave the country because of comments he made about the military offensive and its impact on innocent civilians. Mr James Elder is a spokesman for the United Nations Children's Fund in Colombo and has made several statements on foreign television news channels and print media concerning the horrendous humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka. The *Age* newspaper reported on 7 September that although Mr Elder holds a residency visa valid until 2010, Mr P B. Abeykoon, Sri Lanka's controller of immigration and emigration, advised that Mr Elder's visa was cancelled from 7 September this year and that he was ordered to leave Sri Lanka immediately. It was only after the United Nations appealed for more time that the order was extended until 21 September. The *Age* reported:

Mr Abeykoon said the Government took the decision some months ago based on 'adverse remarks made to the media', but he declined to give further details.

Mr Elder had spoken of the unimaginable hell suffered by children caught up in the last stages of the war in Sri Lanka. Surely the suffering experienced in Sri Lanka needs an honest voice. Surely an independent assessment of the situation is necessary to provide adequate support to the men, women and children trapped in this unimaginable hell. Australia has offered a generous \$25.4 million in aid in a bid to restore peace and security. However, much more must be done. It is obvious that there exists no freedom of the press in Sri Lanka. The actions of the government of Sri Lanka must be condemned and must be condemned loudly. I again appeal to all governments of the world who have

respect for human rights, the rule of law and free speech  
to join together and call on the government of Sri Lanka  
to right the wrongs forthwith.