



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

Thursday, 30 September 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 30 September 2010
Page 57
Questioner
Speaker Back, Sen Chris

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator BACK (Western Australia) (1.14 pm)—Madam Acting Deputy President, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the motion to adopt the address-in-reply to the speech of the Governor-General in this place two days ago. That was my first opportunity to be part of the opening of a new parliament, and it was a great privilege—which reminds me of the honour that it has been for me to be re-elected by the people of Western Australia, to whom I express my appreciation. What was regrettable for me on that occasion was that the quality of the content that was given to the Governor-General to present to this place did not in any way match the quality of her own presentation to us. It was an opportunity wasted. It was an opportunity—with everybody here assembled from both places, with the guests who were privileged to be able to be here and with the Australian people listening in—for the Prime Minister, through the Governor-General, to have actually presented something. We know that when the last Rudd-Gillard government was elected, in 2007, it promised much and delivered little. The regrettable thing I heard in the presentation the other day was that there is very little to deliver on this occasion, because little was promised.

In the moments that I have, I will reflect on some of the promises most important to me and my constituency. The first relates to education. We were told that there will be a new focus on rural and regional Australia, particularly with regard to education. I have spoken in this place of the terrible circumstances that now beset regional and rural universities. In my own home state of Western Australia, we have been fighting a rearguard action to keep the Muresk Institute of agriculture alive after 85 years. That is slipping. It is slipping because there is not, has not been and apparently—according to the speech—will not be an increased focus upon the need to keep regional universities and places of higher education open, recognising the added costs.

Speakers have already mentioned in this place the challenges associated with isolated children. There is a need—which we had hoped to see addressed—for youth allowance to be extended for tertiary students and for greater support to be provided for students from secondary schools. If you look back at the history of tertiary education in this country, and particularly at those who succeed at tertiary level, whatever have been the programs in place, low socioeconomic status has

not been the main barrier to successful achievement at university. What has been and continues to be the case—and we see no reason, as a result of the speech, for this to change—is that those who cannot attend universities from their own home, in other words young people from regional agricultural communities, have been those who are disadvantaged. We saw nothing in the Governor-General's speech to prevent that.

I was hoping that we would have heard an apology for the scandalous Building the Education Revolution funding of some \$16 billion, but we did not hear any apology. I would have thought there would have been some explanation. I would have thought there would have been some accountability as to how these funds could have been so badly wasted in the state education sectors—particularly those of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland—in contrast to the funds that went to the Catholic and independent schools.

I sat on the Senate committee that inquired into this. I exposed the fact that the Catholic and independent schools, under their block grant authorities, spent the funds that were made available to them exactly in accordance with what we would have expected per square metre. The difference between expenditure for the Catholic and independent schools and expenditure for the state schools was highlighted. The state school figures per square metre were double and even triple what we saw elsewhere.

It was unfortunate that people such as the Director-General of Education and Training in New South Wales said to us that it was because the Catholics and the independents did not factor in add-on costs such as furniture, fixtures and fittings—only to have them correct that. He then said that the difference was in the quality of construction. Well, history is already proving that there is a difference in quality of construction, in that many of the buildings put there by the contractors of the state systems are already falling apart. There certainly has been no indication at all that there has been inferior construction or use of materials in the Catholic or independent school systems.

I was hoping that there might have been a recognition by the Prime Minister, through the Governor-General's speech, that the so-called Building the Education Revolution never at any time had any impact or effect on the so-called economic stimulus, because as history shows—we have heard it from

Tax, Treasury and others—we were already recovering from the global economic circumstances by the time the first bricks were actually being laid. I think always of those poor people from Tottenham Central School in western New South Wales who came all the way into Sydney only to learn how successfully others, in the Catholic and independent schools, had been able to spend their funds, as opposed to the small tin shed that they got as a cafeteria, which in occupational health and safety terms was too small to even be used.

On the National Broadband Network, far from there being a statement by the incoming government that they would pull it, review it and develop a business plan and economic case for it, all we heard was that they will move ahead with some \$43 billion to create another government monopoly, whereas every other country in the world is taking advantage of competitive activities in the private sector to deliver in this area. I investigated this during the election campaign. I had a very well experienced software programmer—a person who has spent most of his life in this area—make the point to me that in fact Australia communicates only about five to seven per cent of all its internet connectivity within this country while between 90 and 93 per cent is overseas, in what he called the offshore pipeline. The point he made to me was that there is not a cent of the \$43 billion that is actually committed to widening, increasing, doubling or changing that pipeline.

His analogy was simple. He said that within your home—within Australia—you can have the biggest, widest reticulation pipes you like, but if the pipe going from the mains in the street into your block is only three-quarters of an inch, or 19 millimetres, wide it is not going to change the connectivity and therefore the speed of access to the rest of the world. Surely, one would see that as being essential. I thought we would have found the answer to the question: why is it that in Tasmania, where connectivity has been free of charge, less than 50 per cent have taken it up?

I now turn to the agricultural sector—again, a sector which was absent from the Governor-General's speech. As I have reminded the chamber before, Australia has both the obligation and the opportunity to feed more than 1.9 billion additional people in this region by 2050. I would have thought we may have seen an indication of where there would be stimulus and support for the sector. We are going to have to do it with less land, less water, less fertiliser, less fuel, less money and with an ever ageing population of farmers. With the government's embrace of the rural regional Independents who have helped form this new rainbow coalition government, I have seen no indication at all on that. Not only that, but we are seeing our exporters being disadvantaged. More and more burdens are being placed upon them and it seems to

be easier for importers. We see this in the horticultural sector at the moment. We see the assault on the apple industry in this country. We are trying to fight the importation of apples from countries—China and New Zealand in particular—that have apple blight, a disease we do not have. We know that, in those countries, they are using antibiotics to spray the trees before the fruit comes into this country. Yet we do not seem able to stop it.

I mentioned a few moments ago the question of education in the rural sector, and I come back to it again. If we cannot educate the next generation of farmers and agribusiness personnel to a level where they can pick up that challenge, we are going to be severely disadvantaged. I want to see some leadership from this government for however long they occupy the treasury bench.

I would like to speak of farm viability for a moment. How wonderful it is that in the eastern states this year you have got a season that will produce good crops. We in the west are having a diabolical season. It is likely that up to one-third of Western Australian grain producers will not be viable to put in a crop in 2011. The opportunity is there for government to provide leadership. For example, they can have a look at multi-peril crop insurance. For many years this has been a stabilising influence in North America, Europe and South Africa. Yet here we do not yet have that opportunity; we do not even have people willing to have a look at it. Those are the sorts of things I hoped to hear of in the speech from the Governor-General about the Prime Minister's leadership of this country.

Being from Western Australia I cannot let this opportunity pass without reminding the chamber of the question of minerals royalties. How easily the previous Prime Minister and the Treasurer talked about our minerals being 'the asset of all Australians'. The Australian Constitution is very clear. If we in this chamber do not stand up for the integrity of the Australian Constitution, who is going to? Under the Constitution, mineral royalties are the province of the states, not the Commonwealth. A mineral royalty is merely the price at which the government of a state, on behalf of the people of that state, is willing to sell that mineral to a would-be purchaser. A royalty is merely a purchase price by a company or an entity that wants to buy the mineral. It is nothing more, it is nothing less and it is nothing to do with the Commonwealth.

In all of the discussions that take place on minerals royalties, minerals taxes, resource rent taxes et cetera, let it be remembered that this is nothing more than a state issue. There is no role for the Commonwealth to be grabbing the royalties of the states. How disappointing it was to see negotiations with three multinational mining companies—and this

was apparently going to change completely the relationship with the entire mining sector—only to be told, ‘We were really there representing the interests of the minor players, so get on with it.’ Well, ‘get on with it’ not at all—it ought always have been!

I hope this government has learnt for the future that you do not change by bullying, you do not change by arrogance; you change by good negotiation and good consultation well in advance, not in arrears and not with a gun to the head. Madam Acting Deputy President, this government has no idea of the damage it has caused internationally to the reputation of this country and, from the viewpoint of the smaller miners, the damage it has done to confidence in the banking sector. Whilst the banking sector might not be saying too much publicly, they are certainly concerned about where risk lies—and, as we all know, banks reflect risk in interest rates and in charges to their clients.

There has been much discussion about the carbon tax and climate change. My colleague Senator Ronaldson has spoken about the Prime Minister’s turnaround on the carbon tax. Will she stop at nothing to get elected? It is more about the future of this country than getting elected or re-elected, and everybody in this place should be devoting their attention to it. I remind you that we only produce 1.4 per cent of the world’s carbon. Any effort by Australia in isolation will either do nothing or, because of carbon leakage, add to the level of world carbon. Of course we must move in relation to the rest of the world, but we must not at any time put families, businesses and industry at risk by some form of unilateral action.

The IPCC has been discredited in this whole process. There needs to be a robust debate by credible scientists and others. But there has not been that debate. We must surely engage but we must do so at a level that is commensurate with good science, good economics and good business, and we must not act in isolation from our trading partners and trading competitors. For those of you who do not know China, India, Indonesia or these other countries, go and have a look at their business practices, go and have a look at their procedures, and then ask yourself: to what extent are we in Australia going to have any influence at all? I can assure you we will have little influence.

I wish to draw attention—as indeed Senator Crossin courteously did—to the election to the House of Representatives this week of my associate Mr Ken Wyatt, who was successful in winning, after a spirited battle, the seat of Hasluck. Those who heard Ken Wyatt’s speech yesterday were immensely proud. Those of us from Western Australia, those of us in the Liberal Party, were immensely proud, and those who worked so hard to support Ken’s election are duly pleased and proud.

Ken Wyatt yesterday drew attention to the need for education and the need to support the elderly in our community. I have heard Noel Pearson speak eloquently about three factors when it comes to trying to lift those of low socioeconomic status, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. He speaks of the equation being: self-respect added to opportunity equals capability. We heard that theme yesterday from Ken Wyatt when he said that self-respect came from his family, from his opportunities and from those who supported him, and that opportunity, for him, came from hard work and from education. Putting those things together—self-respect added to opportunity—we certainly see in Ken Wyatt a level of capability that I am sure is going to create new standards in this parliament.

I was particularly concerned at the time to learn of a limited number of emails from people to Ken, to his office, to say, ‘If I had known you were an Aboriginal man I wouldn’t have voted for you.’ Let me tell you: for every one of those stupid people there would be hundreds who, if they had heard his speech yesterday, would have said, ‘Knowing that you are an Indigenous man, knowing your quality and calibre, I certainly will be voting for you.’

Ken’s activity reminded me that I am privileged to have recently been invited onto the board of the MyKasih Foundation, a philanthropic foundation based in Malaysia which supports the mothers of low socioeconomic families. Funds are placed, on a fortnightly basis, for one year only—remember: there is no social security in Malaysia—into an account which the mother can access from her Malaysian identification card, the MyKad. On a fortnightly basis, she can actually shop as anybody else does for goods for her family. But linked to that financial support is a skills development program in budgeting and other household activities. The third component is encouragement for her children, be they young or adolescent, to participate in education—coming back to that all the time. As Ken Wyatt spoke yesterday I reflected on the value of that MyKasih concept and its possible application here in Australia.

I conclude now with reference to the coalition between the Greens, the Independents and the Labor government. Now is the time: for the first time in the history of the Greens, they are actually in a position to influence policy in this parliament and I call on this government to call the Greens to account in the areas in which, they have said to the Australian people, they want removals. They want removal of the private health rebate—that 30 or 40 per cent. They want removal of the funding to the Catholic and independent schools sector, which will cost every Australian \$6,000 for every child that is in a Catholic or independent

school. And they want the introduction of death duties. I call on the government to repudiate and reject each of those three policies.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Hutchins)—Order! We will have a brief interruption for Minister Feeney.