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Tuesday, 7 March 2000

Mr SPEAKER (Mr Neil Andrew) took the chair at 2.30 p.m., and read prayers.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

Mr SPEAKER—I acknowledge in the galleries today the presence of servicemen, servicewomen, police and civilians who have served Australia with great distinction in East Timor.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

Mr SPEAKER—On the floor of the chamber we have the commander of the International Force for East Timor, INTERFET, Major General Peter Cosgrove. I know the House joins me in welcoming you, sir, on your return to Australia. Major General Cosgrove is accompanied by the Chief and Vice Chief of the Defence Force and by the chiefs of the Navy, Army and Air Force.

In the galleries we also welcome representative troops returning from INTERFET service, as well as representatives from the Australian Federal Police and government and non-government agencies. General Cosgrove, ladies and gentlemen: you have served your country with honour and distinction, and your colleagues who remain with the United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor continue to do so. The nation is proud of your achievements and, on behalf of the House, I welcome you all.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Nursing Homes: Spot Checks

Mr BEAZLEY (2.33 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence, I wish to associate myself with the remarks that you have just made of welcome. The Prime Minister and I have had a chance to say our own things in the last hour or so. My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, do you recall saying this morning on the Today show that you were being misquoted by the interviewer and that you had not told the House last August that spot checks were being conducted at that time? Minister, in light of the fundamental responsibility upon you not to mislead this House, I ask: isn’t the full Hansard record of what you said on 31 August last year:

There are nursing homes that exist today that ought not to be open. The reason we will continue to have spot checks and the reason I will continue to have published on the Internet the names of residential facilities that do not meet the standard is the same reason that we want exposed the fact that we will not tolerate such care.

Minister, didn’t you mislead the House last year with that statement? Didn’t you mislead the Australian public this morning by denying the clear Hansard record? Why should anyone believe anything you say about the nursing home crisis?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—After yesterday, I carefully went through the Hansard. There were a number of questions that were asked me. I went through the Hansard, as I said, carefully, and the answers that I gave on that occasion were quite correct—with the exception of one thing. I said that the Labor Party had closed four homes in 13 years. I was wrong; it was only one.

Tax Reform: State Services

Mr BARRESI (2.35 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer advise the House how the states will benefit from the introduction of the new tax system, and how their ability to provide services will be enhanced?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Deakin for his question and acknowledge the fine work that he does in representing the citizens of Deakin. Of course, under the new tax system not only are we introducing the largest personal income tax cut in Australia’s history but we are totally reforming Commonwealth-state financial relations. The states will be given all of the revenue from GST. May I say that again: the states will be given all of the revenue from GST, which will allow them to abolish their current inefficient indirect tax bases and will also mean that the annual bunfight at the Premiers Conference, when they come to Canberra looking for money, will be over.

This is, of course, of great assistance to the states. That is why the Labor Party is ostensibly trying to engage in conversation at the moment to try to ignore the benefits that are available to the states. When we were in opposition, we used to try this trick too. You would turn around to your frontbench and
talk in loud voices so you would not have to put up with the bad news. It will not actually give the Leader of the Opposition any inspiration. As the Labor chat room yesterday said, 'In the talentless Labor frontbench, things are so bad that Laurie Brereton is now being talked of seriously.'

If, of course, the GST should be rolled back, the states would be the losers, and if the states were the losers the Commonwealth guarantee recently announced by the Leader of the Opposition would mean that the Commonwealth would have to make up the difference. Not only would it have to make up the difference; it would have no goods taxes to make it up from, so it would come out of income tax. The Leader of the Opposition has hooked himself on his own petard. He was asked recently about where he would actually roll back the goods and services tax, and this is what he said yesterday—listen to this for a clear enunciation of Labor Party policy. For four years he has been thinking about his roll-back policy, and this is the little gem he came up with yesterday. Mr Beazley said:

This is why I sensibly have taken the view that, after announcing that, in principle, we're committed to rollback and not rollback just immediately ... certainly roll-back immediately ... but over time, we have given ourselves the flexibility to look at the budgetary circumstances at the time. This is not prolix; this is gobbledegook. He might as well say to the press gallery, 'Get used to gobbledegook.' The fact is that he is on an uncharted road to an unknown destination with no means of paying for it and no policy. He is like a rolling stone.

Mr Horne—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. My point of order is on relevance. I know the wine was nice at lunchtime, and obviously the Treasurer over—

Mr SPEAKER—The member for Paterson will resume his seat.

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. That comment should be withdrawn, Mr Speaker.

Mr Horne—Mr Speaker, I withdraw.

Mr SPEAKER—The member for Paterson has facilitated the House by withdrawing, and I thank him. I understand the Treasurer has concluded his answer. I call the member for Barton.

Nursing Homes: Riverside

Mr McCLELLAND (2.40 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, is it not the case that your press release of yesterday stated that copies of the second Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency report into Riverside Nursing Home are available on request? Is it not the case that yesterday evening your staff made copies of this report available to representatives of the various media agencies? Why did you allow this to happen, given that it is presently prohibited under Part 3, Division 2, Subdivision 1 of your own Accreditation Grant Principles 1999? Minister, aren't you and your office in breach of your own regulations?

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Under the standing orders you are not entitled to ask for a legal opinion. It is as simple as that.

Mr Beazley interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition understands that he did not have the call. But, in any case, I am very happy to rule on this matter without any assistance from either side. The Minister for Aged Care was asked whether or not anything she had done was in breach of the regulations of her department, as I understand it. She was not asked to comment on the legal status of the document she was given, and I invite her to respond.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Mr Speaker, I believe that is asking for a legal opinion, however—

Mr Wilton interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—I warn the member for Isaacs!

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—We believed the material as published yesterday was in line and correct. I will check with our legal authorities on that point.

Tax Reform: Small Business

Mr LINDSAY (2.42 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Minister, what progress has been made in
implementing the tax benefits for small business previously announced by the government? Is the minister aware of any alternative proposals for the taxation treatment of small business?

Mr REITH—I thank the member for Herbert for his question. I think it is appropriate also to note, Mr Speaker, that the member for Herbert is well known in this chamber as a great advocate for the ADF in Townsville. I think that is recognised on both sides of the House because he does do a good job for his constituents.

The government’s tax reforms provide significant benefits to the small business community. In fact, the small business community has consistently been in favour of genuine and comprehensive tax reform for many years, including the introduction of a goods and services tax. They have also supported the very significant reductions in income tax which are included in the package. The small business community will be beneficiaries of those huge reductions in income tax. They have also been in favour of the abolition of the hidden indirect tax which the Labor Party has had in operation for many years—the wholesale sales tax. One of the reasons they are in favour of the abolition of the hidden indirect tax which the Labor Party has had in operation for many years—the wholesale sales tax. One of the reasons they are in favour of the abolition of the wholesale sales tax is that it takes the cost off business and, if you can reduce the cost of doing business, that provides a benefit not only to small business but also to the people that they employ. The small business community is also very much in favour of the abolition of provisional tax. Provisional tax has sent many businesses broke over the years. The abolition of provisional tax is the culmination of a long campaign by the small business community to achieve that objective.

When the government was first elected back in 1996, we had a committee look at reducing red tape. One of the recommendations of the committee, which comprised people from small business, was that we introduce a system known as pay as you go. The reason that small business sees that as reducing red tape is that it will see a reduction in the number of forms having to be filled out by small business down to one simplified, single system—the pay as you go system. So that is also a significant plus for the small business community.

Obviously, there are transition issues with the introduction of the new package, and for that reason the government has set about the biggest information and education campaign for a tax change in Australia’s history. There have been literally thousands of seminars, and a whole range of services provided, particularly to small business, to enable them to make that change. An amount of $500 million has been set aside for that task and, on top of that, $175 million as the benefit to small business from immediate tax deductibility of items purchased as they get set up for the GST.

I think the small business community would be aghast to now find out that, if the Labor Party were ever to be elected, the first thing they would do would be to move what they call a series of changes or roll-backs to the GST, adding significantly to the compliance costs for the small business community. After running around the country saying that they are concerned about small business and red tape, their policy is in fact to load them up with a whole lot of red tape if ever they are elected. To add insult to injury, it is the Labor Party’s policy to pay for the deal they have offered to the state premiers with an increase in income tax. Who do you think is going to pay the increase in income tax? None other than small business. Not only will it affect them in respect of income tax; whilst this government has been reducing capital gains tax, the Labor Party’s increases in income tax will mean increases in capital gains tax for the small business community.

One of the best things we have done was to halve capital gains tax. Now it is Labor Party policy to put it up. The small business community is part of the great dynamic of the Australian economy, creating jobs. In the end, if we look after small business, we get more jobs and we get higher living standards. Our policy supports them. It seems, again, that Labor’s policy is to tax small business.
ute yesterday the report to which my colleague the member for Barton referred, why then did the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency this morning refuse to provide a copy to the shadow minister for aged care and advise him that the report has not been made publicly available and that it would be made available in accordance with the time frame specified under the accreditation grant principles of 1999?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—I told you earlier that you had raised a legal matter. I will check it with the legal authorities. As I told you, my advice is that I was acting in accordance with the act.

Mr McMullan—I seek leave to table a fax from the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency to the shadow minister for aged care.

Leave granted.

Tax Reform: Primary Producers

Mr FORREST (2.49 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Would the minister confirm that the new tax system, including the introduction of the GST, will benefit primary producers? Is the minister aware of alternative approaches to this issue and how would they impact on primary producers?

Mr TRUSS—I can certainly confirm to the honourable member for Mallee that farmers in his electorate and around Australia will indeed gain very real benefits from the government's new tax system—a billion dollars worth of cuts in their expenditure, reduced income tax and improved benefits for their families. All of those things are very important for rural and regional Australians. I can also confirm that I have heard reports that there are some alternative ideas around. After three years of telling us how evil the goods and services tax is and of being unable to persuade anybody, other than the people of Botswana and Swaziland, that they have a better system, Labor have finally decided, 'Well, we'll keep the GST after all. It won't be quite the same; we're just going to roll it back. But we'll keep it. It's evil. We don't like it but we'll just roll it back.' They have not told us how it is going to be rolled back, whether they are going to reduce the rate from 10 per cent to nine per cent, or what other measures they might have in mind.

Most farmers will remember the last time Labor promised to reduce taxes. Remember the l-a-w tax cuts? That is the last time they rolled back taxes. They actually went up! So, if anybody is looking around for any reductions, I think they should probably look at Labor's form on this issue and they will know they will not be receiving much benefit. Just in case Labor are proposing to actually reduce the revenue from the GST, it is perhaps time they told Australian farmers, and indeed other people, who will be the losers from this loss of revenue. For instance, are the opposition aware that, under the new tax system, 70 per cent of Australian farmers will pay no more income tax than 17 cents in the dollar? Seventy per cent of all Australian farmers will pay 17 cents in the dollar or less, and many more will pay none. Is that what Labor is going to roll back?

Are they also aware that Australian families are going to get very significant income tax cuts? A family with two children, with one under age five, will get a tax cut of $71 a week. Is that what they are going to roll back? The tax cuts? What about the reductions in costs, including reduced fuel costs? Is that what they are going to roll back? This is the sort of thing that Labor is telling us about. I think it is about time, if they are going to roll back taxes, that they started giving assurances to farmers that the real benefits that are going to be provided under this tax package are not going to be rolled back—that there will not be a roll-back on the tax cuts and that there will not be a roll-back on the savings that farmers will receive. Only when we get that assurance can anybody have any kind of confidence as to what Labor proposes for the future. The reality is: Labor is going to roll back all right; they are going to roll back the real benefits that are available under the new tax system.

Nursing Homes: Alchera Park

Mr SWAN (2.53 p.m.)—My question without notice is directed to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, are you aware that in April last year the Alchera Park Nursing Home in Queensland was inspected by your agency and, consistent with your policy, it
was given notice of the inspection and was therefore able to roster on additional staff? Can you confirm that, months after that inspection, during which residents expressed concerns to the agency, two residents were admitted to hospital with gangrenous wounds and suffering severe dehydration and that they later passed away? What action have you taken to ensure the safety of the residents in that nursing home—or do you need another front page headline before you act?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—In accordance with a report made to me today by the standards and accreditation agency, a total of 11 facilities in Queensland have been referred as a serious risk. Nine of these immediately commenced remedial action and remain under agency supervision. None of those is the one that you mentioned. Two remain under serious risk, and neither of those is the one that you mentioned. That is the report from the agency as of today.

Education: Targets

Mr PROSSER (2.55 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Is the minister aware of recent acknowledgments concerning education targets? Are these targets consistent with each other, and what is the significance of these targets for the future education of Australians?

Dr KEMP—I am aware of several targets for educational qualifications which have come into the public arena as a result of the Labor Party’s lapsing into confusion as it attempts to formulate an education policy. Let me run through this record of confusion of the last two weeks as the Leader of the Opposition attempts to formulate at least some educational goal.

The confusion started on the Sunday program a fortnight ago, when the Leader of the Opposition stated that, in his view, the most important educational target was that ‘every young person should exit their teens with a post-school qualification’—that is, every young person should have a post school qualification: a degree, a diploma or some trade qualification. At present, 12.8 per cent of young people have that qualification. The Leader of the Opposition is proposing to raise that to 100 per cent, apparently. Labor sources quickly came to the rescue and said that this was a mistake and that the Leader of the Opposition overstated this target. There was a letter to the Australian from the Leader of the Opposition stating what target he actually said the Labor Party was aiming at. He rolled it back. The big roll-back had begun; it had rolled back from 100 per cent. He stated: What we want by 2010 is at least 90 per cent of young people leaving their teens to have a Year 12 or equivalent qualification—

He did not say a degree or a diploma but a Year 12 qualification. He said that would not be too hard because in the last decade we have actually been at levels just like that. He was wrong again. There has been no time in the last decade when there has been any figure like 90 per cent reached. Australia was never near 90 per cent for Year 12 retention. The highest figure reached was around 76 per cent, and that was when Kim Beazley was pumping up youth unemployment and young people had virtually no option but to go back into school. When Labor left office the figure was nearer to 70 per cent—nowhere near 90 per cent. He was wrong again.

Last night, we had the member for Dobell at the Sydney Institute rolling back this target yet again. He scaled it back in this way. He said that what Labor was really aiming to achieve was 90 per cent year 12 retention by 2010. That is equivalent to an 82 per cent year 12 qualification rate. So an eight per cent gap has now opened up between the target of the Leader of the Opposition and the target of the member for Dobell. What we have here is total confusion. We have another example of an uncharted journey leading to an unknown destination; and I do not know whether we are at the destination now, because we have total confusion in relation to the educational targets of the opposition.

The Leader of the Opposition was a complete failure as minister for education. He achieved nothing in that portfolio; he was not interested in the portfolio. He was not able to state any sensible educational goals then, and the opposition today has no sensible, credible educational goals on the table—it just has total confusion. In education as in the GST, it
is on an uncharted journey leading to an uncertain destination.

**Nursing Homes: Alchera Park**

Mr SWAN (2.59 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, can you confirm that the complaints referred to in my last question concerning the Alchera Park Nursing Home were referred to your department’s complaints unit in Brisbane last November? Is it the case that those who complained have not received a copy of the agency’s report into this nursing home arising from their complaints? And isn’t it the case that they have received no formal response from your department’s complaints unit? Minister, what are you doing about this mess?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—As I said before, I went through today’s report and gave you that report. The details which you have mentioned here in the House today, I would be pleased to receive them and follow it up.

**Immigration: Humanitarian Program**

Mrs GALLUS (3.00 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Would the minister inform the House of the cost to taxpayers if the government were to accept the call for no constraints on the size of the humanitarian program? Minister, does the program accept all people who arrive in Australia unlawfully? If you make the assumption—none of them have argued that they should access the program on the basis of need now.

Mr RUDDOCK—I thank the honourable member for Hindmarsh for her question, because it does give me an opportunity to deal with a very difficult issue and one which is of concern to me and, I believe, most members of the House. Members would be aware that Australia has, by world standards, a generous approach to resettling refugees and humanitarian entrants and that per capita our program for resettlement has been the largest in the world. Last year, in response to the situation in Kosovo and East Timor, we saw an effective increase of 50 per cent in the numbers of people whom we were able to assist. So we are the most generous in per capita terms in the world. We saw a 50 per cent increase.

But there are some people who seem to believe that you can go on indefinitely accommodating additional numbers of people in the refugee and humanitarian program. For instance, the member for Grayndler is of the view that you should allow all people who arrive in Australia unlawfully and who obtain refugee status to simply be added to the program and to be an additional charge upon the budget as a result of their accommodation. The member for Oxley believes that something of the order of 500 Vietnamese people in Hong Kong and the Philippines ought to be accommodated in the refugee and humanitarian program. The member for Bowman believes that the Kosovars and the Timorese who remain in Australia should be allowed to remain here as an additional component of the refugee and humanitarian program. None of them has argued that they ought to find their places at the expense of those people who would access the program on the basis of need now.

The fact of the matter is that, if you were to add all of those people who have come to Australia unlawfully and who are likely to be accepted and who are in the process now, you have something of the order of 4,000 additional places. If you make the assumption—which is not unreasonable—that we may have people continuing to arrive in Australia who have similar backgrounds and who are likely to succeed in making those claims, then we are probably looking at 6,000 people. If you assume that you continue to conduct policies in a way which would accommodate those sorts of arrivals and those sorts of numbers, you would be looking at similar numbers of people having to be accommodated next year. The cost to the forward estimates per thousand is $21.5 million; 4,000 people and you are looking at $83 million cost to the forward estimates; 6,000 people would be $120 million to the forward estimates. If you take it year in, year out, you have got another $100 million or more each year to the forward estimates.

I put the question to the honourable member for Grayndler—he sits there as quasi-frontbench material; he sits there as a parliamentary secretary—‘This involves fiscal responsibility,’ and he said, ‘I accept that absolutely.’ Does that mean, in addition to rolling back the GST, they are out there walking
both sides of the street, pretending to people that they are able to increase government expenditure without regard to any fiscal responsibility? Clearly, the question that has to be answered is not by the member for Grayndler and not by the shadow minister, because he is trying to walk both sides of the street on this issue, but by the Leader of the Opposition. Is he going to pull them into line and say, ‘We want to have fiscal credibility,’ or is he going to be out there holding out to some groups in the community that the Labor Party is going to find those extra funds and fit them into the forward estimates but try to pretend that they are not doing so?

Nursing Homes: Alchera Park

Mr McMULLAN (3.05 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, isn’t it the case that one of the Alchera Park Nursing Home complainants referred to by the member for Lilley contacted your office in the last few weeks to find out what has been done about the serious issues she raised concerning Alchera Park Nursing Home? What advice did she receive? Can you confirm that this person is still waiting for a final response to her complaint? Will you undertake to report to the House today on what you did in relation to these complaints to your office?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—It is fortuitous that you asked the question because I now have the answer on the Alchera Park Nursing Home. The points are these: the Aged Care Complaints Resolution Scheme received several complaints on 16 November 1999 concerning standards of care for three residents of Alchera Park Nursing Home who subsequently died in Gladstone Hospital. Following preliminary investigations, the complaints resolution scheme met with representatives from the facility on 22 November 1999 and subsequently referred the matter to the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency on 25 November.

The agency undertook a full review of standards at the home on 30 November and 1 December, which identified three areas of concern, and an immediate improvement plan was developed. The agency is continuing to monitor the facility to ensure that the improvements outlined in the improvement plan are implemented and that systems are in place to ensure continued adherence to them. With the agreement of all complainants, these complaints were finalised on 18 January 2000 on the basis of the actions put in place to remedy previous care problems.

Mr McMullan—I ask that the minister table the document from which she was quoting.

Mr SPEAKER—Was the minister quoting from a confidential document? The minister has indicated that the document was confidential.

Roads: Upgrades

Mrs HULL (3.08 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services. Will the minister inform the House of developments in improving road transport efficiency through bridge upgrades on strategic freight routes in my electorate of Riverina and across Australia? Will the minister also inform the House of any impediments to the delivery of these reforms?

Mr ANDERSON—One of the important reforms that the government is pursuing in transport, where we think reform is important, is the rolling out of higher mass limits. Higher mass limits further extend the use of—

Mr Howard—They’re rolling out; not rolling in.

Mr ANDERSON—I will come to that in a moment. This allows for the more effective loading of heavy trucks and leads to an increase in efficiency in the trucking industry and a reduction in the number of trucks on our roads for a given freight task. The total estimated value to the Australian economy is about $850 million a year—a worthwhile reform. In pursuit of it—and we at Commonwealth government level have been pursuing this vigorously—I announced yesterday a further $30 million for bridge upgrading across Australia, particularly for bridges off the national highway, with an emphasis on routes which will foster regional development. That is in addition to the $30 million or so that we have already made available for bridges on the national highway. One criterion for considering applications is whether
or not state and local governments will put money in as well, which gives us the opportunity to extend the money a lot further.

This worthwhile reform will certainly benefit rural and regional Australia and deliver real benefits to the overall economy. But guess who is opposing the rollout of this important reform? The ALP. They are not interested in rolling out more roads; they are more interested in standing in the way of reform. The NSW Labor government will not move to roll out this very important reform. They have consistently held back the potential that can be unleashed from this ongoing issue of transport efficiency in this country. However, I make the point that we are not churlish: the money, the offer, is on the table and we will leave it there. Eventually NSW will have to come to the party.

That same obstructionist approach to reform in transport can be seen in this place. It is worth recalling that in 1991 the ALP, at federal level, gave up on a sensible, strategic approach to road reform in Australia. They got out of funding important regional roads for development, for example. Guess who was the minister for transport at the time? It was the same fellow who cannot cope with reform at the moment—the Leader of the Opposition. Another example of their unwillingness to progress vitally important reforms which are important in a social sense as well was their abandonment of the black spots program. We are putting around $40 million a year into this program. It is being used to eliminate around 400 serious accident spots a year. That investment of $40 million a year is estimated to be saving eight lives a year and around 320 serious crashes. That is a very valuable investment in reform. So there you have it. The ALP, presented with opportunities to support strong reform, walked away from regional development and the role that road development could play in it when the now Leader of the Opposition was the minister for transport. They walked away from black spots. The tiger does not change its spots. They are still opposing reform in NSW of a sort that can produce real benefits for the national economy.

Nursing Homes: Riverside

Ms LIVERMORE (3.13 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, have you seen reports today that the member for Groom believes that unless you act immediately there will be incidents in Queensland similar to those that forced the closure of Riverside Nursing Home? Have you contacted the member to find out which nursing homes he was referring to? How many nursing homes was he referring to, and where are they? What are you doing about them?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—I am sure that the member for Groom, being a good and diligent member for this side of the House, will speak with me about any concerns that he has. I have yet to hear from him.

Medicare: Rural and Regional Australia

Mr SECKER (3.14 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Health and Aged Care. Will the minister inform the House of the government’s initiatives to increase Medicare access for Australians in rural areas? Is the minister aware of any alternative proposals on this issue?

Dr WOOLDRIDGE—I thank the honourable member for his question. When we came to government four years ago there were very limited ways in which people in rural Australia could claim under Medicare. In the last four years we have substantially increased the way that this can be done. Of course, there are the traditional Medicare offices, 100 of which are in rural Australia out of a total of 226 right around the country. We have not closed any offices in rural Australia in four years. But we have introduced other facilities such as telephone claiming; a very popular ‘facsimile machines in pharmacies’ scheme which gives 500 pharmacies around Australia the mechanism whereby people can go in and submit Medicare claims to the Health Insurance Commission; two-way agency agreements between private health funds and the Health Insurance Commission, because there are some rural centres that have private health fund offices but not Medicare offices; and of course our rural transaction centres.
In addition to these, we have undergone pilot programs of touch-screen kiosks in the Northern Territory and Victoria. These are presently being evaluated, and we believe they will be highly successful and highly acceptable. We have undergone a pilot of electronic lodgment of Medicare claims directly from the doctor’s surgery. This trial has been quite successful, and the research by the Health Insurance Commission shows it is highly acceptable to the public. We hope to roll this out further so that by July this year doctors who have compatible computer software will be able to be on line, and doctors without compatible computer software will be able to offer this service by the end of the year. So there are six different ways that people can claim from Medicare. The most significant and extensive of these are the 500 pharmacy claiming agencies.

I was interested to note, some weeks ago, that the Leader of the Opposition did actually mention the ‘H’ word—health—in a doorstep in Launceston when he was announcing his new policy of post offices for government services. Unfortunately, a journalist got in the way. They do have a habit of asking difficult questions. I will quote from the transcript: ‘Journalist: Mr Beazley, Australia Post already offers banking and Telstra. What other services do you envisage?’ I will not read out the answer; it is 11 lines of absolutely nothing. Then the journalist asked the drop-dead question: ‘But what sort of services?’ ‘Well, it could be services related to health.’ This is wonderful, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition spends all morning with his shadow cabinet discussing these services and, when asked what they will do, the first thing off the top of his mind is health. Clearly he has no understanding that the fact is that every doctor in Australia will be able to be a Medicare claiming point by the end of the year, and that the 500 pharmacies that already enable claims under Medicare will, each and every one of them, have those facilities threatened if Medicare claiming facilities are put in post offices. It is also curious that he should choose post offices, given that Labor closed 277 postal outlets in rural Australia between 1989 and 1995. This is an example of policy on the run, and it is an example of the Leader of the Opposition and an opposition that clearly do not understand what is going on in health.

Nursing Homes: Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency

Mr McMULLAN (3.18 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, what arrangements have you made to ensure that you receive regular reports from the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency concerning serious risks to residents of nursing homes? What action do you take to ensure that the agency acts promptly on those reports? What follow-up procedures do you have in place to satisfy yourself that effective action has been taken with regard to these reports of serious risk?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—I thought it would have been apparent to the member asking the question that I had a report from the agency today. There is indeed a reporting mechanism whereby there is a regular transmission of where the various investigations are at.

I would like, Mr Speaker, if I could, to add to an answer I gave earlier. It concerns the release of the information relating to the—

Mr SPEAKER—I interrupt the minister briefly to point out that it is normal to add to answers at the end of question time. If the answer is relevant to the question asked by the Manager of Opposition Business, I will allow it to proceed; otherwise I will give her the opportunity at the end of question time as is the practice.

Work for the Dole: Possible Roll-Back

Mr HARDGRAVE (3.20 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment Services. Would the minister provide the House with details of any threats which may roll back the ongoing success of the Work for the Dole program?

Mr ABBOTT—Mr Speaker, I have been asked about the ongoing achievements of Work for the Dole, which of course is one of the signature programs and significant successes of the Howard government. So far 57,000 young Australians have participated, over 1,500 projects have commenced and 34 per cent of participants have gone into paid employment, and this compares very favourably with achievements from the former
government’s Working Nation policy. Over 80 per cent of participants in Work for the Dole report that their involvement in the project has increased their determination to find work. But I have been asked about threats to this program.

Unfortunately, a handful of unions have been trying their best to sabotage Work for the Dole projects. Last year the head office of the Australian Workers Union vetoed five projects in New South Wales national parks that would have provided work experience to more than 500 young Australians. In the past few weeks, the Commonwealth Public Sector Union has tried to sabotage the chances of 150 young Australians to gain work skills in gardening, office administration and librarianship through projects in Perth schools. The Australian Education Union has also tried to sabotage similar Work for the Dole projects in Canberra schools for 40 participants. I call on the parliamentary representatives of the CPSU, the Labor members for Lalor, Capricornia, Bass, Jagajaga, Lowe and Sydney, to follow the lead of their distinguished colleague the member for Batman, who was not a bad employment spokesman in the end, in urging community organisations to work with this great program.

On the subject of threats, between 1992 and 1996 Brisbane City Council placed 3,000 participants in various labour market programs and received nearly $30 million in federal funds for doing so. But the number of Work for the Dole places filled by that council is not 3,000, not 2,000, not 1,000, but zero, even though 30 other Queensland councils, many of them Labor controlled, have participated, even though the council has been approached by a number of great Australian charities to get involved, and even though my friend and colleague the member for Moreton has received no fewer than 330 letters of support for Work for the Dole from his electorate alone. Why is Jim Soorley trying to deny young Queenslanders this chance to show their mettle? The greatest threat of all to this program comes from members opposite who have been frogmarched by their union paymasters into opposing Work for the Dole.

Where does the member for Dickson stand on this? Is she as confused about Work for the Dole as she is about whether the document she recently launched is a policy or a mere forecast? Is she as confused about Work for the Dole as she is about whether she wants to be shadow employment minister at all? When she was the leader of the Democrats, she called Work for the Dole ‘disgraceful, divisive politics from the Prime Minister’. Presumably she was just posturing then, because she ultimately passed the thing. But where does she stand now? If a policy is too much to ask, an updated opinion will do. And, if she says that it needs accredited training, she has got to tell us where the money is going to come from because, without that, we have to assume that if Labor ever get into government it will be goodbye to GST roll-back and goodbye to the prospect of tax cuts for ordinary Australians.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

Mr SPEAKER—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon the Hon. David Pickering, deputy leader of the Fijian opposition, together with members of the parliament of Fiji. On behalf of the House, I extend a very warm welcome to our visitors.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Nursing Homes: Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency

Mr BEAZLEY (3.26 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care and follows the answer she gave to a previous question from this side of the House. Does your answer mean that all the reports from your agency related to Riverside and all the other problem nursing homes arrived on your desk regularly, with updates as to the implementation of any recommended action?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—It means that I receive update reports of the present state at the date of the report from the standards and accreditation agency which, I might remind you, is an independent agency.

Regional Forest Agreements: Victoria

Mr RONALDSON (3.26 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for For-
stry and Conservation. Would the minister inform the House of progress being made with the remaining two Victorian regional forest agreements covering Gippsland and West Victoria, which include my electorate of Ballarat and the electorates of Corangamite and Wannon. What measures will be taken to ensure that jobs in these areas will be protected and what support is the forest industry receiving in these regions?

Mr TUCKEY—I thank the member for Ballarat for his question and the significant support he and the member for Corangamite, the Minister for the Arts and the Centenary of Federation, and the member for Wannon have provided me in addressing some serious problems relative to the remaining two regional forest agreements in Victoria. Unfortunately, if the literal interpretation of the assessment that has been produced by way of a discussion paper was applied, there would be serious industry cutbacks, due to a reduced sawlog resource, and substantial job losses, estimated by some in the hundreds. Such a discussion paper is put out for that purpose. At the request of the members I have just mentioned and with their assistance, I have been able to get into discussion with people who work within it and process its products—to try and find solutions within a sustainable management environment. I am encouraged by a number of suggestions that would save jobs and I have been able to have officers of my department inspect areas of the forest where we think assistance could arise. In that regard, although I will continue to make our point of view known, I have been disappointed by correspondence recently from the state government of Victoria, recently elected by votes from these regions, implying to me that they would want $5 million for the purpose of making workers redundant. We would treat that issue extremely seriously. It is one for which we are very hopeful that we can find solutions. Our policy is to use the funds available in the Commonwealth budget to create work opportunities and find solutions. The last thing we need is a state government already coming to the conclusion that jobs are to be lost. Yesterday I really did give an opportunity to the members representing local Labor electorates to assist me in this task. Of course, they did not stay around very long to do that, and I inform the House that, 24 hours later, I still have nothing from the member for McMillan that would contribute to a process of finding solutions. I mean, he is the local member, and one would think that he could bring some local knowledge. It might be that he is waiting for me to make another visit to his electorate in order to communicate with me. I just hope that, in any public meeting, he does it loudly enough so that I can stop telling people he is not my grandson along for the ride—because he sticks to me like glue as though he were going to get lost.

All members have a responsibility in this regard. The member for Paterson stood up on a point of order here yesterday and said that he had actually put a question on notice to me that was evidence of his concern. The question on notice was all about New South Wales state legislation, and I do not know what that has to do with it. But, coming back to Victoria, whilst I have not received any communication from Labor members—state or federal—I have received communications from the CFMEU, who say that unions warn, ‘No forest reserves if jobs lost.’ I quote their spokesman, Mr O’Connor: ‘We are not having new national parks in Victoria being paid for by the jobs of blue-collar workers in the bush and struggling rural communities.’ One would have thought that to be the first ultimatum I would have received from the member for McMillan. But Mr O’Connor has lost confidence in the Labor Party. In another release entitled ‘CFMEU slams Beazley’, he says: ‘Beazley has torn up national ALP policy and has deceived workers, their families and communities in regional Australia and he signals that the federal ALP are out to get timber workers.’ Going by their lack of activity, that allegation appears to be true. It is significant of the party. When it comes to people’s right to work, what do you stand for? Why don’t you just chuckle about it? I want to know what you stand for. But the fundamental issues are that the government is getting on with finding solutions to protect those workers’ jobs. The members for Ballarat, Corangamite, Wannon and Gippsland
are all out there knocking on my door saying, ‘Have you thought of this? Have you thought of that? Let’s find a solution within the policy.’ But not one word from the Labor Party. They do not care about jobs.

Nursing Homes: Dangerous Drugs

Ms MACklin (3.33 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Aged Care. Minister, bearing in mind the answer to your last question, is it not a fact that a report detailing numerous instances of dangerous drugs being improperly administered in facilities was tabled in a Senate estimates committee on 1 December last year and that the senator tabling this report directed that a copy be given to you? Can you confirm that this report was also the subject of an article published on 2 December last year in the *Daily Telegraph*? Can you explain why you remained unaware of this report detailing systematic failings in your aged care system until it was raised on the *7.30 Report* on 25 February? Minister, why have you been asleep at the wheel?

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—I will deal firstly with the Fuller report. My department does have a copy of that report, but unfortunately the report does not make any reference to any aged care service. When the matter was raised with me on the *7.30 Report*, and Ms Fuller was on that television program, I said I would like to meet with her and discuss it. I did precisely that. I found her and we spent several hours together on the Sunday. I put her in touch with my department. In the meantime, the department had been working on the report, but I would point out to you that Ms Fuller had also sent approximately five copies of her report, which do not specify which facilities were involved, to New South Wales Health, which has the responsibility for dealing with medications. I would simply refer you to schedule 1 of the principles, where it is set out quite specifically that all facilities must comply with state and federal legislation as it pertains to medication and drugs.

Having put Ms Fuller together with people in my department, we are working to see if there can be better coordination of responsibilities between state and federal governments because it seems quite plain that there is not the necessary coordination going on. Indeed, I have written to Minister Craig Knowles in the New South Wales government and asked him to tell me what action he takes to monitor his legislation and what legislation underpins it, so that coordination can happen. Unless the Leader of the Opposition has any misunderstanding—

Mr Mcmullan—What did you do? You did nothing!

Mr Speaker—Manager of Opposition Business!

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—of the nature of the reports that are made to me, they are in summary form and look a trifle like that.

Mr Beazley—Mr Speaker, I ask that the report waved around by the minister just then, with no confidential mark on it whatsoever, be tabled.

Mr Speaker—the minister did not, in fact, read from that. Before I recognise the Leader of the Opposition, I ask the Minister for Aged Care: is she prepared to table the document to which the leader refers?

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—No, the document is marked ‘confidential’.

Workplace Relations: Employment Conditions

Mr Billson (3.37 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Minister, you would be aware that unions in Victoria are agitating for a 36-hour week and a 24 per cent increase in pay. Would you inform the House of the government’s position on this push and the impact these claims are having on the Victorian economy? What positions in relation to the claim have various other parties adopted?

Mr Reith—The member for Dunkley’s question raises a matter of real concern to a lot of Victorians—in fact, most Victorians—brought home sharply by recent developments, where we saw power restrictions in the state as a result of industrial action. Sadly in Victoria we are now seeing in action what happens when you get a Labor Party elected, particularly a Labor Party with a weak leader in the new Premier, Steve Bracks. In respect of the building industry, for example, in Sydney under the federal law the building
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under the federal law the building union settled up at 15 per cent over three years. But in Victoria, because Mr Bracks is a weak leader, a pushover and a roll-back leader of the sort we now have federally, they think they can get not 15 per cent but 24 per cent and work less for it with a 36-hour week claim.

Even as late as this morning on 3AW radio in Melbourne, when he was asked about the 36-hour week, all Mr Bracks could say was, ‘I am urging compromise.’ We urge on Mr Bracks a bit of leadership to stand up and say to these unions that this is unaffordable for the state of Victoria. In the state of Victoria in the last few weeks we have already seen the effects of weak leadership with the cancellation by Mirvac of a $1 billion project, which has cost a lot of investment and jobs already. You can imagine, Mr Speaker, that if ever we had the same weak leadership in the federal government, investment and jobs would be driven out of this country at a record rate.

For example, on another issue, there is the ACTU’s claim currently before the Industrial Relations Commission. A couple of years ago the shadow minister thought the safety net review case was a matter of such importance that he actually turned up on behalf of the Labor Party and presented a point of view. This year, when asked what is Labor’s position on the 24 per cent, they do not have a position. Why don’t they have a position? It is because the Leader of the Opposition does not have what it takes to stand up to some of these union leaders—to stand up for the workers and for a system that will keep inflation and interest rates at a reasonable level.

Mr Beazley—We stand up for the workers. These people get less money than you get in your expenses.

Mr REITH—The ACTU, in Greg Combet’s document, which he put out when he became the ACTU secretary, said, ‘One of the proudest boasts of this country in recent years has been the improvement in real wages for people on low incomes.’

Mr Howard—Since 1996.

Mr REITH—It has been since 1996 as a result of our reforms. When you have weak leadership, you have record unemployment, declining real wages and the sort of roll-back, roll-over policy that we have from this man. In the end, the people who pay for this are the people who are unemployed and the small businesses that make this economy as good as it is.

Mr Howard—Mr Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the Notice Paper.

QUESTIONS TO MR SPEAKER

Questions on Notice

Mr RIPOLL (3.42 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, could I ask you to write to the Treasurer and ask him to give some reasons as to why he has not answered my question 1068 on the Notice Paper of Wednesday, 24 November?

Mr SPEAKER—I will follow this matter up with the Treasurer under the provisions of standing order 150.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Nursing Homes: Riverside

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar—Minister for Aged Care) (3.43 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, my additional information relates to the release of the report relating to the Riverside home. My advice is that, under the legislation, the agency is prevented from re-
leasing the report for 28 days. However, in this case the delegate has released the report. It cannot be provided by the agency, but it can be by the delegate of the secretary. This is confirmed by the legal advice from our legal branch.

**PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS**

Mr O’KEEFE (Burke) (3.43 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

Mr SPEAKER—Does the honourable member claim to have been misrepresented?

Mr O’KEEFE—Yes.

Mr SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr O’KEEFE—Mr Speaker, during question time the Minister for Forestry and Conservation stated that he had not received representations from any Victorian Labor MPs on forest matters relating to Victoria. I am just making the point that, in respect of my own forest area in my own electorate, he has received several representations from me and I hope he will, at some point, be gracious enough to acknowledge that.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (3.44 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

Mr SPEAKER—Does the honourable member claim to have been misrepresented?

Mr ALBANESE—Yes.

Mr SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr ALBANESE—During question time today the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs claimed that I supported unlimited numbers of refugees being permitted to arrive in Australia illegally. What I oppose is disadvantaging those applicants who have applied offshore in an orderly and legal fashion, contrary to the minister’s rhetoric, particularly given that only 4,635 offshore visas and 4,500 onshore visas have been issued by February, and these programs have distinct purposes.

Mr SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler may not enter into a debate. As he knows, he must indicate where he is misrepresented but he may not debate the issue.

Mr ZAHRA (McMillan) (3.45 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, I seek leave to make a personal explanation.

Mr Melham—He is not related to the minister!

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—The House will come to order. I appreciate that the exchange has been principally good-natured. Does the member for McMillan claim to have been misrepresented?

Mr ZAHRA—Grievously, Mr Speaker. The Minister for Forestry and Conservation in his remarks in question time today suggested that people had thought that I was his grandson. To the best of my knowledge, it is genetically impossible for me or anyone else in this House to be related to the minister or any other member of his species.

Mr SPEAKER—The member for McMillan will resume his seat. He knows that that is not a valid personal explanation.

**PAPERS**

Mr Reith—Papers are tabled as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the papers will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings.

Motion (by Mr Reith) proposed:

That the House take note of the following paper:


Debate (on motion by Mr McMullan) adjourned.

**MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE**

Nursing Homes: Quality of Care

Mr SPEAKER—I have received a letter from the honorable member for Lilley proposing that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion, namely:

The failure of the Minister for Aged Care to ensure that nursing homes provide quality care for all elderly Australians.
I call upon those members who approve of the proposed discussion to rise in their places.

More than the number of members required by the standing orders having risen in their places—

Mr SWAN (Lilley) (3.47 p.m.)—In the House today the Minister for Aged Care not only demonstrated that she is incompetent; the thing that she demonstrated for the first time today from her own mouth is that she is grossly negligent. She admitted today—

Mr Reith—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. I understood that this was a matter of public importance. If they want to move a censure motion, let them move it. There are forms of the House. But if he wants to make those sorts of claims he should put them in a substantive motion.

Mr SPEAKER—The Leader of the House makes a point about the standard of language in debate. I do not know that what the member for Lilley had uttered was of itself censure material, but I do ask him to exercise some more restraint.

Mr SWAN—There could be no more important task for an opposition than to make the government accountable for the care of the elderly and the most vulnerable in our community. Today in this House the minister walked in and said, ‘I get regular reports about what is going on at Riverside and Alchera Park and the 29-plus other nursing homes in this country where people are getting Third World treatment.’ So it is very important that this opposition keeps this minister accountable for what has not been going on. We know there have been 4,000 complaints—4,000 complaints, Minister—through 1998 and 1999, and not one spot check until the story about kerosene baths at Riverside was blown in the media. Then suddenly in over 24 months we get the first spot check. What we get here is a very great insight into the approach of the Howard-Bishop government: the Howard-Bishop government when it comes to regulation: the Howard-Bishop government does not believe in it. The minister’s policy when it comes to spot checks would be the equivalent of the police commissioner announcing tomorrow that breathalysers will only be placed on a stretch of road if a newspaper writes about it. If a newspaper writes about speeding traffic on a road or drunk drivers, there will be a spot breathalyser out there; but when it comes to the care of our elderly, not one spot check. There have been 4,000 complaints and the first spot check comes in Riverside some time after—in fact, many days after—complaints have surfaced in the minister’s office, and months and months after the first report on Riverside was done.

This is all pretty sad, because we have just had the International Year of the Older Person. We had the TV ads. They are still running because the minister could not get them to air last year. They only went to air at Christmas, because she is so incompetent. They are still running. What do they say? That the Australian people and this government value older Australians. Simultaneously on the news when those ads are running we have got children and grandchildren watching shocked and disbelieving as they see the pictures of elderly residents and their families at the Riverside home—a truly shocking and sickening experience for Australians. What is the source of all this distress? Of course, it is the funding cuts of the Howard-Bishop government and it is the deregulation of aged care by the Howard-Bishop government. That is the grim reality of the Howard-Bishop social coalition.

For many Australians, retirement was always meant to be a reward, but what it has become for some Australians is a nightmare—not for all elderly Australians in nursing home care but for those Australians in nursing home care where there are unscrupulous providers or incompetent providers. There is no regulatory framework in place to catch them out when people are not being treated properly. That is an indictment of the government. It is the logical conclusion of all of the government’s policies over the last four or five years: the removal of capital funding from nursing homes, the requirement of older Australians to sell their home just to get the basic equivalent of health care, and the final indignity of the Riverside incident. What that demonstrates is that all those quality controls that protect the elderly, that give them dignity in their old age, have simply
been ripped away. That is what we see. But
what is below the surface? We know there are
at least 29 other homes, Minister. How many
of those have you received reports on? There
are something like 3,000 nursing homes in
Australia. How many more reports have
passed your desk?

What we know from Riverside is, even if
they have been on your desk, you have not
taken any notice because they have not come
to light in the media. When Riverside was
brought to your attention, you took 49 days
to actually go down there, culminating in the
events of yesterday. The first report that you
would have received about Riverside goes
back to July last year.

Minister, you have been in power in this
portfolio for 297 days and two-thirds of the
time that you have been minister and respon-
sible for aged care, you have been sitting on
the problems at Riverside because they were
brought to your attention in July last year—
that is what you admitted today. So for two-
thirds of the time that you have been minister
you have been aware of what is going on at
Riverside. It has taken 50 days for what has
been occurring at Riverside to culminate in
the events of yesterday. But the truth is, if
you had been attentive to your task, if you
had been caring for the needs of those older
people, if you had read those reports in July,
if there had been some action from
you, there would have been no need for peo-
ple to be removed from Riverside, none
whatsoever.

Therefore, you have been grossly negli-
gent in your approach because you simply
ignored those reports. You were more con-
cerned with playing the A list. How fre-
quently do you see pictures of the minister in
the social pages, in Sydney or Melbourne, at
the opera? How frequently do you see pic-
tures of her in nursing homes and how often
did she visit Riverside? One of the com-
plaints at Riverside is that the minister has
not been anywhere near that facility. That is
what people really resent. They resent being
used by you in some political game to defend
yourself against the charge that you have
been not only incompetent but also com-
pletely negligent.

When you came into this House on 31
August last year, you said to everyone that
there were regular spot checks. Yesterday we
had the farce of question after question where
the word ‘zero’ could not pass your lips. We
kept asking you in a variety of different
ways: how many spot checks have taken
place across the 3,000 nursing homes in this
country? Given that you had said you be-
lieved in them, given that you had said that
they were a worthy tool, given that you
boasted about how tough your regulatory
framework was, we asked you: how many
spot checks have there been? The word ‘zero’
could not pass your lips and that is what con-
demns you to the charge of incompetence.

What condemns you to the charge of neg-
ligence is that you have now told us today
that you were reading the reports and still
you did not have the spot checks in place.
That is a very serious dereliction of duties for
which you should resign. But, given that you
are such an integral part of the Howard-
Bishop government, we will not be holding
our breath. We will not be waiting for that,
but sooner or later the elderly citizens of this
country and their relatives and friends will
demand your resignation, and it will surely
come. If the reward that people who are liv-
ing in some of these facilities get for a life-
time of hard work for this country is a shower
every three days or a kerosene bath, then we
have really come to the depths of despair
when it comes to social policy and John
Howard’s social coalition.

It is simply not good enough for you to say
that there does not need to be a regulatory
framework. It is simply not good enough for
you to ignore the evidence which has been
presented to you not only privately but pub-
licly. I would like to quote briefly from the
Elite Care report which you talked about in
question time today—the one you forgot
about, which was given to you some months
ago. This is what the Elite Care report says:

Short cuts to save money for proprietors, with
no regard for safety of the public, or the law. The
ever increasing trend to cut Registered Nurses out
of Geriatrics in favour of unqualified people off
the street, yet charging the Government, through
the RCS, for ‘Nursing Hours’ and ‘Nursing Work’
... The problem with the ever increasing number of
'Retirement Villages' and 'Hostels' with no
Registered Nurse in the management seat and worse still not even one on the site, is fast becoming a legal issue. The use of any person off the street, with no Nursing or Medical background, to manage and supervise these establishments, is common.

Minister, that evidence is typical of what any member of parliament in this House could tell you from simply moving around the facilities in their electorates. Everyone who has a nursing home in their electorate is aware that many of the providers—who are as generous as they can possibly be, who work as hard as they can possibly work, who have staff who work their fingers to the bone, who have volunteers who make up the difference—know that it is getting harder and harder to provide the quality of care and they sheet that back to funding, as indeed do the members of your own backbench.

When the 24 Liberal and National Party members from Queensland in the last parliament came into this House and voted for your aged care proposals, the proposals of the previous minister, they put their own political futures first and the elderly of Australia last. If members behind you are serious in some of the public statements they are making, they will come into this parliament and join us on this side of the House in supporting this motion. If the member for Groom is serious that what is occurring at Riverside is in fact occurring at institutions or facilities within his electorate, he will put the elderly of Groom first and come and join us on this side in this motion.

What is occurring with the deregulation of the nursing home industry, the cuts to capital fundings and the arrangements for the sale of the family homes basically means that those in the Liberal and National parties are quite prepared to put the elderly last and their political futures first. And that is something that is going to be explained to people right across this country in the next 18 months, because we desperately need some form of accountability to keep this government honest. Accountability is really only going to come at the next election. We are firmly committed to a regulatory framework which ensures that there is accountability and that the standard of care is provided. Everybody in the industry knows that when you changed the regulatory framework there was no longer any necessity to spend the moneys that were given on the care of the residents. All of that was simply abolished. So we now get to this ridiculous position where you have nursing homes of 60-odd people and possibly one registered nurse in the facility. The Nurses Federation has been talking about it; parents, children, grandchildren of the people in facilities around this country have been talking about it. You have put in place a system of regulation which basically means a problem cannot be exposed unless it turns up in the media. That is the reason why we are not having any spot checks. We are not having any spot checks because it would show the failure of the complete aged care system put together by the Howard-Bishop government over the last four-and-a-bit years.

When the Prime Minister gave his interviews on the weekend, talking about the glorious achievements of the Howard-Anderson-Bishop government, aged care was not mentioned, and we can certainly see why. With aged care, you get a spotlight on something that has occurred in a whole variety of areas in social policy. What has occurred in child care is occurring in aged care—funding cuts. It is occurring across the social security system—the wholesale withdrawal of government from the process, leaving it to the market. What happens is that the most vulnerable in the community suffer as a result of that withdrawal. We need a minister in this government who is committed to a form of regulation which protects the quality of care for the most vulnerable elderly Australians, not one that simply wants to design a system so that the faults cannot be seen by the community. You should be condemned and resign. (Time expired)

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)—Before I call the next speaker in this discussion, I want to say to the member for Lilley that I deliberately did not interrupt him but he was out of order for almost the complete duration of his speech. ‘You’ is a four-letter word and you must address people through the chair. I bring that to the attention of all members.
Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar—Minister for Aged Care) (4.02 p.m.)—One of the most worrying aspects of the debate and the way that the Labor Party have conducted it is the fact that many providers have found that their good names are being besmirched. It is really quite distressing to talk with people who work in good aged care providers and who give excellent care—many of whom are already accredited under the new system. They are caught up in the Labor Party’s political tirade. I want to start by saying that the need for reform was absolutely paramount.

Fran Bailey interjecting

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—My colleague behind me mentioned the Gregory report, which was commissioned by the Labor Party to deal with the need for capital funding for residential aged care. They did absolutely nothing about it. The policy of accommodation charges that was introduced by the Prime Minister will produce $1.4 billion over 10 years, and the success of this program is evidenced by the fact that there is about $800 million worth of new building going on in the industry. The pressure that we have been able to bring to bear through the reforms in certification means that buildings must meet a standard. It means that they must, under a standard that I brought in, meet a compulsory compliance with fire standards, for instance, and they have a stiff test in order to be certified. If they are not certified, they can have neither accommodation bonds of the hostel variety, which were introduced by the Labor Party, nor accommodation charges for high-level care, nor concessional payments.

The thing that is important to point out here is that at the time we took over, after 13 years under Labor, 75 per cent of homes did not meet Australian design standards, 38 per cent of residents shared their bedroom with four or more people, 13 per cent of homes did not meet fire regulations and 11 per cent of homes did not meet health regulations. As I have already said, you did not bother to follow the Gregory report and, furthermore, because of your cuts in funding, you left the system 10,000 places short when we took over. One of the things we have done to rectify this situation is, first and foremost, to honour the formula of having 100 places available for every population of a thousand people over the age of 70. By next year, we will have passed that target of 100 places. More particularly, we have provided money for capital. I have a particular concern for rural and regional Australia as well, and the result of that was that in the last round, when in excess of 7,000 places were released, 40 per cent of those places went to rural and regional Australia. That is despite the fact that the population that meets that demographic is 30 per cent. In other words, we are catching up.

With regard to capital funding, 68 per cent of that funding for capital went into rural and regional Australia. In other words, at every turn we are trying to catch up in those areas which were so badly neglected by Labor. When we began to reform the certification system, there were 300 homes which were uncertified. We now have only two per cent. In other words, 98 per cent of the 3,000-odd places are now certified. The accreditation system is on its rollout. I was only able to get the accreditation principles through the Senate in September of last year with the help of the Democrats because the Labor Party opposed them. Their shadow spokesman, Senator Evans, in an interview during the week belatedly admitted that accreditation was okay, so they are apparently not going to roll it back. They are going to keep it. Unlike their tax policy, they are not going to roll back accreditation. But what are they going to roll back?

Opposition members interjecting—

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—I heard an interjection about spot checks from the member over there. I bothered to take a little bit of a look at the history under the previous Labor administration because they have purported to the Australian people that spot checks were a major part of their policy. In 10 years, there were hardly any spot checks in the Northern Territory, 100 in South Australia and 50 in the ACT. I have been the Minister for Aged Care for 16 months, and we have had six to date. But, more importantly than that, we have had 1,250 visits by the Aged
Care Standards and Accreditation Agency, including 827 support visits. We have had 1,500 visits by the monitoring team to conduct their review of the residential classification scheme. They have made 14,000 checks on whether or not money is being spent on residents properly.

We have seen a situation where we have 345 site visits for accreditation and we have another 515 ready to go. In other words, this obsession with spot checks, which is a mechanism to give access to a facility when there is something dire that has to be investigated, has been blown way out of proportion. If you look at that series of questions that I answered back in August, it was entirely in context. I said that it was a tool that the agency could use when they determined it was necessary. They determined it was necessary all right. They determined it was necessary when I had it referred to them at 1.00 a.m. on 16 February and they were there at 9 o’clock in the morning. They were there again on a spot visit for their second inspection to make the report from which the decision has finally been made to withdraw funding and to withdraw the bed licences of the Riverside home.

Again I go back to the record of the Labor Party. When we took over the old scheme—the one that was administered and put in place by the Labor Party—there were 44 homes of concern that were handed over to the agency to deal with.

Mr Entsch—What was their minister doing?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Let me tell you who the ministers were.

Mr Entsch—who were the ministers?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—We had Peter Staples, we had Brian Howe and—wait for it—we had Carmen Lawrence, but she forgot how many spot checks she ever did. The report that I have from the standards and accreditation agency shows that we have seven homes at serious risk. We have an additional number of homes—nowhere near 44—which are under constant surveillance by the standards and accreditation agency. They keep me up to date on the fact that these are the ones that are under surveillance. They post on the Internet the reports of review audits, which they are compelled to do under the legislation. The review audit that was complained about by the member for Barton here today—the one that was released under the authority of the secretary under the power of the legislation—was released for the simple reason that people needed to be informed so that some of their fears could be allayed.

One of the things that certainly did concern me a great deal was that there was a need for my department to deal with a Victorian department to arrange for ambulances to evacuate residents from Riverside whose lives were at risk. What did they do?

Mr Lieberman—The state department.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—The state department of Bronwyn Pike. Her department went out and briefed the Herald Sun and had a page 1 story which said that they had planned the alternative accommodation for these residents, which they had not, and that they were involved in the planning of the evacuation, which they were not, with the exception of the provision of ambulances. It concerned the residents greatly because, at that stage, the delegate had made no decision. The department was simply engaged in putting contingency plans in place, as was perfectly proper and as legal advice to the department confirmed. At all times we had to act in accordance with our legal advice so that we did not in any way impugn the proper exercise of power by the delegate under the legislation. Of these homes that are still of concern, the serious risk homes are all under surveillance. With respect to one particular one, a notice was given to the proprietor on 14 February. He had 14 days, but did put in place a satisfactory plan on the action he was going to take. But the agency continues to monitor it.

During the time that we have been able to use the pressure of the new reforms, we have actually been able to achieve 35 substandard homes leaving the industry because they knew they could never meet our standards. I said today that when I gave that answer back in August I had made one mistake. I said that the Labor Party had closed four homes. Wrong. They had used the power to withdraw licences and withdraw funding with respect
to one home. When did they do that? In 1991—and the person who was subsequently found to have acted fraudulently was convicted only last year. For all the hue and cry and hubris that is coming from the Labor Party, there is not one jot of concern for these individual residents whose lives were placed at risk. It is a political game.

Mr Wilkie—Rubbish!
Mr Slipper—It’s a stunt.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—It is an absolute stunt. The way in which the pathetic reply comes really does give great cause to wonder whether or not they are even entitled to represent Her Majesty’s opposition.

Let me tell you that the Riverside Nursing Home has form that goes back to 1988. In 1988 the first standards monitoring took place, and it achieved a respectable score. On 30 March 1992 there was an announced full visit, and it was found that urgent action was required on the following standards: health care; continence; infection control; restraint; nutrition and hydration; mobility and dexterity; sensory losses; comments and complaints; home-like; private property; variety of activities; and security.

Mr Entsch—When was that?
Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—That was in 1992. I wonder who was the minister then!
Mr Slipper—What did Labor do?

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—They did not do anything but the department worked with them. There was a slight improvement in April 1992. In 1993 urgent action was required again. It was identified as a home of concern on 29 March 1993. It was declared a home of concern on 13 December 1993 and it stayed that way until 3 September 1996. In other words, all through those periods what did Labor do about it? Absolutely nothing.

When we came to office in May 1998 that home in fact went into liquidation for the first time. On 13 August 1998, the 44 homes of concern that formed the department’s list were transferred to the agency. In September 1998 the agency undertook a support visit to the facility. The agency was verbally advised that there were risks identified with the facility, and the agency decided to undertake a full assessment. On 13, 14 and 15 April 1999, the agency undertook assessment visits to the facility and prepared a draft report in relation to the facility. The agency advised that the facility was given the opportunity to validate the issues identified. On 25 May 1999, the department made a second referral to the agency following a number of complaints. In July 1999 the agency made a further assessment visit. After this was done, a full report was published. On 26 and 27 October 1999, the agency undertook a partial assessment. A report was prepared on 3 November 1999. It did not identify any serious risks at the facility.

In other words, by the end of 1999, the home had pulled up its socks again, as it had been doing since 1988. The complaint with regard to the bathing in kerosene then occurred. That bathing incident culminated in my finding out about it on 15 February and taking swift and effective action. We have now taken action to close that home down, withdrawing its licence and funding and taking care of those residents. (Time expired)

Mr WILTON (Isaacs) (4.17 p.m.)—Is it any wonder that those opposite are scurrying from the chamber, embarrassed by what was an unconvincing performance by a minister in her death throes. The indignity and pain suffered by the 60 frail and aged residents of the Riverside Nursing Home in my electorate of Isaacs has been exacerbated by Minister Bishop’s incompetence, her lack of understanding and compassion and, in particular, her abject failure to accept a modicum of responsibility for this disgraceful episode. The minister clutches at straws as she drowns in a sea of kerosene. Believe me—no one on this side of the House is about to extend a hand to help her.

The minister was reported this morning on ABC radio as having no friends on that side of the House, and indeed by a government spokesperson as having more friends on this side of the House. Believe me—she has no friends on either side of the House, and no one will extend a hand to help her out of that bath of kerosene in which she is drowning. This is because she is incapable of basically doing what is right. She is incapable of accepting responsibility for her own actions, or
indeed the lack of them. As Michael Gordon said in today’s Age, ‘This is a minister in denial. She has blamed everybody but herself.’ She has blamed her own department, she has blamed the failure of the government’s regulations, she has blamed the state government in Victoria and she has blamed the former federal government. The minister has blamed everybody but herself, and she stands condemned for it.

To date, clearly, the minister has failed on several occasions to respond to a number of key questions which are at the nub of her future in this place. The questions go to these issues: why didn’t the minister order spot checks at Riverside Nursing Home in the electorate of Isaacs when a report on the home in May 1998 found that it had failed to meet 26 out of 29 care standards? Why did she state to parliament on two occasions last 31 August that spot checks of nursing homes had been undertaken when they had not? On 17 January this year, the minister’s department was informed of the kerosene baths incident. The minister claims she was not told then but she will not say why, only yet again blaming her department. How could the minister possibly have been on a personal mission to search for a suitable nursing home for her own father, noticing the parlous state of several of them, yet fail to implement proper monitoring standards to ensure that those problems were not endemic across the nation? Finally, why have the residents of Riverside Nursing Home and their loved ones been put to the indignity and trauma of evacuation without ever being told of the future of the nursing home?

The minister’s complete failure to answer these questions is the key reason why her political fate dangles by a diminishing thread. She has continued to demonstrate an absolute inability and refusal to answer questions relating to spot checks that were undertaken after a report by her Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency on Riverside in July 1999 found that it had problems with both infection control and administration of medication. Despite standing in the House, as I say, on two occasions on 31 August last year, claiming that spot checks were happening, the fact is that no spot checks have occurred to ensure that any such advance warning mechanism to avert this terrible tragedy was ever put in place.

We all know now that, since 1998, there have been in excess of 4,000 complaints received and that not one spot check has been undertaken. This minister is asleep at the wheel. She is driving a model T Ford and it is out of control. The minister has no feel nor compassion for aged people whatsoever. She only has a feel for her own backside and the huge task it takes to protect it. As I put to the minister during question time yesterday, she did not choose to announce on 24 February the sanctions against Riverside until such time as she was aware that matters would appear in the newspapers the next day. To further highlight the absolute levels of incompetence which she demonstrates time and time again, the provider was not informed of this tragic incident for nearly three weeks. We all know that this sordid and sorry saga would not have occurred had this minister put in place the appropriate monitoring standards.

This minister is more concerned about adverse media attention than she is about the welfare of residents. It is that same numbing fear of adverse media attention that forced her to act yesterday, before parliament resumed, and submit the frail, aged residents of Riverside Nursing Home and their loved ones to the indignity and trauma of evacuation. The forced relocation of the residents from Riverside to St Vincent’s is simply a half-hearted last minute attempt by the minister—and not all that convincingly, by any means—to be seen to do something. She has certainly done something, all right—nearly a month after she claims the Riverside problems were first drawn to her attention. Unfortunately for the frail and elderly residents, the decisions that she has made have had a fairly grave effect on their spiritual, physical and mental wellbeing. How can we tell how the trauma of being dragged 40 kilometres across Melbourne in a confused state will affect these people in the long term? For most residents, Riverside has been their home for many years. It has been their home away from home. They have formed attachments to the staff, they have developed bonds, and of
course the staff have lost their jobs in this tragedy. Many of the loved ones of residents have actually moved into the area to be closer to them, only to be dragged well and truly away. Now they have got nothing but unfamiliarity—unfamiliar walls, the unfamiliar faces of new staff, and the new routine that they will have to get used to.

And what is going to happen to them after their four weeks at St Vincent’s have expired? Is the department going to uproot them again and relocate them to a different nursing home, or to some other unfamiliar environment, in a convoy of ambulances? People take quite a while to adjust to new surroundings, and two moves in four weeks could prove to be highly detrimental to these aged and frail people. And wasn’t it caring—and a real insight—of the minister to highlight what could only have been the one minor bright point in the evacuees’ day yesterday: when they were offered a piece of fruit upon their arrival at St Vincent’s. No doubt it was a rotten banana, and I am sure that the minister will slip on its peel.

It is none other than the minister who has had responsibility for running Riverside Nursing Home over the past few weeks, and the standard of care has indeed diminished to a level that the minister claims was life-threatening and she had to close it down. It is shameful, as the front page of today’s Herald Sun says. The Herald Sun editorial of today stated:

The litany of alleged maltreatment she released in a statement yesterday is as much an indictment of her performance as minister as it is of the actions of those immediately responsible for the residents’ care. It is unconscionable that Mrs Bishop’s frantic clutching at ad hoc solutions in an attempt to save her own political neck is adding to the anxiety and insecurity of the residents of their families.

Under the Westminster system’s concept of ministerial responsibility, a minister who has demonstrated such comprehensive political incompetence would have gone a long time ago.

Her last attempt, yesterday, to shift the blame—this time on the previous Labor government—was the ultimate in shameless buck-passing. Had the spot checks she promised been operating, the Riverside affair might have been exposed much earlier. The ultimate blame for the debacle will rest with Minister Bishop, and she must put the welfare of the frail and aged ahead of her own political fate.

Minister, all of this begs the question: how many more Riversides are there out there? I suspect there are many, many more, and this opposition will chase you down every burrow to ensure that you apply and monitor decent standards so this will not recur. What you should do is exactly what the Herald Sun editorial of today suggested you should do: put the welfare of the aged and frail in this country above your own political hide. You must accept that responsibility for this tragedy lies with you and that you are incompetent for this post. You have no choice but to resign, and you should resign today.

Dr SOUTHcott (Boothby) (4.27 p.m.)—I have just done a search of Hansard, and I have found that yesterday when the member for Isaacs asked a question in parliament it was the first time the words ‘Riverside Nursing Home’ had ever passed his lips in this chamber. He is the local federal member for the Riverside Nursing Home. We have heard one of the shadow ministers talk about spot checks and what they would have achieved. What I would like to know is: did the local federal Labor member ever visit the Riverside Nursing Home? Did he ever facilitate any complaints from staff, residents or families at Riverside Nursing Home? We have talked about spot checks that would have occurred from the department. What the member for Lilley should ask is: were there any spot checks from the local federal member? I do not think so.

The Age on 3 March noted that concerns about safety at the Riverside Nursing Home first emerged in 1988. In 1992, the department noted that urgent action was required in relation to issues of continence, infection control and health care. Several times during the Labor years it was rated as in need of urgent action. On 29 March 1993, it was cited as a home of concern; it was not declared until 13 December 1993. In January 1994, the department considered revoking the home’s approved provider status. What action was taken under ministers Peter Staples, Brian Howe or the member for Fremantle,
Carmen Lawrence? None. This is a problem that dragged on for years under Labor. What no-one has focused on is that, under accreditation, homes which do not meet the standards will be closed at the end of the year. How many nursing homes were closed in the 13 years of Labor? One.

In 1993 Professor Gregory noted in a survey of the nursing home sector that 75 per cent of nursing homes did not meet Australian design standards; 38 per cent of residents shared a bedroom with four or more people; 13 per cent of nursing homes did not meet fire standards; 11 per cent of nursing homes did not meet health standards. Yet, in the last four years of the Labor government, capital funding for nursing homes was reduced by 75 per cent to a miserly $10 million. By contrast, through the accommodation charges, the coalition government has provided $1.4 billion over a 10-year period for the capital upgrade of nursing homes. We have already heard that there are detailed inspections for accreditation and that there are detailed inspections for the residential classification schedules that are going on—much more detailed than just walking in and having a look around the nursing home. We have already seen the failure of on-spot checks from the member for Isaacs who had no idea, after four years of being the member, that there were any problems at this nursing home.

Is the Labor Party arguing that we should remove delegation and that somehow the minister should be responsible for every clinical decision and for every care plan in nursing homes? No. The minister is taking the same approach which Labor took in government, which is that you have to delegate some powers to the department. I would like to pose another question to the Labor Party in relation to the treatment that was ordered and given by a registered nurse in the state of Victoria. I wonder whether you are going to be asking John Thwaites, the state Minister for Health, questions about the registration of nurses in the state of Victoria. In terms of the coalition government, our record has been recurrent funding for residential aged care in nursing homes and hostels. That has grown by 42 per cent—a billion dollars extra in the four years since March 1996. We have introduced accreditation. As the minister said, 34 outdated, substandard nursing homes and hostels in Victoria alone have chosen to close rather than to try to meet the stringent accreditation criteria. The Riverside Nursing Home had already failed certification—that is related to the building standards—and, if they had not improved the quality of the building by the end of this year, they would have closed anyway. Commonwealth funding would have ceased for them.

The coalition has responded to the Gregory report to provide for capital upgrade of nursing homes. We have introduced accreditation following consultation with consumers and with the industry, which is a rigorous process and which provides an audit visit that assesses management systems. Under accreditation, there have been 1,250 visits to facilities. Under residential classification schedules, there have been 1,500 visits, including surveying of 14,000 care plans. Labor’s record on accreditation and monitoring was poor. The focus has been lost in this debate in that we have been a government that has introduced quality care into nursing homes. The vast majority of nursing homes and hostels are meeting the accreditation standards. Under quality care, all residents who need nursing services will receive nursing services. That was not previously the case under the Labor government. Under certification, 98 per cent of facilities have passed certification. We have also provided more capital for the residential aged care facilities—$1.4 billion over the first 10 years, which is provided from the accommodation charge. The complaints resolution scheme had 4,000 complaints and over 90 per cent of them have been settled to the satisfaction of both parties. Under the Labor government, you had no accreditation, no certification, no anonymous complaints mechanism; you had a bureaucratic top-down system and it concentrated on process, not outcomes. Regarding the case made by the Labor Party over the last two days, they have not made the case
against the minister. We have heard that the department was slow in referring the specific complaint of kerosene baths to the agency, but no-one has disputed that once the minister was aware of the situation she acted promptly and appropriately. The minister became aware of this on 15 February, and we had someone in the home by the next day.

I would like to finish by contrasting that with the approach the Labor Party took in office under the previous ministers Staples, Howe and Lawrence. There are members opposite who were part of the governments in which they were the ministers for aged care, and not once did they ever call on those ministers to resign. I think the coalition government has done a lot to improve the quality of care in the nursing homes. There are nursing homes around Australia that are not going to meet accreditation and they are being scrutinised carefully by the department.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—Order! The discussion is now concluded.

COMMITTEES

Public Accounts and Audit Committee

Membership

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—Mr Speaker has received advice from the Government Whip that he has nominated Mr Lindsay to be a member of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit in place of Mr Brough.

Motion (by Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—by leave—agreed to:

That Mr Brough be discharged from the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit and that, in his place, Mr Lindsay be appointed a member of the committee.

Selection Committee

Report

Mr NEHL (Cowper) (4.37 p.m.)—I present the report of the Selection Committee relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private members business on Monday, 13 March 2000.

The report read as follows—

Report relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 13 March 2000

Pursuant to standing order 331, the Selection Committee has determined the order of precedence and times to be allotted for consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 13 March 2000. The order of precedence and the allotments of time determined by the Committee are shown in the list.

COMMITTEE AND DELEGATION REPORTS

1 PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND REGIONAL SERVICES—STANDING COMMITTEE: Report on inquiry into infrastructure and the development of Australia’s regional areas.

Time allotted — 25 minutes.

Speech time limits —

First two Members speaking — 10 minutes each.

Other Members — 5 minutes each.


The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made—all statements to be made within a total time of 20 minutes.

Speech time limit—

Each Member—5 minutes.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Order of precedence

Notices

Mrs Crosio to present a bill for an act to provide for the establishment and administration of a scheme to guarantee the payment of wages and accrued liabilities owed to employees in the event of employer insolvency, and for related purposes. (Employee Protection (Employee Entitlements Guarantee) Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Kerr to present a Bill for an Act to provide for a civil forfeiture scheme for the proceeds of criminal activity and other related purposes. (Criminal Assets Recovery Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Kerr to present a Bill for an Act to amend the National Crime Authority Act 1984 and other related purposes. (National Crime Authority (Amendment) Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)
Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Kerr to present a Bill for an Act to amend the Proceeds of Crime Act 1987 and other related purposes. (Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Ms Macklin to present a Bill for an Act to amend the law in respect of the prohibition of discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace, and for related purposes. (Sex Discrimination Legislation Amendment (Pregnancy and Work) Bill 2000 — Notice given 6 March 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Adams to move:
That this House:

(1) notes that dumping of cement from Indonesia, China, Malaysia and Thailand is significantly undercutting Australian cement prices;

(2) notes substantial industry investment and cost cutting has made the Australian cement industry cost competitive, but the companies cannot compete against imports being sold below their cost of manufacture;

(3) notes dumping is threatening the viability of Australia’s cement industry operations, with a real threat of plant closures unless urgent action is taken; and

(4) calls on the Government to
(a) recognise the threats to the cement industry by dumping;
(b) recognise the efforts of the Australian industry to comply with environmental safeguards that the dumping countries are not being made to follow;
(c) ensure that immediate action is taken under our current anti-dumping legislation to protect the Australian industry; and
(d) take steps to protect all industries that are susceptible to dumping. (Notice given 25 November 1999.

Time allotted — remaining private Members’ business time.

Speech time limits —
Mover of motion — 10 minutes.
Other Members — 5 minutes each.

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—I advise the House that the Deputy Speaker has fixed Wednesday, 8 March 2000, at 9.40 a.m., as the time for the next meeting of the Main Committee, unless an alternative day or hour is fixed.

MATTERS REFERRED TO MAIN COMMITTEE

Motion (by Mr Ronaldson)—by leave—agreed to:
That the following bills be referred to the Main Committee for consideration:
Australian Wool Research and Promotion Organisation Amendment (Funding and Wool Tax) Bill 2000
Census Information Legislation Amendment Bill 2000
Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment Bill (No. 3) 1999
Timor Gap Treaty (Transitional Arrangements) Bill 2000

MIGRATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No. 2) 1999

Second Reading
Debate resumed from 6 March, on motion by Mr Ruddock:
That the bill be now read a second time.

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) (4.40 p.m.)—This is a topic with which I am familiar and on which I am anxious to speak. The unexpected opportunity to do so has pleased me. Australia’s immigration program was basically run on the voting pattern of the migrants coming to Australia. What has changed with the incoming government is that there is now an immigration program based on integrity and value to Australia. I compliment the minister on his involvement in the program and the careful and thoughtful way in which he has wound back the excesses of the past. He is now approaching an immigration program which closely resembles the aspirations of most Australians. I know it is not for us in this debate to look at whether we increase numbers in the immigration program. However, what is clear is that the principles of the program will not be changed. Irrespective of what proportion of humanitarian programs skilled workers or family reunions constitute,
the balance is now approaching what will be the most beneficial for Australia. I thank the minister for his involvement in our immigration program and his tireless work over the period.

Mr RUDDOCK (Berowra—Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Reconciliation) (4.41 p.m.)—in reply—I thank the honourable member for Mitchell. I suspect he was filling in because of my late arrival. Last evening we debated the Migration Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1999. I thank the honourable members who spoke to that bill. They included the member for Bowman, the member for Hindmarsh, the member for Calwell, the member for McMillan, the member for Oxley, the member for Petrie, the member for Moreton, the member for Lyons, as well as the member for Mitchell. This bill is evidence of the will of the government to enhance the efficiency, as well as the efficacy, of the administration of migration legislation while preserving its integrity and the rights of persons affected by it.

The main measures contained in the bill include the implementation of recommendations made by a committee of inquiry into temporary entry business sponsorships, saving clients of the migration department from wasting time and money in making applications that could not otherwise succeed; protecting our community from convicted war criminals who are subject to deportation; providing certain visa applicants with merits review rights in respect of decisions previously not merits reviewable; allowing the grant of visas to applicants otherwise affected by successive caps on a visa grant; doubling the period points tested migration applicants can remain in the pool; and maintaining the integrity of the scheme for judicial review of immigration decision making by treating decisions of the Migration Review Tribunal, which commenced operation on 1 June last year, in the same way as those made by the previous Immigration Review Tribunal. The bill contains measures which are beneficial to clients and/or the community at large and, while still ensuring that the government’s migration program is not compromised, obviously it is an important bill in those terms. If I were discussing the bill, that is all I would have to say. However, there were a number of other points raised and I take the opportunity to deal with some of those.

Mr Sciacca—I would be surprised if you didn’t.

Mr RUDDOCK—I want to provide some further advice to the honourable member because I think the substantial interest he had in the maintenance of our refugee and humanitarian program is well understood by me. It is an interest I share. I want to say, in the quieter moments that we have this afternoon, that I am very angry, as minister, that I have had to implement a pause in relation to the visaing of people offshore for entry to Australia under the refugee and humanitarian program.

That has happened because we do have a program, as I said earlier today, of 12,000 people—the largest refugee and humanitarian resettlement program in the world per capita—where we count as part of the program those people who make successful onshore asylum claims. The reason I have railed for years about integrity in relation to the system of determining those applications is that I believe they need to be seen as being comparable with those that are granted through the refugee and humanitarian program. If you have onshore claims where the entitlements are significantly beyond those which people who are trying to access it abroad have to demonstrate, it is little wonder that people will think it is better to get on a boat and get to Australia and make those claims here.

Mr McClelland—That is what you are forcing them to do.

Mr RUDDOCK—No. If you are arguing—and I looked very carefully to see whether you fell into the trap yesterday—that there should be no pause, that you can merely draw on future immigration programs, mortgage the future of refugee and humanitarian programs to allow a lot of people in now, and I saw that as being what you suggested yesterday, borrowing from the forward program—

Mr Sciacca—for those that were in the pipeline.
Mr RUDDOCK—I will deal with those in the pipeline. So you are not suggesting that it be that generous.

Mr Sciacca—I am not suggesting that.

Mr RUDDOCK—Are you suggesting generally, if we get 6,000 claims this year onshore, that we ought to allow another 6,000 people simply on top of the 12,000 we would normally take? Is that what you are suggesting?

Mr Sciacca—I am talking about looking after those who want to come and live here.

Mr RUDDOCK—So am I. And I will give you some ways and means in which you can help me in relation to that.

Mr Sciacca interjecting—

Mr RUDDOCK—We will talk about judicial review again. Let me make the point that at the moment we have delays in determining claims. We have more people getting through because judicial review has essentially led to a significant expansion of the way in which the refugee convention is being conducted here in Australia. That is the reality. It is essentially because of the—

Mr Sciacca—No.

Mr RUDDOCK—Well, it is. It is essentially because we have had judicial review that we are getting domestic violence cases accommodated. Judicial review led to a situation where people who have been displaced because of civil war have been accommodated, and I can take you through them chapter and verse. They are there. But when you have a tribunal that is trying to deal with these sorts of issues, being micromanaged from on top by judicial review, a certain outcome will be delay.

Mr Sciacca—Would you like your case heard by someone who is appointed for three years?

Mr RUDDOCK—I would not mind. Those appointments are made with integrity and through a process in which there is very careful scrutiny of the people who are appointed. But I hear the sorts of question marks that you are putting over the tribunal.

Mr Sciacca—It is not a question mark.

Mr RUDDOCK—It is, and it is a reflection upon the tribunal for you to make those sorts of comments. You may want to walk away from that later as well, but that is what it is. Let me take you through the situation of what is in fact happening in relation to these matters. I indicated earlier today that the onshore—

Mr Sciacca interjecting—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—Order! The chair has been very tolerant. I thought the exchange might be helpful to disclose what the situation is.

Mr RUDDOCK—Good humoured.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER—I understand that it has been good humoured, but if you address your remarks through the chair and the honourable member for Bowman contains his interjections that would be helpful.

Mr RUDDOCK—Let me make the point that at the moment 5,018 grants have been made offshore and 1,457 have been made onshore. Of the 3,500 people that we have in detention, I do not know how many of those claims will get up. The majority are Iraqi and Afghani, and if the rates of approval we have seen before are there, then those places onshore will be fairly quickly taken up.

Mr Sciacca interjecting—

Mr RUDDOCK—Yes, it does. The point I made at question time today also applies—that is, if you continue to have boat arrivals of the same order that we have been having up until now, prudence would suggest that you would need to keep places to meet any claims that might arise. The advice I received was that the pause ought to apply now, and the advice I give to the honourable member is this: we have not stopped processing—we are still going to deal with the processing of applications—but we will not be granting visas. At an appropriate time when we know with greater clarity whether or not we will come in on target, we can commence visasing offshore to ensure that the appropriate number of places are used. To my way of thinking that is certainly the appropriate response in all the circumstances.

The honourable member for Calwell was equally vocal last evening in relation particularly to the way in which visitor visa
grants are made. I want to make it clear that he is of the view that a non-return rate is inappropriate for considering and developing risk profiles. The only point I would make is that I think the non-return rate is crucial for being able to deal with those matters. Essentially, these are people who, for a variety of reasons, have not returned—some of them because they have allowed themselves to become unlawful but, in other cases, they are people who are able, with advice, to remain lawful but purely for the purposes of remaining in Australia in many cases. We have the presence of a large number of protection claims from places such as, for instance, the Philippines or, in the case the honourable member for Calwell would have raised, Lebanon. You get few successful asylum claims that need to be tested, and that is evidenced by the decision records of the department and the Refugee Review Tribunal, yet very large numbers of people are using the protection route to delay their claims. It is certainly appropriate that those matters should be taken into account. I do not micro-manage the risk profiles. I do not go to the department saying, ‘These are the factors you ought to take into account.’ I expect them to make objective decisions using the same criteria—that were used when you were in office. That is the factual situation. The member for Calwell, who has had long experience in these matters, should be aware of it.

In relation to the other comments, I am grateful for the emphasis that the members for Hindmarsh and Moreton put on the integrity of the program. I am certainly pleased at the emphasis that the members for McMillan and Petrie put on the importance of settlement programs. I want to make some comments in relation to the observations of the member for Lyons, particularly in relation to regional migration. I, as minister, have done more to assist regional migration than any minister before me. More programs have been put in place to get a shift in the migration outcome. Let us be clear: I would have liked it to be more, but those mechanisms have delivered the best possible outcome with integrity.

The fact is that, if state governments are determined to shift immigration decisions and they are prepared to put the work into it, they can do so. Of the 2,000 people who have gone to regional Australia because governments have been assisting in taking up these sorts of mechanisms, 1,000 have gone to South Australia. That has not happened by accident. It has happened because South Australia has been committed to accessing the various regional initiatives. In other states, they have not.

Some people think that, to get people to go to regional Australia, you can degrade criteria without consequence. Sure, you can degrade criteria, but there is a point beyond which you cannot go in avoiding skills recognition, language competency or relative youthfulness. Those criteria ultimately determine whether or not people are going to be successful. They are the bottom line. We are at the point where the sorts of factors that can be considered in terms of regional migration are being maximised. I will of course be looking to see whether or not the committee of the parliament which is looking at regional migration can come up with any new and additional ideas, but I have not yet seen them.

I notice there is a good deal of interest in Tasmania. But to date the Tasmanian government has not been prepared to take up the opportunity to state-sponsor migrants with skills required in Tasmania. South Australia has. It is in their hands, if they are prepared to take it up. If they were really interested, that is what they would be doing.

The member for Lyons made some points about the Kosovars and East Timorese. Essentially, he was looking for places within the refugee and humanitarian program for those who came here on a temporary basis where there was an expectation that they would return and where they signed an undertaking that they would return. We have allowed people—because essentially the returns to date have been voluntary—to stay on. In the case of the East Timorese, it was because they wanted to get the wet season over—and, I might say, miss out on the opportunity to plant their crops, but that did not seem to matter. In the case of the Kosovars, they wanted to get the European winter over. Well,
the winter is just about over in Europe. There is an expectation that the remainder should return, subject to the evaluation the UNHCR is undertaking to see whether there are any that have claims of a protection character that are worthy of examination. Other than that, I have an expectation that they should return and I am looking for that in early April. It ought to be beyond doubt that return is what is expected. Certainly we are not going to put people who might have protection claims at risk. But the UNHCR will be involved in identifying whether there are any such claims. We will continue to support any people who have any illnesses, and their relatives, while illnesses are properly addressed, as we have right through this process.

The member for Oxley raised the issue of Vietnamese people from Hong Kong and the Philippines who have made claims as asylum seekers. He asserted that we ought to be finding places within the refugee and humanitarian program for them. Earlier in the day I made the point that if you reduce the number of places you have to decide whether you see people in those circumstances as being the same as those who are languishing in some of the refugee camps abroad who have no place to return to and no place to stay.

Mr Sciacca—Some of them have got the means, and they have got people in Australia who are prepared to look after them.

Mr Ruddock—If you are arguing it, as I said, if you want to walk down both sides of the road—

Mr Sciacca—I am not trying to do that.

Mr Ruddock—Well, that is what it sounds like. What you are saying is that they are equivalent. In relation to the Vietnamese, they were asylum seekers whose claims were rejected. Everybody else whose claims were rejected under the comprehensive plan of action that was put in place by Senator Ray when he was my predecessor—a Labor minister—went back. These are the people in Hong Kong who refused to return and whom the Hong Kong government now says it will not expel, so they are able to continue in Hong Kong with certainty. The people in the Philippines were those who were rejected asylum seekers, so they are not refugees. Let us be clear that they are not refugees. They were rejected asylum seekers whom Vietnam would have taken back and whom, because of the genuine interest of the Catholic Church and its influence, the Philippines said it could not send back. Essentially, the Philippines said, ‘Look, they are rejected asylum seekers but we are going to let them stay.’ Why do we have to resolve that situation by taking people out of those camps into Australia ahead of those who are in the most vulnerable situations who are in fact refugees? That is the question you have to ask yourself.

Mr Sciacca interjecting—

Mr Ruddock—Are you going to go out there and say to the Vietnamese, ‘I’m on your side, mate. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. I’ll be there when you want me,’ and feign some fiscal responsibility in relation to these matters? Is that what you are going to do? Are you going to walk both sides of the street? I am fascinated by these sorts of interjections, which demonstrate that you have no principles about these matters. What you are concerned about is trying to earn a few political brownie points with particular vested interests—

Mr Sciacca—You know about brownie points.

Mr Ruddock—Well, I do. You can go out and, as long as nobody has pinned you down and identified what you are doing, you can go out and say to the Vietnamese, ‘I’m on your side, mate. I’m here. I’ll help you through’—

Mr Sciacca interjecting—

Mr Ruddock—That is what you can do. For those who are sponsoring and assisting—

Mr Sciacca—How do you know we’ll do that?

Mr Ruddock—Because of the way you are advocating it now. I have essentially got you and your colleagues exposed so everybody can see exactly what you are doing. At the end of the day, if you think you are going to be able to run a program with integrity with those sorts of double standards, it will be a very poor day for Australia if you are ever making the decisions.
Question resolved in the affirmative.
Bill read a second time.

Third Reading
Leave granted for third reading to be moved forthwith.
Bill (on motion by Mr Ruddock) read a third time.

CUSTOMS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (CRIMINAL SANCTIONS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 1999

Second Reading
Debate resumed from 17 February, on motion by Mr Williams:
That the bill be now read a second time.
upon which Mr Kerr moved by way of amendment:
That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words:
whilst not declining to give the Bill a second reading, the House:
(1) calls for an approach to illicit drug use which acknowledges that law enforcement alone cannot be a sufficient response to the health and social problems that confront us as a society in relation to illicit drugs, and policy makers and the community must focus on the effects of drug use on youth, and on developing harm minimisation strategies;
(2) is of the opinion that the Bill is a misguided response to the issue of illicit drugs in Australia, as the ‘war on drugs’ rhetoric is misguided, misplaced and out of step with what is really going on in the Australian community;
(3) is concerned that the increases in penalties contained in the Bill, have no coherent foundation and may lead to unintended and grossly unfair consequences; and
(4) whilst accepting that there are sound public policy reasons in the lead up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games to support special measures to prohibit the importation of performance enhancing drugs, notes that there has been inadequate public consultation in the development of these measures and the other penalty measures in the legislation, and calls on the Government to refer these issues to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs for a comprehensive review after the Sydney 2000 Games have concluded.”

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (5.02 p.m.)—Customs have been around for a long time. It is one of those enduring pillars of civilisation that is attractive to governments because it is an earner. It is attractive to the community because it stands in the way of criminal trade and, more recently, defends our borders against drugs. International events and the greater globalisation of the drug trade, however, mean we have no time to lose if we are to have any sense of controlling this traffic.

I think all of us cheer when a major cargo is intercepted, but we all ask ourselves just how much is actually getting through. Every publicised bust only serves to emphasise the magnitude of the trafficking taking place. So I have a great deal of respect for Customs. We do not know how successful they are and they can only keep trying. They have been in the business a long time. I notice that last year they put up eight bills, although most were about tariffs. They run a staff of around 4,000, and I would suggest, with respect, that they are pushing it uphill. They will be under a lot of strain with the Olympics. There is no doubt that illegal imports will rise with the expected heavier processing demands. There is no doubt that there will be increased smuggling of firearms, pornography, knives, dangerous toys and chemicals as consignments in the luggage of arrivals at airports.

Labor supports the general measures for reducing illegal imports, but it concerns me that this legislation is being promoted as being really and truly tough on drugs. It certainly is at airports, but that is where very little makes the crossing. Last financial year, Customs intercepted a little over half a tonne of heroin and, in the year before that, 138 kilograms. About 36 kilograms came from airports, cargo and the mail in 1998-99. Sea passengers and crew are lumped in with the more independent smuggling operations with their own transport.

It is obvious that the traffic is crossing our coastline at places other than by coming in at airports on economy class with a stomach full of condoms. I am interested in these import preferences because a lot of the heroin coming into the country ends up in my electorate of Fowler, on the streets of Cabramatta and in the low rental housing units around Liverpool and Warwick Farm. The heroin that is crossing our border ends up in the arms or lungs of
increasing numbers of young people in my electorate. Customs are charged with a major responsibility in the war against drugs. I feel for them. Every reasonable person working in the field believes it is a war that has already been lost. The secret war is against HIV and hepatitis. It is against the harm drugs do, the crime they cause and the damaged lives of addicts and their families. It is time to attend to the casualties; it is time to accept that drugs with anti-social consequences have been around for longer than Customs and will probably outlast even that ancient institution.

The international prohibition of drugs does not mean we should not revisit the issue of victimless crimes before we become like the United States, where mandatory sentences and zero tolerance are filling their prison system so that today’s prison population has had a 100 per cent increase over the past decade. The vigilance we have so unsuccessfully applied to illicit drugs we now apply to potential stick injuries to our children and ourselves. Not all parents can drive their kids to school to avoid the hazard and, in any case, a number of night-time schoolyards in my electorate are used by addicts. The consequence of prohibition is higher prices, but I am concerned that this government seems more intent on the public relations side of the battle—knowing that it is superficial—without attending to the problem at hand.

The phrase, ‘This sends the wrong message to our young people,’ only betrays the appalling lack of understanding of the Howard policy department. It shows how unlike their thinking is when compared to younger Australians. The pulp it thumping not only is hypocritical but reinforces the worst community attitudes. It promotes ignorance. It fails by any test to impart any wisdom about the risks. As Catherine Lumby said in last week’s Bulletin, ‘You’ve got the congregation fidgeting in the pews.’

We should be vigilant at the customs barriers, but the drugs intercepted at airports are fractional compared to the boats and the planes. People who try to bring in drugs with their luggage or concealed on or in their bodies are fools. The quantities can be marketable and a lot of little couriers can make up a large quantity, but they are all dupes of bigger criminals. You can jail them, you can deport them and you can fine them huge sums of money like the $250,000 this legislation proposes. You can convict them of serious criminal offences. You can do what you like with them, and someone else will be stupid enough to take their place. They are not the Mr Bigs: they are dispensable or they are pathetic users bringing in enough to tide them over until they get to a supply line.

Kevin, a drug counsellor at the South West Alternative Program in Cabramatta, has got over 144 clients on his books. He tells me that heroin at $20 a cap from a street dealer is better value than marijuana—and it is more affordable for younger users. He is most worried about the under-16s and the problems in getting them onto a methadone program. The word ‘despair’ sums it up. The plummeting price of heroin—from about $8,000 an ounce only a couple of years back to something a little over $4,000 today—means your average street dealer has to move more of it just to keep up with his or her own habit. It is pyramid distribution. It is market economics.

Competition is at work in the drug economy, and the good news for dealers and addicts is that it will be GST free. Can you believe it! That means there will be more goods, more distributors and lower prices. But the trouble is that there is more and more and more; prices are going down and down and down. The wreckage which Kevin deals with is going up and up—and they are the motivated ones, the ones who want to be free. We are not doing enough to liberate these suffering fellow human beings. Places like the South West Alternative Program are not confident their clientele will decline in the foreseeable future. The point is that we need more effective measures to counter what is happening and, frankly, sticking a $250,000 or 10-year criminal penalty on illegally bringing through customs more than 100 grams of marijuana is just plain weird.

Rock-and-roll has done much, but who are we serving when some bunch of headbangers with very loud instruments and shocking lyrics comes into the country with drugs like marijuana or worse for personal use and we spray it over the papers that we caught them?
I will tell you whom we are serving: it is the recording companies. The bad boys need more than a parental advisory sticker on the CD. They want to get sprung for bringing illicit substances into the country. It is counterproductive and we have to be careful unless they are seriously running drugs. At the same time, we need to give fair warning to all visitors that we are in line with most other countries at the barriers. It is only fair to do so.

Customs circulates some snappy little press items. They show the sorts of drug-related interceptions that take place when dealing with international arrivals. For instance:

The attention that customs officers at Sydney Airport paid to an arriving American woman was increased when a passive alert detector dog reacted. Passive alert dogs are trained to locate drugs being carried by people. In this case, a subsequent body search of the woman revealed cannabis and valium hidden inside a sanitary napkin. The Australian Federal Police arrested her on drug offences.

And they will in future, no doubt, be collecting the 10 per cent GST on the particular tampon. Another example is as follows:

A male traveller who arrived at Brisbane Airport with what he claimed was a rock in his sock was found to be carrying hashish. Two customs drug detector dogs, Dillon and Derry, displayed an interest in the traveller’s feet. The man volunteered to have his shoes and socks searched. The traveller said that a lump discovered in the toe of one sock must have been a rock. However, it turned out to be cannabis resin. Both the passenger and the rock were handed over to the Federal Police.

There is another about a man arriving from the UK at Perth and becoming agitated when getting a bit of Customs attention. It is another dog story. When his bag was being checked, he grabbed an aspirin packet from it and emptied some white tablets onto his hand. He then tried to run out of the Customs area, putting the pills into his mouth as he went. After a short chase, five tablets which later tested positive as ecstasy were found on the floor near the absconder. There was one ecstasy tablet still in the aspirin box. In addition, the man said he thought he had swallowed about five tablets of the designer drug. He was taken to the Royal Perth Hospital for emergency treatment and later charged over the illegal importation. Like heroin prices, lower airfares are attracting all sorts of people into the country. We have expanded the market, but that does not guarantee a similar expansion of the IQ of some tourists. If anything, we need to protect these people from themselves.

The increase in penalties on importation of chemicals which are used in the production of other illegal drugs I am sure begs wider consultation. We could be talking about Sudafed here. These precursor chemicals could be anything. They could also be in the possession of a perfectly innocent person with proper reasons for having them. So we must be very careful, especially as we are a tourist destination hosting the Olympics. Under this legislation, commercial trafficking of narcotics attracts a maximum penalty of $750,000. Drug couriers are often desperate and pathetic risk takers with habits of their own. They will always be with us. I agree that the penalty should be steep, but no-one seriously believes the penalty will be a deterrent. Even the threat of death does not seem to deter them and, while $750,000 is a long way short of the death penalty, it is just as unlikely to stop these medically unwell people from trying. That is the nature of a heavy addiction.

What comes in through the barriers surely pales into insignificance compared with the major shipments. Customs intercepted 115 kilograms of cocaine disguised as black soil and concealed in air freight only last month. And that was only days after the record catch of 500 kilos of cocaine off the coast north of Sydney. Cocaine is not the drug of choice in Cabramatta. It is more for the corporate types, the law-abiding wealth builders of our nation using half a gram or even a gram a day. They might have a raging habit but they can afford it without breaking into homes and sleeping rough. There is a lot of hypocrisy when society judges between the two. They could both be presenting at the customs barrier. Both are criminals. So it is the irrelevance of the penalties that most disturbs me. I understand Customs took advice from Attor-
ney-General’s on this. What are they on about? This legislation has been put together to give some effect to our commitment to a drug free Olympics, but this bill has tougher sanctions on marijuana than it does on really serious sports drugs being brought in to win gold at our drug free Olympics.

Where is Minister Kelly? What has she got to say about this? If I were her, I would be setting Senator Vanstone to rights about this little inconsistency. Minister Kelly came back from maternity leave to talk to cabinet about the airport, but obviously this is not quite as important an issue to her. So this is an omnibus bill with tough measures on the illicit drugs front. The minister herself considers drugs a major issue only when it suits the government to whip up a bit of media attention focusing on how we are winning the war against drugs. That is plain hypocrisy. It is also dishonest.

In the last three months of last year, the minister issued 62 press releases. That is quite a flurry. Those on the subject of illicit drugs numbered nine: two in October, six in November and one in December. That is how important the drug issue is—one-seventh of a short attention span. Of the 62 press releases, two were spent on condemning Labor for delaying this very legislation by calling for parliamentary scrutiny. Minister Vanstone said, ‘Australia has taken the lead on restricting the illegal use of sports drugs, and now the ALP wants to leave the floodgates open right up until the Games have almost begun. This is a shocking message to be sending the rest of the world at this time.’

Here we are with messages again. If we are not sending messages to our children over drugs, we are sending messages to the world that Labor has opened the floodgates to drugs in sport. But it was this government which introduced this bill just before Christmas, when you could have taken some action a couple of years ago. And you thought you could give urgency to the other measures by tacking the Olympic flag on it and sending out press releases condemning proper parliamentary process.

The floodgates are already open for narcotics coming across the borders. The government has not noticed that we have got an epidemic in this country. And what has this government done? It has cut Federal Police numbers at a time when we really need to get serious about border protection. Last year Australian customs vessels undertook three search and rescue operations as part of a total of 44 tactical responses. There were 252 strategic taskings for other federal and state agencies, and they spent so much unplanned maintenance time there was a greater reliance on the Navy’s Fremantle class patrol boats. Those boats are coming to the end of their productive life. We need faster boats to adequately respond to the illegal activities, the drug and people smuggling which is escalating. It is time our coastal security ceased being shared around.

We need to have an Australian coastguard with modern, Australian built vessels to enforce and maintain the integrity of our border. This is an opportunity for this government to create a single entity charged with coastal surveillance and protection. Instead of shooting their guns in the air to frighten off drug smugglers and to reassure our citizens, it is time to take to the boats and systematically stop the large and illegal shipments of drugs coming over the border and ending up in my electorate of Fowler, which takes in Cabramatta. And in Cabramatta those very drugs are fueling a younger and younger culture of sons and daughters who get more dependent and sicker and older before their time. And time is something we can no longer afford in saving those lives.

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (5.22 p.m.)—It is my pleasure to rise to support the Customs Legislation Amendment (Criminal Sanctions and Other Measures) Bill 1999. It is an important piece of legislation. The member for Fowler made many interesting points about the threat that drugs represent to our society. I think every member of this House would be concerned about that threat and the implications it has for our young people. However, the member for Fowler has missed some legislation that went through under Minister Kelly’s guidance and dealt specifically with drug use at the Olympics, providing
access to Customs officers to facilitate the checking that is required and to exchange information between sporting officials both internationally and within Australia. It was directed specifically at lifting the bar in terms of how tough it would be during the Olympics. I agree with the member for Fowler that we certainly want to ensure that the Olympics are as drug free as possible. There is nothing worse than some of the images that we saw during the last Olympics when there was clearly a drug cheat involved in the swimming who simply got away with it. I was actually in Atlanta sitting among the parents of some of the swimmers who were very concerned about what was happening. They all suspected that this swimmer was taking drugs, but they were not able to catch her. How heartbreaking it was for those young kids who did it the hard way, day in day out, year after year, doing their training and being cheated out of their medals by someone who resorted to drugs. I agree with the sentiments of the member for Fowler but say that she should refer to the bills that Minister Kelly introduced into the Main Committee which were discussed and did much to address that environment.

The Australian Olympic Committee, the IOC executives and SOCOG are involved in addressing that as much as possible. They are not saying that there are things we should be doing which we are not doing. This is one attempt by way of further legislation and penalties. I heard the comments about the penalties. They are appropriate. It is about the introduction of drugs into this country. Clearly, there needs to be appropriate penalties. However, I am sure that the member’s main sentiments related to the drug problem which she experiences in her electorate and which is a blight on our society.

It is important that we address some of these issues because of the Olympics coming to Australia. Also, it is important for tourism in this country—which I know, Madam Deputy Speaker Gash, you have been involved in in a significant way—that we do as much as we can to create the right image internationally. Some of the provisions in this bill will enable Customs officers to examine packages coming into Australia for drugs and guns which may be brought in illegally by those who believe they can cheat on the system. It gives greater access to Customs officers to check what is being brought into the country. The bill provides for increased penalties for a range of import and export offences under the Customs Act. The bill is in four parts: firstly, amending the Customs Act and the Australian Postal Corporations Act to enhance Customs’ powers to detect illicit drugs; secondly, to increase penalties; thirdly, for videotaping strip searches for evidence, including the protection of the searcher and the searched; and, fourthly, amending the Customs Administration Act in relation to the appointment of the chief executive. It is the first three aspects on which we are concentrating today.

Concerning the amendment of the Customs Act and the Australian Postal Corporations Act to enhance Customs’ powers to detect illicit drugs, I understand that there has been some comment and criticism in the Senate that they are not sure of these powers and that Customs officers would simply be able to undertake their own checks without an Australia Post officer being present. The reason for this is simply that in the past there has been evidence of Australia Post officers being involved in some drug smuggling activities. It is not surprising that this might exist, given the number of employees at Australia Post and given the financial incentives out there in the marketplace, and the size of the drug trade. This is one of the reasons why it was wished that these provisions be provided—to enable Customs officers to search parcels and packages without Australia Post officers being aware of this being undertaken.

Last year some 600,000 articles were opened, resulting in two complaints, neither of which were found to have been made on good grounds. So, in terms of Customs’ record, there is little doubt that as an agency it can be trusted to operate in a reliable and accountable manner. Put simply, if Australia Post is informed that there is suspect activity which is being investigated by Customs, it requires the Australia Post officers involved to cease their illegal operations. I think this is an appropriate way to go—to allow for these
provisions and to provide greater searching ability for Customs officers who clearly have this as their primary responsibility.

The second part relates to the amendment of the Customs Act to provide for increased penalties for a range of import and export offences, including custodial sentences. The bill lifts the maximum civil penalty for non-narcotic offences from $50,000 to $100,000 and, at the same time, creates new criminal non-narcotic offences with custodial sentences. In other words, where you do not have drugs involved but you have other items brought into the country—and guns would be included in that provision—under this legislation you have the ability to take action. It is appropriate to recognise, especially given the regime in which we operate, that as far as possible we want a gun-free environment, except for those guns which are clearly approved—those used by sporting clubs and those who use them in their occupation. It is appropriate that we do all that we can to provide these measures and the penalties involved.

The bill also introduces criminal penalties for import-export offences for the first time. The new civil penalty maximum of $100,000 will apply to all prohibited import and export offences. It is clear, however, that some offences by their nature, or the circumstances that led to the offence, require more serious deterrents. For example, serious offences involving prescribed quantities of precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of narcotics and other drugs would carry a maximum penalty of $100,000, and the legislation would also allow courts to impose a sentence of up to five years imprisonment. The same penalty would also apply to offences involving prescribed levels of substances that illicitly enhance performance in sport. So significant penalties are involved and there are provisions that relate specifically to sport. It is a moveable feast for those looking at the drugs in sport process. There are myriad new drugs that are masked in the detection process, so to be able to apply these penalties to those drugs is significant. The maximum penalty of $100,000 and up to five years imprisonment is a very significant inducement for people to cease drug trafficking.

Let me give an example of how diligent Customs is. In a club I am involved in there is a young boxer from my electorate. He bought some drugs in the United States, which are sold over the counter there. Their status is being questioned here and they are not freely available, but they are not on the restricted list. He brought them back into the country. He was apprehended at the airport and searched. They found these drugs on him. They were taken off him and all types of questions were asked. He came to see me about the problems he was having. The drugs are for his own use as a boxer. After an extensive search, it was found that they were not on the prohibited items list, and we have an ongoing dialogue as to when they are going to be released by Customs. I think it illustrates the vigilance of the people at Sydney airport. They were on the case. It may not have fitted specifically into the category that they were looking at, which is prescribed under these provisions here, but it does show that officers at the airport are being vigilant.

The more serious offences, such as those involving weapons or child pornography, will attract a penalty of $250,000 and/or 10 years imprisonment. The Commonwealth’s prosecution policy, implemented by the Director of Public Prosecutions, will form the basis of all decisions for the new criminal offences. So we have gradations in penalties, from $50,000 to $100,000 for offences involving prohibited substances which are used in mixing drugs, to $100,000 and the possibility of five years in jail for more serious offences. For offences involving firearms and child pornography, there are increased penalties of up to $250,000 and the possibility of 10 years imprisonment. I am sure that you will agree with me, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there is nothing more significant that we should be concerned about in our society than drugs, guns and child pornography. Immense havoc is created in our society by child pornography rings and the effect they have on their victims. In my electorate, I was involved in the launch of a society in Sutherland for young people who had been abused as children. Child pornography fuels paedophilia. Whatever we can do as adults to restrict this trade is significant. To me, 10 years imprisonment is an appropriate penalty.
Fowler has said that these penalties are not hard enough. It is always a fine balance, but this bill significantly increases the penalties involved. Nowhere is the increase in penalties more significant than for drug, child pornography and weapons offences. There are fines from $4,000 to $250,000 for cannabis trafficking and from $100,000 to $500,000 for other narcotics offences. A new monetary penalty of $750,000 for the commercial trafficking of narcotics has also been introduced into the Customs Act.

Another issue is the framework being set up for the videotaping of strip searches for evidence, which is to be used for the protection of the searcher and the searched. The bill introduces two elements: technology can be used or, if the individual apprehended at the airport or the port does not want to use the scanning technology, they can opt for a physical strip search. If required, the videotaping can show publicly what took place. It is a protection for all those involved. It is obviously a clear record of the apprehension, and it is a good record if there are drugs or illicit substances found on that individual. Customs currently has strict operating procedures that are designed to reflect a reasonable balance between preserving a person's dignity and liberty and the protection of the community as a whole. I do not think that there is any excuse for saying, 'My civil liberties are being infringed, I do not want to undertake this.' If they do not want to remove their clothes for the strip search, under this legislation they can use the scanning technology. If they wish to use the normal procedure, then there will be videotaping.

Emerging technologies are widely used in various parts of the world, and it is good to see that Customs is ahead of the game by implementing new technologies such as body scan X-rays, particle detectors, thermal imaging and swabbing kits. Following expert examination of the technology, the government has decided to include a provision in this bill to allow new technology to be used, which will have widespread use throughout Australia.

The provisions in this bill cover not only the penalties involved—which are throughout the legislation—but also the ability for Customs officers to search postal items that are brought into the country without the need to have a postal officer involved. The bill also allows new technology to be used as an alternative to strip searching and for videotaping when strip searching takes place. Finally, there are provisions in the bill in relation to the appointment of the chief executive for a period of up to five years. Of course, that is a technical aspect as well.

This is about several things. It is about establishing a drug-free environment as far as possible within Australia. It is about being on the case. No-one has all the answers, but certainly the punitive provisions, the preventative aspects, the penalties involved, the technology that will be able to be deployed for searches and the fact that the bill will allow Customs officers to search postal items themselves are significant measures. Especially in this year when we have so many tourists coming from overseas, we have a great opportunity to show ourselves to the world. Some 350,000 international visitors will come to this country during the 14 days of the Olympic Games—or 16 days if you count the opening and closing ceremonies. It is certainly an opportunity to showcase ourselves but, at the same time, with some 15,000 press coming from around the world, it is a time when we could be exposed in terms of drugs being used in sport. If extensive checks are made and we find that teams bring into the country drugs which are clearly prohibited or narcotic drugs, the measures in this bill will allow Customs officers to take effective action if necessary.

While there have been some criticisms from opposition members that we have not gone far enough—why didn’t we do this—it is clear that this bill relates to the other bills that were brought in by Minister Kelly which will ensure drug testing for those taking part in sport and will provide the ability for various agencies to work together and allow the swapping of information between the Customs officers and sporting officials in various parts of the country and internationally. I think those measures, combined with the new technology and other measures in this bill, are a significant step forward. We all hope and trust that the Olympics in Australia will
be outstanding. Being drug free is one of our highest priorities as a country. I believe there are significant measures included in this bill and I commend the bill to the House.

Mr PROSSER (Forrest) (5.40 p.m.)—In support of the Customs Legislation Amendment (Criminal Sanctions and Other Measures) Bill 1999, it should also be noted that the United States has already been down this road and is already using new technology with much success. I believe that, in time, the use of this new technology will get even greater results and that it will detect more drugs and that the evidence will be more able to be relied upon in court in the event of a prosecution. The real genius in the drafting of this part of the amendment is that new technologies will be inserted as part of the regulations. In this way, Customs will be free to continue using technological advancements as they arise, using the previous in-built safeguards that I mentioned, without continually having to amend the Customs Act.

From a parliamentary perspective, the parliament can still disallow any regulation within 28 days. So it still has the ultimate power of veto over any new technology, and that is over and above the safeguards before the technology can be introduced as a regulation. I understand that concerns regarding parliamentary scrutiny of prescribed technology will be picked up in an amendment to be tabled later that will make it a requirement that the CEO consults with Commonwealth authorities in relation to equipment Customs proposes to use in external searches. The CEO must put before each House of parliament a copy of any advice received from those authorities within seven sitting days of each House after the day on which the statement is given to the minister.

Other concerns, including the privacy arrangements for collected material, will also be addressed in amendments to be tabled later—for example, reducing from 180 to 120 the number of days materials seized as evidential material by an officer of Customs or an authorised person can be retained. Privacy will be further addressed by an amendment to be tabled which will prescribe the method of secure storage of any videotapes and electronic records of any external searches as well as any photographs, images or samples taken in external searches. These stringent amendments to be tabled can only strengthen public confidence in the Customs Act and the Customs Service. The use of prescribed equipment should result in a more efficient and effective enforcement of the Customs Act. Enforcement of the Customs Act protects the community from dangerous goods, weapons and drugs. The use of technology may even cause less inconvenience and delay to members of the travelling public.

As a former Customs minister, a concerned community member and a parent it pleases me greatly to see the increased penalties and the new penalties being introduced. At present, a person convicted of smuggling goods may be ordered to pay a penalty amounting to not more than five times and not less than twice the amount of duty that would have been payable on the goods. The current alternative to the penalty that I have just outlined is for a court to impose a maximum penalty of $50,000. This bill increases this amount to a maximum of $100,000. With respect to serious offences, which could involve the importation of chemicals used in the manufacturing of drugs and would possibly attract the maximum penalty of $100,000, this bill will also allow the courts to impose a sentence of up to five years.

I am also very pleased to note that this same penalty will apply to offences involving prescribed drugs that are used to enhance performance in sport. The bill also proposes increased penalties for all narcotics. The penalty for trafficking in cannabis will increase from $4,000 to $250,000. For drugs other than cannabis, the penalty will increase from $100,000 to $500,000. Another very sensible amendment and part of the Commonwealth's tough on drugs in sport package is that Customs will now be able to notify the Australian Sports Drug Agency of the name of the person caught importing performance enhancing drugs. The maximum penalty for importing or exporting large quantities of narcotics—by large, I mean obviously for commercial purposes or for repeat offenders with drugs of trafficable quantity—will be increased from life imprisonment to a fine of $750,000 and/or life imprisonment.
New penalties for importing prohibited weapons and child pornography will be $250,000 or 10 years imprisonment. I am pleased that this government in the lead-up to the Olympics is getting tough on drugs. By so doing it is supporting not only clean Australian athletes but also athletes who compete at the very edge of human endurance without the use of performance enhancing drugs. That is what the Olympics is all about, and I firmly believe that is what Australia is all about—a level playing field and a fair go all round.

New section 233BAA provides for what are called special offences relating to tier 1 goods. Tier 1 goods are those prescribed by regulation whose importation or exportation is absolutely or conditionally prohibited. These include performance enhancing drugs, non-narcotic drugs and other specified goods. New section 233BAB creates special offences relating to what are called tier 2 goods. These are goods specified by regulation and may include firearms, knives, chemicals, antipersonnel sprays, radioactive materials, human body tissue and fluids, child pornography, counterfeit charge cards and other specified goods. The regulations cannot prescribe a good as being tier 2 unless its importation or exportation is absolutely or conditionally prohibited under the customs regulation.

Child pornography is a new addition, defined in new subsection 233BAB(3) as documents or goods which sexually depict a person who is or appears to be less than 16 years of age or someone who is or appears to be below that age who is a victim of torture, cruelty or abuse. In order to be guilty of an offence involving tier 1 or tier 2 goods, the accused person must have lacked the requisite approval to import or export the goods.

This bill introduces a new provision that allows the evidence of lack of requisite approval. It provides that a certificate issued by an authorised officer stating that a defendant lacked the necessary import or export approval is prima facie evidence of that fact. The defendant bears the onus of rebutting this evidence. He or she must be given a copy of the certificate and notice of the intention to rely on the certificate as evidence. I do not think this is an unreasonable burden on the accused and it should smooth administrative procedures of the Customs Service.
ernment and is also sometimes recognised by members of the opposition. During the debate I was pleased to hear the member for Denison indicate that the opposition ‘did not resile from the suggestion that serious importations of drugs are serious matters and must be dealt with seriously’. It is therefore surprising that the member for Denison also suggested that the penalties for narcotic offences contained in this bill were draconian. The member sought to defend the rights of small-time drug users in the Australian Capital Territory, noting that possession of 100 grams of cannabis in the Australian Capital Territory would attract a fine of $100 whereas a person importing 100 grams, under this bill, would be liable to a penalty of $250,000 or 10 years imprisonment. The member for Denison failed to highlight that the $100 fine relates to a possession offence in the Australian Capital Territory. Not only that, the $100 fine relates to possession of 25 grams of cannabis, not 100 grams. It is important to note that a person convicted of selling or supplying 100 grams of cannabis in the Australian Capital Territory is subject to a maximum prison term of 10 years.

It is the government’s view that the income generated by trafficking in narcotics, together with the potential harm caused by such criminal enterprise, should attract monetary and custodial penalties that effectively deter illicit activity. The member for Denison also suggested during the debate that the maximum penalty for certain categories of narcotics trafficking was being increased from $4,000 to $250,000 or 10 years imprisonment. The $4,000 trafficking fine was set in 1971 and at that time applied to all narcotics. This bill provides for an increase in the maximum fine to $250,000 to more realistically reflect the seriousness of the offence. It is important to note that the 10-year maximum prison term is already provided for under the existing provisions of the act. The government considers that it is unreasonable to increase the monetary penalty for prohibited import offences to $100,000 and to retain a $4,000 penalty for a cannabis trafficking offence.

The member for Denison drew attention to the need to have forfeiture provisions aimed at those commercially trafficking in drugs ‘to hit people where it hurts’. It is the government’s view that an increase in monetary penalties for narcotics trafficking offences does precisely that. In his comments, the member suggested that the Customs Act would contain penalties that were disproportionately high. The Customs Act drug trafficking offences are among the most serious on the Commonwealth statute book and are similar to—and, in some instances, milder than—those in many other countries. Given the very heavy imprisonment terms that were already available for these offences, which remain unchanged, the increase in maximum fines merely brings these into realistic alignment to counter the huge financial incentives to traffic in narcotics.

More generally, the member for Denison suggested that the penalty increases in the bill have no coherent foundation. In fact, the new criminal offences and penalties have been well considered. They relate to the most serious contraventions of import and export laws involving matters such as illicit drugs, firearms, child pornography and radioactive materials. The five- and 10-year maximum prison terms for the new tier 1 and tier 2 offences are at an appropriate level when compared with penalties for longstanding offences such as 20 years for money laundering—a crime that is often associated with smuggling—under the Proceeds of Crime Act, 12 years for the import or export of counterfeit money or securities under the Crimes (Currency) Act and 10 years for damaging or destroying Commonwealth property under the Crimes Act. It is important to remember that these penalties are maxima only, allowing courts to apply an appropriate penalty in the circumstances of each case. Indeed, the amendments remove minimum penalties from the Customs Act. Courts do not hesitate to impose penalties well below the maximum when they consider this appropriate.

The bill also provides for amendments to the Australian Postal Corporation Act 1989, to allow Customs to open international postal articles in the same way as it has control over all other cargo entering Australia. The opposition has indicated that it has concerns about
the potential for loss of privacy and the opportunities for corrupt practices. The bill as it stands includes provision for regulations covering Customs examination of postal articles and for returning those articles to the normal course of carriage. The government will be moving an amendment to outline Customs accountability arrangements in the Australian Postal Corporation Act, with the details being provided in regulations. As with other personal information obtained by Customs in the course of its duties, records of postal examinations will be subject to the Commonwealth’s privacy principles.

Responding to the need to facilitate legitimate passengers through our border, the bill allows the use of technology as an alternative to disrobing for external personal searches. As the member for Denison has noted, the government intends to move an amendment to the bill to ensure that the use of technology for personal searches is always a voluntary process based on tabled advice from relevant expert agencies about the safety of such equipment. The government recognises the need to maintain a balance between the privacy and dignity of travellers and their goods coming through the border and the need to deter illegal activity and provide protection for our community.

This bill is only one element in the government’s justice strategy. Just as important are research into the causes of offences against public safety and putting in place measures that help to deter people from engaging in conduct that causes harm to themselves or others in society. Far from focusing on a law enforcement approach, this government is committed to an integrated response to the illicit drug problem. These actions, combined with leadership in developing alternatives to being absorbed into the criminal justice system, are evidence of the importance this government attaches to a balanced strategy for dealing with the harmful impacts of these substances and the need to educate and rehabilitate illicit drug users throughout Australia. I commend the bill to the House.

Amendment negatived.

Original question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill read a second time.

**Consideration in Detail**

Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.

**Mr Kerr (Denison)** (5.59 p.m.)—by leave—I move amendments Nos 1 to 4:

1. Schedule 1, item 3, page 3 (lines 22 to 25), omit subsection 2, substitute:

   The article to which this section applies may be removed by an authorised examiner or member of the Australian Federal Police from the normal course of carriage following such procedures (if any) as are prescribed for the purposes of the section and opened by an authorised examiner or member of the Australian Federal Police in the presence of a Customs officer.

2. Schedule 1, item 3, page 3 (lines 26 to 28), omit subsection 3, substitute:

   A Customs officer who is present at the opening of an article may examine the article, in the presence of the authorised examiner or member of the Australian Federal Police who opened the article, to check whether it consists of, or contains, such drugs or other chemical compound.

3. Schedule 1, item 3, page 4 (line 5), omit “the Customs officer”, substitute “the authorised examiner or member of the Australian Federal Police”.

4. Schedule 1, item 5, page 4 (line 25), omit “by”, substitute “in the presence of”.

These amendments relate to the way in which Customs, under the legislation, are to be given authority to inspect and open personal mail. As the act currently stands, if a Customs officer has reason to suspect that an item of post might contain a suspicious article, that officer is obliged to take the item to an official of Australia Post, who will then open it. If the item does not contain any article warranting further proceedings, the letter is resealed, a note is made that it was opened in the course of a Customs inspection, and it is returned to the post. But if there is some item in it which warrants further proceedings then of course they can occur.

The government has decided that existing arrangements may in some circumstances give rise to instances where, because of doubt about the probity of members of Australia Post, they wish to put in a regime where they no longer have to submit the postal article to an officer of Australia Post. The problem is that they leave a vacuum. It may be a per-
fectly legitimate concern if there has been some history of members of Australia Post in some exchanges talking out of turn either through a lack of appreciation of the importance of these matters because they do not understand the significance of them or because they may have some connections with people who are in the drug trade. If those instances have occurred, then I understand perfectly why the government would want to put in place measures which provide for an alternative method. What I do not understand is why the government is batting on with a proposal that gives no adequate safeguards at all. Instead of the existing arrangements, it proposes that any single Customs officer can take from the postal stream, without knowledge of any other person, letters that are coming into an exchange, open an article of post unsupervised and take such steps in relation to that article as befits the circumstance. If it is done honestly and appropriately, they would follow the same steps that they would have been obliged to follow previously—that is, if they find nothing, they do not read it and they return it, marked in an appropriate way, to the postal stream. If they do find something in it, then obviously they proceed to follow the course, but we do not allow single individuals unrestrained access to any other items of personal communication.

As the Attorney well knows, when it comes to the interception of telephone calls, for example, he has authority to authorise the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation to intercept calls, and the warrants for them are treated seriously. It requires officers of ASIO to come to him. They provide a sworn statement of why it is appropriate to seek authorisation for a telephone tap, and he no doubt gives that the proper consideration as befits his office. There will be instances from time to time where he decides not to grant those particular requests or to grant them in a limited way. Similarly, a member of the Australian Federal Police or a state police force who is authorised under Commonwealth legislation to seek telephone interception warrants for criminal activities has to go either before a judge or before a member of the Australian Administrative Tribunal and make a case for it by putting forward the basis upon which they are seeking that right to intrude into people’s privacy. It is perfectly unobjectionable, you would think, that we have to have a system which does not allow law enforcement unrestrained breaches of our personal communications—our privacy. We would expect there to be proper safeguards. But here we are going to have a system whereby essentially any individual member of the Customs Service can enter into the postal stream, take out any piece of mail and not be subject to any supervision, even by another member of the Customs Service. (Extension of time granted) The circumstance would permit an individual member of the Customs Service to act in that way.

We know that even with those who are well fitted and screened for selection to our police and law enforcement agencies around Australia abuses take place from time to time. We would be naïve to pretend that they do not. Just the other day there was a report of a Queensland police officer being interviewed for an alleged 240 instances of accessing motor vehicle registration so that he could check out potential girlfriends. How is it going to be when you have an individual member of Customs—not subject to any scrutiny or supervision—standing in a mail stream and seeing a piece of post coming through from perhaps a girlfriend or a wife and being tempted to open that and have a look? What is going to happen, for example, if he sees a piece of mail coming through from someone in public life? I can imagine that, if you saw some piece of mail from Cathy Freeman or from Daryl Williams QC, you might be tempted to have a look and see what is going on. There is no-one looking over your shoulder to make certain that the processes are carried out in accordance with law. There is nothing to check that these instances are not abused. I cannot understand how the government has allowed this to come to pass. There are a number of other matters which, in the course of discussions prior to the introduction of this legislation, we raised with Minister Vanstone. To the minister’s credit, most of those technical issues have been taken up and are being moved by the government—not in the same drafting form that we proposed but perhaps in better drafting form. Nonetheless, they have been taken
up. But why this stand-out? I simply cannot understand it. It seems to me to be tempting human gullibility to a great degree to propose that people will always act in conformity with legal obligations when they are given these immense powers with no supervision and with only monitoring and reporting conditions which require them to identify some specifics, which go to a sort of statistical index, but which do not require them to seek in any way either prior permission to open a particular piece of mail or to have present somebody who can supervise that process.

What we are proposing is to give the government some additional flexibility, and that is to say, 'If you are worried that there are within Australia Post certain officials and certain exchanges that you do not want to have involved in this process of letter opening, take it to a member of the Australian Federal Police.' If there are instances where this occurs, allow the alternative to come into place where Customs officers can call on a member of the Australian Federal Police to open the post. But at least have somebody else there who opens the post and provides a safeguard or check to our privacy. Personally, I find it quite disturbing that somebody could read my mail simply for the curiosity value of it. I find it more disturbing that there is a possibility of setting people up—if you get a piece of post coming through from someone you do not like and you are a Customs officer. For God's sake, we know that people plant things in the police forces: we are not children. We do everything we can to suppress those practices and to stamp them out. Yet here we are actually inviting bad practice by not having any supervision, by not having a check, by not having any safeguards. You can imagine somebody saying, 'We found this in the post.' True it is that when you receive a piece of mail it is only part of a chain of evidence and it may well be that you can say, 'I had nothing to do with the origin of that material.' But imagine also if that information is somehow put into the public domain. How difficult then to deal with a scandal and the difficulties that arise from it. The very fact that somebody might be charged or proceedings instigated and dropped at a later stage in relation to one of these instances should make us all aware of the significance of it. (Time expired)

Mr Williams (Tangney—Attorney-General) (6.09 p.m.)—The government is seeking tougher checks for drugs in respect of 160 million parcels and letters that arrive in Australia each year from overseas. The member for Denison seems to be concerned about the civil rights of the intended recipient of the mail and that Customs might, alone, open the package or letter. Customs opens containers, it searches people, it searches ships and it searches aircraft without there being an Australian Federal Police presence. This is a situation which is probably less intrusive than that, but it is not without safeguards. A Customs officer's power to examine mail or an article in the mail is strictly limited to articles where there is a reasonable belief that drugs are present. The belief cannot be founded on a frolic or a fancy of the Customs officer. The belief will be determined by some process such as one involving a sniffer dog, an X-ray or intelligence sources. It is not done on guesswork.

The member for Denison will be aware that the government proposes amendments in which there will be additional safeguards introduced for the recording of the processes relating to the opening of mail. The records will also be subject to the normal application of the privacy principles under the Privacy Act. While I understand the good intentions behind what the member for Denison proposes, it is simply impractical in the context of the volume of mail, the risks that are involved and the balancing of interests within the community—the balancing of a person's privacy in respect of mail or a package reasonably suspected to contain drugs on the one hand and the protection of the community from importation of drugs on the other hand. The government will oppose the amendments.

Mr Kerr (Denison) (6.12 p.m.)—I find this an extraordinary argument. We are told that there are hundreds of millions of postal items coming in and out of the country, yet how many thousands of millions of telephone conversations occur daily throughout this country, and do we allow law enforcement officers who have a reasonable belief that one
of those phone calls requires interception to make up their own minds to listen to it? We do not. We require a process supervised by yourself, in the case of ASIO, and by a judge or a member of the AAT in relation to law enforcement. What you propose now is to strip away the only protection, which is a requirement—it is not a particularly strong protection, I might say; it is not a pre-approval clearance—that there be present when a piece of mail is opened somebody else external to Customs. You will take that away and say it is a proper respect for the balance. I think that is an absolutely stupid position. You say, 'They’ll only act on reasonable belief.' Who is to vet that? No-one in your system—not a single sausage. There is no obligation to have, for example, a camera to watch and to verify that there was a sniffer dog or some objective test to pull out a piece of post. There is nothing like that. So there you are; you have got your dog, you have got your X-ray machine, but you see a nice piece of juicy mail coming from a nice celebrity of the day—shall we say Kerry Packer?—and somebody decides it might be fun to have a look at it. Who is going to check on that? Who is going to check if it is their girlfriend’s post? Who is going to check on all these potential abuses that must happen with hundreds of millions of bits of mail coming through all the time. What the Attorney has said is that there is nobody: what we have to do is trust these fellows.

I do trust most people in law enforcement. I have a great deal of respect for the people who served as members of the Australian Federal Police and the National Crime Authority when I was Minister for Justice. Surprisingly, I believe that most police—even in jurisdictions like NSW—do their best to act honestly at all times. But I would like to know where anybody who can stand before this parliament and suggest that those kinds of uncontrolled exercises of discretion have not been abused over the last 20 years has been. Where have they been? I have to tell you that they could not have been in Australia, because the news reports of this stuff daily give us examples of where people make bad decisions. They breach the obligations that have been placed on them by the community as law enforcement and Customs officials. We should not exaggerate officials. We should not exaggerate that. The huge majority of people do not act improperly, but we should not close our eyes to the fact that some do so and do so quite frequently. Why would we strip away something that can be not a particular inconvenience? If there is a case where in a particular exchange someone within Australia Post is suspected of being a source of information to organised crime or leaking in relation to these kinds of inspections, let us root them out. Let us investigate them as participants in corrupt conduct. Let us get rid of them. If we do have our eye on them and we suspect them, let us bring in an Australian Federal Police officer who can do the checking instead.

Let us not abandon our civil liberties for the sake of this kind of absolute indifference to the interests of those of us who still have some respect for a citizen’s privacy. To say that checking you when you come off the plane to see whether you have some drugs in your suitcase, to say that intercepting personal communications—with the potential of someone reading letters and all the embarrassment and awkwardness if that communication is then used in a circumstance which might give rise to blackmail or all kinds of infringements of our rights—is the same thing, Attorney-General, suggests that you need to get a closer grip on this issue and take it away from your junior minister who has sold you a pup. You are standing up and defending what is absolutely indefensible.

There is no public interest that would require us to give away safeguards. We have suggested one method of putting an alternative safeguard in; you have come up with nothing. (Time expired)

Mr WILLIAMS (Tangney—Attorney-General) (6.17 p.m.)—I remain totally unconvinced of the need to deploy scarce Australian Federal Police resources to overlook the work of Customs officers. I am advised that the Customs officers who work in international mail exchanges do not work in isolation. A number of officers work together. In full view of others they screen and select suspect parcels for further examination. An officer then directs a parcel to an X-ray channel operated by two officers. If the X-ray indicates the presence of drugs, the parcel is
removed from the system for opening and at this point the details are recorded. No single officer can handle postal articles in isolation.

What the member for Denison is really suggesting is that there are people who work for Customs or potentially work for Customs who are going to commit serious criminal offences. The consequences of undertaking the course of action that the member for Denison suggests needs protection against are so serious that I think anybody who contemplates it would be aware that they are running a big risk, particularly in an environment where they are not working alone. The government remains committed to opposing the amendments.

Mr Kerr (Denison) (6.18 p.m.)—Somebody is really selling you a pup. We got a formal briefing from Customs and they said that they could not give us the assurance that people do not work alone. They refused to give that assurance. They refused to build in any other safeguards. So we remain completely convinced that this government has taken its eye off the ball in this instance.

The idea that even in the usual course of operations Customs officers do not work alone fills me with no particular confidence. We know that people who do not work alone can often consistently cover for each other. That is one of the facts of life in corrupt policing. Having an independent person from Australia Post to open letters provides a check. It is suggested that the opposition is somehow degrading Customs officers by pointing to the fact that some may on occasion be tempted to act improperly. But what is the government doing by the smear suggesting that those in Australia Post are not fit to act as assessors, checkers and openers of mail just to make sure that nothing is going wrong? We will be pressing on with this and we will be doing our damnest to persuade the Democrats, the Greens and the Independents in the Senate to support our position when it gets to that place.

Question put:
That the amendments (Mr Kerr’s) be agreed to.

The House divided [6.24 p.m.]

(Mr Deputy Speaker—Mr Colin Hollis)
Question so resolved in the negative

Sitting suspended from 6.31 p.m. to 8.00 p.m.

Mr WILLIAMS (Tangney—Attorney-General) (8.00 p.m.)—by leave—I move government amendments Nos 1 to 11:

(1) Schedule 1, item 3, page 4 (after line 18), at the end of section 90T, add:

(7) The Australian Customs Service established under the Customs Administration Act 1985 must establish and maintain, in accordance with regulations made for the purposes of this section, a record setting out, in respect of each article that is removed from the normal course of carriage and opened for the purpose of its examination by a Customs officer:

(a) particulars of the article; and

(b) particulars of the nature of the examination of the article and its contents; and

(c) whether the article and its contents were, following the examination, dealt with according to law or returned to the normal course of carriage.

(8) Regulations made for the purposes of subsection (7) must specify:

(a) the place or places at which the record referred to in that subsection is required to be established and maintained; and

(b) the manner in which the record is to be kept; and

(c) the uses that can be made of information contained in the record.

(2) Schedule 2, item 1, page 6 (line 6), omit “180”, substitute “120”.

(3) Schedule 2, item 2, page 6 (line 8), omit “180”, substitute “120”.

(4) Schedule 2, item 3, page 6 (line 10), omit “180”, substitute “120”.

(5) Schedule 2, item 4, page 6 (line 12), omit “180”, substitute “120”.

(6) Schedule 2, item 9, page 7 (line 33) to page 8, (line 6), omit subsection (11A), substitute:

(11A) Prescribed equipment may be used in carrying out the external search if, and only if, consent to the use of the equipment in carrying out the search has been given by the detainee and the requirements of section 219RAB are met.

Note: Section 219RAC deals with regulations prescribing equipment.

(7) Schedule 2, item 10, page 10 (after line 17), at the end of section 219RAC, add:

(4) If, before making a statement of the kind described in subsection (2), the CEO consults with Commonwealth authorities in accordance with subsection (3), the CEO must lay a copy of any advice received from those authorities in the course of that consultation before each House of the Parliament within 7 sitting days of that House after the day on which the statement is given to the Minister.

(8) Schedule 2, item 10, page 12 (after line 18), at the end of section 219RAF, add:

(7) The regulations must make provision in relation to the secure storage of any videotape or other electronic record of an external search, and of any photograph, image or sample referred to in paragraph (1)(b), (c) or (d) pending its ultimate destruction.
(9) Schedule 2, item 17, page 14 (line 29), omit paragraph (1)(h), substitute:

(h) items of child pornography or of child abuse material; and

(10) Schedule 2, item 17, page 15 (after line 14), after subsection (3), insert:

(3A) For the purposes of subsection (1), an item is taken to be an item of child abuse material if it is a document or other goods:

(a) that depicts a person:

(i) who is, or who appears to be, under 16 years of age; and

(ii) who is a victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse; and

(b) that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult.

(11) Schedule 2, item 21, page 16 (lines 30 and 31), omit the item, substitute:

21 Subsection 245(2)
Omit “$20,000” (wherever occurring), substitute “$40,000”.

22 Subsection 245(4)
Omit “$5,000” (wherever occurring), substitute “$20,000”.

With opposition agreement, the Customs Legislation Amendment (Criminal Sanctions and Other Measures) Bill 1999 was referred to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee for report by 16 February. After the government considered that report, and following discussions with the opposition, the government has agreed to propose a number of amendments to the following aspects of the bill: Customs examination of international postal articles, retention of evidential material, voluntary use of technology in external personal searches, tabling of advice from expert agencies on the use of such technology and storage of records obtained in external personal searches. The government has also decided to remove additional amendments to the bill, broadening the new import-export offence to encompass child abuse material and increasing the jurisdictional limits for customs prosecutions in lower courts. As the government believes that the basis for the new penalty provisions is sound, it does not intend to move any amendments to those parts of the bill dealing with the new criminal penalties for prohibited import-export offences, nor to the increased monetary penalties for narcotic offences.

Amendment 1 relates to the Customs examination of international postal articles. The bill already provides, in subsection 90T(6), for regulations to be made for the purpose of determining the procedure for removing an article from the normal course of postal carriage for the purpose of a customs examination, and for the article’s return to the normal course. As the supplementary explanatory memorandum indicates, the proposed amendment will add new subsections (7) and (8) to require Customs to maintain a record, in the manner prescribed, of all articles that are removed from the normal course of carriage and opened for examination. These measures would normally be undertaken as standard operating procedures—but, as evidence of Customs adherence to the need for transparency and accountability in examining postal articles, the amendment makes it clear that the regulations will define the nature and circumstances of records to be kept and the purposes for which they might be used.

The amendment is in response to concerns expressed by the opposition about a perception of potential breaches of accountability in civil liberties when postal articles go beyond Australia Post’s control. The government considers that the amendment provides appropriate measures to safeguard the community’s rights without breaching the need for security in drug operations.

Amendments 2 to 5 relate to retention of evidential material. The bill proposed to increase the time during which Customs could retain evidential material before returning it to its owner from the current 60 days to 180 days. As indicated in the supplementary explanatory memorandum, the proposed amendment would result in Customs retaining such material for 120 days, not 180 days as proposed in the bill.

The amendment is in response to concerns expressed by the opposition during the committee’s consideration of the bill that the pattern of extensions granted under a judicial process might not support the proposed increase. The national average for first extensions granted to Customs over the past four calendar years was 4.5 months—that is 135
days—resulting in average retention periods for extended cases of 195 days. Nevertheless, in response to the opposition’s concerns, the government is prepared to concede that 120 days is a manageable extension of the current limit, and this is what the amendment provides for.

In the Senate committee’s minority report, the opposition inquired about disposal of goods with a short or immediate market life. Such goods are seized under a seizure warrant and can be the subject of a claim for return made within 30 days of seizure. Perishable goods or live animals may be disposed of immediately if they present a danger to public health or other animals or plants.

Amendment 6 relates to use of technology in external personal searches. The bill currently provides that prescribed technology may be used to conduct external personal searches either with the person’s consent or as required by the justice or authorised officer ordering the search. The proposed amendment removes any compulsion to undergo the use of technology—allowing its use only with the consent of the person being searched. This amendment results from a view expressed in the opposition’s minority Senate committee report that any order to submit to external search through the use of equipment must be made by a judicial officer. As Customs noted in its submission to the Senate committee, in practice this provision was not expected to be widely used. If a person did not give consent to a search, Customs was likely to seek an order for removal of clothing rather than use of technology to allay suspicion about concealed goods. The power to direct was included to cover the possibility that the available equipment may offer a more effective alternative in the future. The government agrees that consent now be required in all circumstances.

Amendment 7 relates to the tabling of advice from agencies about technology use. The bill provides that, before any technology may be prescribed for use in external personal searches, the Chief Executive Officer of Customs must consult relevant authorities before giving advice to the minister. (Extension of time granted) The amendment will result in the CEO of Customs being required to table advice received from relevant agencies within seven sitting days of the House after the CEO’s statement is provided to the minister. This amendment has resulted from the views expressed by the opposition during the Senate committee’s consideration of the bill in response to concerns raised by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency. While the bill establishes accountability for the CEO of Customs to take such expert opinion into account in advising the minister, the amendment provides an opportunity for parliament to view that evidence before it considers the necessary regulations to introduce new technology.

Amendment 8 relates to prescription of storage requirements for a taped record of external personal searches. The bill provides procedures for the retention and destruction of videotapes, electronic records, photographs, images and hand samples taken in external searches. The effect of the proposed amendment is that regulations will need to be made in relation to secure storage of such data pending its ultimate destruction. As a matter of course, Customs records are already subject to stringent controls on their storage and use. The amendment will reinforce this strict accountability. The government has proposed this amendment in response to a suggestion from the opposition on the basis of comments by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency. While the government does not accept that passengers coming through Australia’s border need have any concerns about the privacy of search records, it is happy to see that concept enshrined in legislation.

Amendments 9 and 10 deal with the new category of child abuse import-export offences. The proposed amendment introduces a new offence under tier 2. This would allow for a maximum penalty of $250,000 and/or 10 years imprisonment. The bill currently provides that child pornography offences, as defined in the bill, should be subject to tier 2 penalties. The amendment would extend the offence to include not just material that depicts someone who is or appears to be under the age of 16 in a sexual pose or activity but also material that depicts someone who is or appears to be below that age who is a victim
of torture, cruelty or physical abuse. The government has decided that child abuse material is equally abhorrent to that depicting the sexual exploitation of children.

Amendment 11 deals with the jurisdictional limits for customs penalties. In the second reading speech on the bill I announced the government’s intention to remove the current $5,000 and $20,000 limits placed on jurisdictions when customs offences are prosecuted in magistrates’ and district or county courts. The government’s additional investigations have revealed that removal of the limits from the Customs Act may not necessarily result in the application of jurisdictional limits to such offences. The government has therefore decided that the most effective way of implementing the government’s intention is to increase the current limits at this stage from $5,000 to $20,000 for courts of summary jurisdiction and from $20,000 to $40,000 for district and county courts and local courts of South Australia and the Northern Territory. The amount of $20,000 is the lowest current civil penalty limit in a state or territory court. The government considers that a limit set in 1982 is inadequate to the task and has heeded the calls by some judicial officers for increased limits. The government amendments are commended to the House.

Mr Kerr (Denison) (8.08 p.m.)—May I firstly express what may sound—and it is not at all meant to sound—two-faced in terms of some of the strong comments I have made in relation to this. I do genuinely wish to express appreciation to the officers of the minister’s office and those from Customs with whom my office and I have had dealings. This has not been the easiest piece of legislation to deal with, partly due to the time frame in which it was introduced. There were some initial misunderstandings, which were unfortunate. Nonetheless, please accept that we, as always, will seek to be as cooperative as the adversarial nature of these proceedings allows and given the strong differences that do exist in relation to particular matters.

That said, may I indicate that items 1 through 8 of the government proposed amendments are essentially initiatives proposed by the opposition and we welcome them. We thank you, Attorney, and thank the minister for adopting them. In an environment where there were some larger issues which were flagged as requiring greater attention in the second reading amendment which we moved, nonetheless it is very pleasing to note that we can work through some of these technical and detailed issues and improve the legislation in the course. Items 9, 10 and 11 are administrative arrangements introduced by the government which do improve the legislation. We are very happy to support them.

The final comment I would make is that I have since had some small check made of the comment by the Attorney regarding the penalties that he says apply to possession offences in the ACT. The most up-to-date information that I have is the report of the Model Criminal Code Officers Committee on a summary of penalties across jurisdictions. That report states that possession of 100 grams of cannabis in the ACT is the subject of a maximum penalty of $100. We shall obviously each consult more carefully to make certain that whatever account is provided is absolutely accurate. That was my best advice and it is based on the printed information supplied by the MCCOC group of advisers. I would have thought that they would be a good source and a confident source upon which I could base the advice I provided to the House. I do not think I will take up any more of the House’s time in relation to these procedural matters. We commend them also to the parliament.

Mr Williams (Tangney—Attorney-General) (8.12 p.m.)—I table the supplementary explanatory memorandum to the bill.

Amendments agreed to.

Bill, as amended, agreed to.

Third Reading

Bill (on motion by Mr Williams)—by leave—read a third time.

COMMITTEES

Treaties Committee

Membership

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gash)—Mr Speaker has received a message from the Senate acquainting the House that
Senator Stott Despoja has been discharged from the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties and that Senator Bartlett has been appointed a member of the committee.

ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION

Consideration of Senate Message

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gash)—The Senate transmits to the House of Representatives the following resolution which was agreed to by the Senate this day:

That, in the opinion of the Senate, the following is a matter of urgency:

The failure of the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) to show positive national leadership on Aboriginal reconciliation, an issue vital to Australia's social well-being and international reputation.

The Senate request the concurrence of the House in this resolution.

Ordered that consideration of the message be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

IMPORT PROCESSING CHARGES AMENDMENT (WAREHOUSES) BILL 1999

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill returned from the Senate with an amendment.

Ordered that the amendment be taken into consideration at the next sitting.

CUSTOMS AMENDMENT (WAREHOUSES) BILL 1999

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill returned from the Senate with amendments.

Ordered that the amendments be taken into consideration at the next sitting.

APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 3) 1999-2000

Cognate bill:

APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 1999-2000

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 6 March, on motion by Mr Fahey:

That the bill be now read a second time.

upon which Mr Tanner moved by way of amendment:

That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words:

“whilst not denying the Bill a second reading, the House condemns:

the Government for its abdication of Commonwealth responsibility for appropriate national funding of health, education and other essential community services;

the recent statements by the Prime Minister indicating that Specific Purpose Payments to the States will be reduced as part of the introduction of the new tax system, breaking both his promise to the Australian people and to State and Territory leaders; and

the Government’s failure to abide by the independent arbitration process regarding the indexation of the Australian Health Care Agreement’s payments to the States for public hospitals”.

Mr ROSS CAMERON (Parramatta) (8.16 p.m.)—Just before Christmas last year, Bill Gates, then chairman of Microsoft, was asked, ‘How does it feel to be the most powerful man in the world?’ ‘I don’t know,’ came the reply. ‘You’d have to ask Rupert Murdoch.’ If we ask ourselves the question who is the greatest Australian of the 20th century, Howard Florey, the co-inventor of penicillin, and Rupert Murdoch, in my view, must be at the top of the short list. We ought not to be so parochial as to be blinded by his decision on citizenship into devaluing Murdoch’s contribution to Australia and to the world. The great shame, in my opinion, is that we have only one Rupert Murdoch; what we need is three or four. I have heard it argued that the greatest thing we could do for human rights in China is for Sky TV to be given broadcasting rights in that country, and I believe there is some force in the argument. If information is power, then Rupert Murdoch, Bill Gates and Ted Turner have done more than any government policy or political leader to empower the global citizen. In 1975, hundreds of thousands of East Timorese were massacred, in part because of the paucity of television and print media coverage. In 1999, the bloodshed, though tragic, was minuscule by comparison, in part because of the television pictures beamed around the world, creating a climate of international outrage which allowed Australia and the UN to act.

Returning to the question of raw power rather than the manner of its exercise,
ness Sunday reporter Michael Pascoe filed an interesting piece last weekend about the stunning performance of Newscorp shares, rising in value from under $10 in October last year to $27.35 today. The more significant aspect of the story was the impact of one stock on the performance of the Australian equity market as a whole. News Corporation now represents almost 20 per cent of the entire value of the Australian stock market. As Pascoe observed:

If fate should knock a hole in the Newscorp share price, it would also punch a fist through the Australian share market and ... every major institution and super fund would feel it.

Pascoe suggested, only half joking, that Rupert Murdoch ought to be required to file regular health reports with the ASX. But that commercial might does not exist in the vacuum. It flows as a consequence of Murdoch’s power as a gatekeeper of news and information. In the field of newspapers alone, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, September 1999, Mr Murdoch now controls 23.4 per cent of Australia’s regional newspapers, 46.6 per cent of suburban newspapers, 67.8 per cent of all capital city and national dailies and 76.1 per cent of all Sunday newspapers.

Again, there is much for which we have to be thankful from Mr Murdoch’s success as an entrepreneur. The Australian newspaper, for example, spent years in the red and many doubted its rationale from the start. But Murdoch persisted, wearing the losses out of a personal belief that Australia needed and could sustain a high quality daily national broadsheet. Australia is a better country as a result. Newscorp’s commercial interests are diverse and run through every stage in the communications chain. In addition to the newspaper dominance, there is 25 per cent of Foxtel in pay TV, control of film production house Fox Studios, News Interactive online services and games and just under 20 per cent of the One.tel telecommunications carrier. A joint venture with Time Warner and America Online, followed by the announcement last week in the New Yorker magazine of the deal with Yahoo, has sent the share price skyward.

But the breathtaking scope and reach of the Newscorp empire inevitably creates risks for Australian democracy. Sydney has just gone through an extensive Broadcasting Authority inquiry into the so-called cash for comment affair. The allegation being made was that editorial content and news and current affairs coverage were being skewed by the undisclosed commercial interests of program sponsors. There is nothing unlawful or immoral about sponsoring a radio program or indeed accepting payment for advocating a view one genuinely supports. The issue is one of transparency and disclosure. It is about ensuring that listeners, readers and viewers of Australian media know when a program has crossed the lines between news, opinion and advertising. The outcome of the inquiry was that a Sydney radio station was required to make an announcement at the start of each current affairs program disclosing the companies and causes making payments to the broadcaster. While I cannot equate the inhalation of nicotine with the consumption of information, the principle bears similarities to health warnings on cigarette packs. The activity is entirely lawful but people are entitled to know the character of the thing they are consuming. The great temptation for a media proprietor must always be the formation of incestuous relationships between group members in which the organs of news are placed at the disposal of the other commercial interests of the empire.

In addition to the risks of commercial bias, the issue of political involvement of media owners seems to me worthy of greater public consideration. A media magnate is just as entitled to a political opinion as any other citizen, perhaps more so. But politics is ultimately about the communication of ideas and images. What happens when one citizen, or non-citizen as the case may be, exercises control over the lion’s share of a nation’s communication assets? There must at least arise the possibility of an exercise in political power which is discordant with the idea of the sovereign people in a liberal democracy.

Tonight, I want to address three questions: (1) Does the prosecution of the other commercial interests of the corporation distort the coverage of news in Murdoch publications? (2) Do the proprietors of Newscorp seek to translate their commercial and information
dominance into political power? And (3), if the answer to either of the first two questions is yes, have sufficient steps been taken to ensure transparency of news coverage and an adequately critical and informed electorate?

I turn now to the evidence, beginning with some historical material relating to the making and unmaking of Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. By the early 1970s, Mr Murdoch appears to have formed the view that it was time to sweep out the cobwebs of 23 years of Liberal government and that Billy McMahon was not a great adornment to the Liberal Party. I see other members in the chamber shaking their heads in agreement. The story is taken up by John Menadue who, as General Manager of the Australian newspaper from 1967 to 1972, was a confidante of both Murdoch and Whitlam, serving the latter as private secretary and head of the Prime Minister's Department and later as Australian Ambassador to Japan. In his memoir, Things you learn along the way, Menadue records:

Working with him for seven years I saw what drove him. It was not making money, as useful as that was, but gaining acceptance by and then influence with people in power.

Murdoch loved to be part of the political game. He couldn’t help himself. Perhaps he acquired it in his days with the Labour Club in Oxford. He spoke to me half seriously about becoming a member of parliament in Australia.

He was, and is a frustrated politician. He can’t leave politics alone.

In relation to the 1972 election, Menadue records:

Murdoch was up to his ears in the campaign. Apart from some key people in the Labor Party, I don’t think anyone was more active in the campaign than he. He was writing speeches and forwarding them, through Mick Young or me, to Whitlam.

But providing his intellectual resources did not satisfy the appetite for participation that Murdoch sought. Mick Young and Eric Walsh created a group styled ‘Businessmen for a change of government’ with a couple of Labor mates and a few names supplied by the ALP advertising agency. The advertising copy was well prepared and Menadue remembers:

Murdoch was attracted both by the advertisements and the intrigue surrounding the front they were using. He agreed that he would run the advertisements in his own newspapers free of charge and would pay for their placement in other newspapers.

Mr Murdoch himself makes a fairly frank confession about this particular foray into Australian political king making. Shortly after the 1975 election, Murdoch is quoted as saying that he ‘single-handedly put the present government into office’. His biographer, William Shawcross, takes up that case at page 162:

He later accepted that he had personally become ‘far too deeply involved in the election. Looking back, we did some dreadful things to the other side ... a lot more happened than even they have managed to find out’.

And on another occasion he said his papers were perhaps unprofessional and certainly unfair to McMahon. He said:

I should have had more reserve, but I got emotionally involved. I allowed, with my eyes open, some of the journalists to go beyond being sort of partisans into almost being principals. They became foot soldiers in Whitlam’s campaign.

As the tide comes in, however, so it goes out. By 1975 Mr Murdoch had suffered a rebuff from Whitlam on development of a bauxite mine but much more significantly, in my view, had formed the view that the Prime Minister’s wider political agenda was antithetical to his own. The partisan character of the campaign which followed in 1975 was so excessive that the News journalists staged a revolt and the printers refused to print. Led by senior reporter Robert Duffield and sub-editor Barry Porter, 73 of them signed a letter to Murdoch in May 1975. The mood can be gleaned from one paragraph which reads:

We can be loyal to the Australian, no matter how much its style, thrust and readership changes, as long as it retains the traditions, principles and integrity of a responsible newspaper. We cannot be loyal to a propaganda sheet.

Subsequently, the entire staff of the Australian, the Mirror and the Telegraph launched a strike including a public statement about the affair chastising Murdoch’s ‘very deliberate and blatant bias in the presentation of news’. The journalists went on to say that they ‘felt it necessary to disassociate ourselves entirely
from the desecration of the traditional and historical ethics of journalism’.

Mr Murdoch subsequently turned his attention to Fleet Street. It is worth asking, following the confessions in relation to the making and unmaking of Whitlam, whether his political activism was in any way tempered by the Australian experience. For this period we turn to Andrew Neil, who spent 11 years as Editor of the Sunday Times. Chapter 7 of his memoir, *Full Disclosure*, is titled ‘At the Court of the Sun King’, a reference to Louis XIV, the most absolute of European monarchs in the modern era. Here he describes the climate in which he worked as editor of a Murdoch publication. He said:

When you work for Rupert Murdoch you do not work for a company chairman or chief executive: you work for a Sun King. You are not a director or manager or an Editor; you are a courtier at the court of the Sun King, rewarded by money and status as long as you serve his purpose, dismissed outright or demoted to a remote corner of the empire when you have ceased to please him, or outlived your usefulness. All life revolves around the Sun King: all authority comes from him. He is the only one to whom allegiance must be owed and he expects his remit to run everywhere, his word to be final. The Sun King is everywhere, even when he is nowhere. He may intervene in matters great or small. You never know when or where, which is what keeps you on your toes and the king constantly on your mind. ‘I wonder how the king is today?’ is the first question that springs to a good courtier’s mind when he wakes up every day.

This chapter shows the hazards of parting on less than amicable terms with a newspaper editor. It also reminds me of that expression ‘A wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse’, that it is not necessary to issue explicit instructions to achieve a particular editorial outcome.

Returning to Australia and the more recent past, we can reflect on the strategy employed by News to gain its long sought foothold in the Australian television market. The issuing of spectrum for the broadcast of digital television presented this government with a choice which involved a technical question about quality which had implications for existing TV players and possible new market entrants. I will not comment on the merits of the argument, on which I have some sympathy for the News case, but purely on the tactics employed to pursue the commercial objectives.

My colleague Jim Lloyd, in the marginal seat of Robertson, woke up one morning to find that a direct mail letter box campaign had begun in his electorate attacking the Howard government over the direction of its digital policy. It was made clear to the back-bench that this was the beginning of a campaign which would target all government marginal seats. I want to reaffirm that there was nothing unlawful about the tactic. It was an exercise of the right to free speech that every citizen enjoys. In the end it was hardly a campaign at all. The ultimate distribution was quite small and did not include my seat of Parramatta. The tactic, however, was widely reported in both the Murdoch and Fairfax press as an indication of what might be expected in a future general election. The power in this instance was not so much in the action as in the threat.

John Menadue was asked by Karon Snowdon on ABC Radio whether the direct mail campaign in marginal seats on digital television held implications for the conduct of the next election. Menadue responded, ‘Yes, he’s certainly threatening John Howard. He’ll threaten any Prime Minister who doesn’t do what he wants and maybe, this time, he’s overplayed his hand.’

It has been argued by some that the pursuit of Murdoch’s interest in digital TV had an effect on the tone of Newscorp coverage of the GST debate. Observers noticed tabloid support for the GST throughout the period of lobbying for a stake for News in digital TV. After it became clear that the News case would not get up, there was an apparent volte face in coverage of such starkness that the *Bulletin*’s Max Walsh suggested that ‘anyone viewing the front pages of the Murdoch press across Australia throughout January would instinctively conclude that an orchestrated campaign was under way’.

Murdoch, father and son, along with a substantial proportion of the Australian electorarate, have been long-time avowed republicans, and they are of course entitled to their
view. But the personal attack on the Prime Minister made by Lachlan—interestingly, in a speech to a collection of Wall Street bankers in New York—struck some as excessive, and the tone of the coverage in News publications throughout the constitutional campaign was so strident that in the end, it seems to me, it actually damaged the cause of the referendum, and I understand that some within the News organisation accept that view.

There has been recent coverage about News’s involvement in the National Textiles dispute, but that issue has received sufficient attention and I do not propose to rehearse it again now. We could look to other examples: at the state level, last week Matthew Moore published an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on News’s prosecution of its commercial interests in relation to SOCOG. Newscorp was seeking the status of official photographer in the torch relay to give it access to the 10,000 relay runners who presumably would be prepared to pay handsomely for a photograph of their efforts. When News was knocked back on that request, two days later the Daily Telegraph newspaper published a column by its Olympics editor, Glenda Korporaal, arguing that SOCOG was ‘in very real danger of further alienating some of its strongest potential supporters’. Matthew Moore goes on to say, ‘There was a whiff of grapeshot.’ He quotes the article again:

SOCOG seems in danger of putting in jeopardy its only remaining potential source of good news before the games—the torch relay.

It is suggested that some 48 hours later, after reading the article, Michael Eyers rang News and indicated that some accommodation could be arrived at and that News reporters would indeed be given special status on the bus and they would be entitled to take photographs and to sell them to torch runners. This apparently produced a considerable sense of victory within the News organisation, but it is just another demonstration of the risk of using news and current affairs coverage as a vehicle for prosecuting the wider commercial interests of a news organisation.

What we have seen so far are eyewitness accounts. We have seen similar fact evidence in both Australia and the UK. We have seen corroboration from other commentators. The question of motive arises, and some have pointed to the fact that most senior executives of News have a significant proportion of their wealth tied up in News shares and options which would seem to provide a motive for a particular accent on the covering of News’s commercial interests. Others have suggested that the power of the proprietor over appointments and promotions is a factor. It has been put to me by a colleague that all proprietors have an interest in the denigration of politicians as a class, because that then strengthens their own position of influence. That may well be paranoia, and indeed this is part of the problem. In defence of News, everyone who gets up to speak on the issue speaks through their particular lens of interest, whether that is as a disgruntled former employee, a competitor in another organisation or a politician displaying the paranoia for which we are well known. The question is really about transparency and the role of the media in a thriving democracy. There is evidence of generational change with the coming of Lachlan to the reins, and I believe there is a conflict taking place in News between the old guard—the sort of Sun King scenario—and the new players. I want to urge the young Turks to carry on, and I wish them well in their endeavours. (Time expired)
transfer of funds from the Capital Investment Program to fund operational expenditure and changed priorities in the acquisition program. These changes are being made under the Defence global budgeting arrangements;

That is somewhat of an innocuous type of statement to be made by the Minister for Finance and Administration in respect of additional appropriations for the Australian Defence Force and the Department of Defence. But when one looks behind what has been happening in that organisation during the last four years under the leadership, firstly, of Ian McLachlan and more recently under the leadership of the present Minister for Defence, John Moore, one sees that clearly there are some worrying signs and some worrying trends.

Indeed, so deep-seated are those concerns in the Department of Defence that the new secretary to that department, Dr Alan Hawke, was driven to deliver a speech marking something like his first 100 days as the new Secretary to the Department of Defence under the very catchy title of ‘What’s the matter—a due diligence report.’ Dr Hawke delivered this due diligence report, which has been described as one of the most extraordinary and gutsy speeches delivered by a mandarin in charge of one of the most important and most senior departments—and certainly a department which has an extremely healthy budget—at a very public gathering at the National Press Club and it rightly grabbed a number of headlines. The speech that Dr Hawke delivered is available on the Department of Defence’s web site and those who perhaps do not have access to the web site can find it reprinted in full in the latest edition of the RSL’s Stand To. If you have the opportunity to look at the speech that Dr Hawke delivered, you will find that it makes some very interesting reading.

It has been a long time—indeed a very long time—since we have heard a departmental head refer to his own budget, the potential for that budget and the present state of the budget in the Department of Defence as parlous. He described his budget as parlous. In this particular speech that he gave, Dr Hawke said:

Financial performance is reported in financial statements. The Auditor-General and his senior staff have left me in no doubt that Defence’s financial statements are at risk of being qualified next year in relation to the valuation of Defence’s assets.

And, as Dr Hawke says:

This tends to focus the mind a bit!
It certainly does tend to focus the mind a bit. It focuses the mind on what has been happening within the Department of Defence for the last four years. When the incoming Liberal government came into office, they said that the Department of Defence was one of those sacrosanct departments of the government which would be protected at every opportunity from cuts to the budget. What we have seen in the last several years with successive budgets is that that statement has been honoured—more, I suggest, because of necessity involving some other aspects of the Defence portfolio—but it certainly has seen no increase in funds being made available. In fact, the budget has been retained in real terms at what it was under the former Labor government.

...
end of its economic life, whether it be the FA18s or the F111s—our two fighter and strike aircraft respectively—or the frigates. We have already seen that the destroyers have come to the end of their economic life. There is a great debate going on as to whether they should be replaced by 20-year-old Kidd class destroyers that were first built for the Shah of Iran—that is how old they are. There is a huge debate going on about the capability that might provide for the Australian Defence Force. We have to take into consideration the fact that the Fremantle class patrol boats have now come to the end of their economic life. The government has taken a decision with respect to them. They are not going to do an upgrade on them; they are going to replace them entirely. I know that would certainly be of some interest to the honourable parliamentary secretary at the table because HMAS Cairns is located within his electorate of Leichhardt and it is one of the patrol boat bases for Northern Australia. I have touched on a number of projects, and I have not mentioned anything that might belong in the Army’s domain—whether it be the tanks, the rifles or whatever. The Steyr rifles that we use have to be replaced shortly as well. Each and every piece of the existing kit has to be replaced.

The government has been saying that there will be no increase in Defence expenditure in this forthcoming budget that will be handed down on 9 May. The Prime Minister the other day said that the budget after next will see an increase in Defence expenditure. The more cynical of us might say that that might be just before the next election, and the government may be going to wrap themselves in the flag once again and say, ‘Aren’t we terrific; we’re prepared to put some money into Defence.’ But it will not matter who is in government over the next three, four or five years because fundamental decisions are going to have to be made, worth variously—according to the estimates of experts in the field—anywhere between $45 billion to $110 billion to replace our Defence equipment.

All of that, of course, is going to be determined in the main by some of the decisions taken in the white paper that is coming out in September of this year. I am pleased that at least the department has decided—and I think it may have been because of some concerns we have raised—that there will be some discussion papers out there in the marketplace for people to raise their concerns and perhaps to have an input into the whole debate about defence in this country.

I think it is an unhealthy situation if people believe that, because of our success in East Timor, that should be the be-all and end-all of what we should and can do as a nation in terms of defence. We were very successful in East Timor, and I will have something more to say about that when we debate the increase in the Medicare levy to pay for that particular deployment when the bill is introduced in this place either this Thursday or next week. But we have to be very careful in running a risk of people believing, because we were successful in East Timor, that that is all we need to do to have a sustainable and healthy Australian defence force for the defence of Australia and perhaps to be engaged in other activities such as peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations or in some other coalition type of arrangement.

That is simply a nonsense. It is absolute and abject nonsense to suggest that East Timor should frame our defence policy. The lessons of East Timor will be an element in our defence policy and a strong element in the input into the defence white paper, but that is going to be one of the most critical pieces of documentation to come out of any government for quite some time. It will be so because of the acquisition issue. It will be so because of the block obsolescence issue. It will be so simply because we are finding that, more and more today, something like 40 per cent to 45 per cent of the entire defence force budget of $11 billion a year actually goes to personnel costs. It is going to the costs of keeping our fighting men and women in uniform and in the Department of Defence. That is rather extraordinary when you think that we are faced with this difficulty of trying to work out what sort of equipment we are going to need to defend Australia.

An even more fundamental question as a part of that is what sort of defence of Australia do we actually want? Do we want what Labor have always believed is important—that is, that we should defend Australia first
at is, that we should defend Australia first and that we should have an ability to operate in some sort of multilateral type of operation, perhaps deployed offshore? Or, should there also be an emphasis on peacekeeping operations, in the same way that we were effective in East Timor?

Now that the Asian economic crisis is over, we see at the present time that many of the nations to our immediate north and northwest, and even in North-East Asia, are actually upping the ante substantially in their defence budgets. The other day, for example, India brought down its defence budget. It is going to increase it by $20 billion for one year. Of course, a lot of that has been brought about because of the war on its borders with Pakistan. Nevertheless, India is going to upgrade its defence budget and enter into a mini-arms race with Pakistan.

We are seeing in other countries now that the Asian economic crisis has concluded that deferrals that occurred previously in the acquisition of new equipment are now being picked up. We have seen China, Malaysia and other nations in our immediate region increase substantially the size of their defence budgets. What does this mean for us? We have enjoyed a great degree of stability in the immediate region because we have had superior firepower and we have enjoyed superior training. We have enjoyed an advantage that many of the other nations within the immediate region do not possess. If we are talking seriously about how we defend ourselves, we have that knowledge edge, we have that technology edge and we defend the land-sea gap. All of that is in some danger. Without putting too fine a point on it, all of that is in some danger as the nations in our immediate region and beyond buy the latest and greatest military hardware.

We are talking now about the fact that any war in the future, any skirmish in the future, is not going to be of the traditional type that you might have seen in movies about World War II. It is not going to be like that. It is going to be fought with stand-off weapons, it is going to be fought with missiles and it is going to be fought with high-tech equipment. What you are probably going to see are platforms like unmanned aerial vehicles delivering missiles. You are not going to see too many armed aircraft. You are going to see people playing war games, virtually, on computer screens many miles from where the actual conflict is taking place. Rather than it dragging on for four, five or six years, it might all be over in a matter of four, five or six hours.

That is the future of warfare in the world, regretfully. It is because of these sorts of concerns that budgetary concerns for Australia are raised. We have to know through the process of the white paper deliberations what sort of a defence of Australia this government proposes. Flowing from that will be consideration of issues like force structure. What do we want? Do we want to buy more tanks and put in place heavily mechanised divisions within the army? Or do we want to have some sort of rapid response like very quickly deployable groups that can go out within our region and serve Australia well? Do we need surface vessels? The whole issue of the replacement of our destroyers raises some fundamental questions. If we are going to defend the air-sea gap as a first priority, as I have always maintained that we should, perhaps it is air superiority that we need. Certainly what we need is something like the AEW&C, the airborne intelligence gathering operation that Boeing proposes to supply to Australia. But that seems to be in danger as well because this government is sending all sorts of signals that it is proposing to slash, cut and burn many of the acquisition programs, many of which have already been proved, I might say. By slashing those, it is going to compromise the security of this nation. By cutting out some of the intelligence gathering apparatus, by cutting out some of the updates that are necessary now for our air capability, by perhaps putting off some of the acquisitions of troop transportation, by looking at the Air 87, the combat reconnaissance helicopter for the army—by looking at all of these things and saying, ‘We’re going to put them all on hold,’ or ‘We’re just going to peel back from them and then we’ll see what the white paper brings down before we make any further decisions,’ I believe is irresponsible.

You cannot say that this government did not know what the circumstances of the
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The budget were—particularly in defence—over the last four years. After all, they were the government. They knew what was going on. Has the minister been asleep at the wheel for the last 18 months since he has been in charge? Did his predecessor, Mr McLachlan, who seemed to have an obsession about wanting to project Australia’s firepower offshore instead of defending Australia, have some misconception as to how best to defend this nation and, as a consequence, did not keep an eye on the budget implications for this? How is it that we are seeing the end of all of this equipment that we need to defend Australia, all at the one time? Clearly, the present government needed to tackle some of these issues some time ago, and they have not done so.

We have been raising these issues—I certainly have been since I have had the opportunity to be the Labor spokesman on defence—for the last 18 months. We have been saying to the minister, ‘You want efficiencies, you are trying to drive efficiencies in the Department of Defence. You are always saying you want good practices and better outcomes before you find any more money for the Department of Defence.’ This is a minister who goes into cabinet arguing for more funds for submarine programs which are desperately needed because, despite some of the headlines that appear from time to time, the Collins class submarines are going to be the best kit that we could possibly have. They are the best conventionally-powered submarines in the world and we need some additional funds. Some decisions should have been taken by management within the Navy in years gone by so that the haemorrhage of the associated costs could have been stemmed, but that did not happen. But this is a minister who wants to bring strong business acumen into the Department of Defence.

The Defence Reform Program was supposed to offer up all these savings that would see the pointy end of defence benefit. The simple fact is: all of those things are parameters associated with budgets. If that is the case, why do we now find Dr Allan Hawke, the Secretary of the Department of Defence, saying that the budget outlook is parlous for the Department of Defence? The answer is: because it is. We have got all these problems on the horizon and yet there does not seem to be a willingness to fix it. It is all well and good for the Prime Minister to say, ‘The budget after next we are going to take care of that. The budget after next we will put more money in defence.’ I am sorry, but it sounds to me like one of those ‘never ever’ promises when they say, ‘At some stage down the track we will certainly put that money in. We just have not reached that track yet and we are not sure how far it is going to be before we will put the money in.’

I sat with the Treasurer and with Dr Allan Hawke today at the luncheon for the Interfet troops. There was a unity ticket between Dr Hawke and me about further funds for the Department of Defence, and I am not sure the Treasurer was necessarily listening with both ears but we gave it our best shot. The fact is that there is going to be a need that cannot be understated for further injections of funds in the Department of Defence. This is not a question of playing politics; it is a question of the defence of Australia. It is a question of trying to work out what we need to replace ageing kit, what sort of force structure we need to have, how the reserves perhaps fit into that scheme, and what we actually need to get those efficiencies which we can then drive into a better outcome for defence.

We are willing, and we always have been, to enter into a constructive debate on this, and that is why I am pleased there is going to be a discussion paper coming out on some of these issues associated with the white paper. We will be delighted to make some comment on that. We have been doing so over the last 12 months or so, and we believe we have made a contribution in that way. But I cannot conclude without stating again: the budget needs to be addressed and it needs to be addressed soon. Having four lines in additional estimates suggesting that money needs to go in, is not an appropriate way to explain where the problems are. (Time expired)

Mrs DRAPER (Makin) (8.56 p.m.)—I rise to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 1999-2000 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 1999-2000. These bills embody the government’s continuing commitment to sound financial management of the economy. We should be
proud of the Howard government’s achievements and the fact that the $10.3 billion deficit which we inherited from the Labor government has been turned around. The Commonwealth will continue to repay billions of dollars of debt, freeing future Australians from this burden whilst ensuring that Australian families and businesses reap the benefits of good economic management and good, strong, sound policies for Australia.

I would like to quote part of the ACTU’s 1999-2000 living wage submission, where the ACTU—and I do mean the ACTU—actually congratulates the Howard coalition for its successful policies. It states:

The Australian economy is clearly characterised by strong economic growth, low inflation, moderate wage growth and improved international competitiveness. Unemployment over the past year has also declined remarkably with the strength of Australia’s labour market performance showing encouraging signs for the year ahead.

I will repeat that salient point once more, for the benefit of the members on the other side of the House. The ACTU stated:

Unemployment over the past year has also declined remarkably with the strength of Australia’s labour market performance showing encouraging signs for the year ahead.

This is something that the Labor Party were unable to achieve while in office. In fact, under the Keating Labor government, all Australians had to suffer the ‘recession we had to have’ and interest rates as high as 17 per cent—and more for businesses and for farmers on the land. When the coalition was elected in 1996, not only was the Treasury cupboard bereft of funds but it was, in fact, in debt to the tune of over $10 billion—not to mention the l-a-w tax cuts that disappeared completely, as well as the hike in the rates of wholesale sales tax after the 1993 election.

For the benefit of my constituents in Makin, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the coalition’s achievements since coming to office in 1996. In the area of employment, 596,300 jobs have been created since March 1996—200,000 more jobs than were created in Labor’s last six years in office. The unemployment rate for the month of January 2000 was 6.8 per cent compared with Labor’s December high in 1992 of 11.2 per cent. And who, you might well ask, was the employment minister at the time? None other than the current Leader of the Opposition, the member for Brand, Kim Beazley. Well done, Kim.

The 1999 December quarter inflation rate was 1.8 per cent compared to an average of 5.2 per cent under Labor. Today interest rates at the standard variable mortgage rate of 7.3 per cent are way down on Labor’s level of 10.5 per cent—not to mention again rates as high as 17 per cent under Keating and the ‘recession we had to have’. In relation to private health insurance, there has been an increase of almost 300,000 in membership since 1 January 1999 which, of course, as most Australians would appreciate, helps to alleviate the problems with the waiting lists in the public health system. With regard to apprenticeships, there are now 140,000 new apprentices in training in traditional trades—a 15 per cent increase since 1995. In the area of aged care, the coalition is committed to providing quality care for older Australians on a fair and sustainable basis, to meeting the challenge of Australia’s ageing population and to ensuring nursing homes meet standards with properly assessed care levels. As well as providing for older Australians in a way in which affords them the dignity and respect they deserve, as part of the coalition initiatives we have committed recurrent funding for residential aged care—nursing homes and hostels. This has grown by 43 per cent since the Howard government came to office.

The government presently provides around $3.5 billion a year in subsidies to care for 135,000 residents in 3,000 aged care facilities around Australia. We have also provided capital funding of $84 million over four years—from 1998-99—to assist facilities in rural and remote areas to meet their capital needs. A total of $28.2 million is being provided to assist in industry restructuring. The coalition has also provided a system of accreditation which applies to all nursing homes and hostels to ensure that the level of aged care services in Australia is of a consistently high standard. During the 13 years under Labor, the quality of nursing homes was allowed to deteriorate. Labor knew of
the urgent need to upgrade nursing homes, but failed to act—dismally. They had commissioned a report by Professor Bob Gregory which indicated that the sector needed a capital injection of around $1.3 billion over 10 years. Labor failed to act against the small number of homes that provided poor quality care. Labor abandoned the aged care sector, particularly in regional and rural areas.

In the area of the coalition’s Tough on Drugs campaign, I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister on his wonderful initiative, particularly in relation to the national illicit drug strategy. As a government, under this strategy, we have committed a total of $295 million towards a balanced approach to the drug problem including for law enforcement, education and treatment. This includes $74.2 million to the Australian Federal Police, $69.9 million to increase protection of our borders, $22.6 million to enhance the capacity of the NCA, $1.8 million for research into drug and crime links, and $1.8 million to AUSTRAC.

Currently in my electorate of Makin, Mr Stephen Trautwein from Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and School and Mr Paul Ridley from Valley View Secondary School are running courses for parents of students as part of their ‘How to drug proof your kids’ program. I have a lovely letter from Mr Stephen Trautwein, thanking me for my support for their work in this area. However, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate everyone for their commitment to helping young people and their families in my electorate of Makin. Another particularly important initiative by the government in this area is the recent launch of the national alcohol campaign by the health minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge. Through a series of television commercials and supporting media and print advertisements in magazines, the program targets 15- to 17-year-olds. There is an excellent classroom program for teachers to utilise, as well as a package of information, including videos, to help parents run successful parent nights, talk to their children and take positive action about alcohol problems.

In relation to the environment and heritage, under coalition priorities the Natural Heritage Trust has been established to help Australians repair and regenerate the local environment. It also gives people the chance to identify and solve environmental problems in their local community, and it enhances Australia’s reputation as a clean, green nation. The Living Cities program will improve the environment in Australia’s urban areas. As part of the coalition initiatives, the $1.5 billion Natural Heritage Trust Fund has been established to target five main areas: vegetation—$430 million to preserve native bushland and restore 250,000 hectares of degraded bushland each year to 2001; land care—$720 million will be used for farmers and communities in the assessment of the extent of water and land degradation, the eradication of feral animals and weeds, and for investment in voluntary land care and other environmental groups; rivers—$380 million has been allocated to improve water quality, water flow and fish regeneration outside the Murray-Darling system through the national river care initiative and the Murray-Darling Basin; biodiversity—$120 million has been set aside for a network of parks and reserves to provide safe habitats for our plants and animals and to save threatened birds and animals such as the albatross, bilby, numbat and mallee fowl; and for coastal and marine issues—$200 million for coastal pollution, including sewage outfalls, stormwater and oil spills and to implement the national oceans policy.

During 1999 we have funded more than 2,500 successful projects under the Natural Heritage Trust as well as related programs. We have also committed an additional $250 million to the trust from the sale of the second 16 per cent tranche of Telstra, signed agreements with all states and territories for them to retain and manage native vegetation and control land clearing, and secured increases in annual spending on sustainable agriculture and biological conservation. The amount spent in 1996-97 to 2000-01 will more than double the amount spent by Labor in its final year.

I would like to note here tonight that a cornerstone of the coalition government’s efforts has been the establishment of the Prime Minister’s Supermarket to Asia Council in September 1996.
tially allocated $14.5 million over three years to fund its Supermarket to Asia work. As part of the coalition’s achievements, the Supermarket to Asia Council’s action plan has the goal of seeing Australian agrifood exports to Asia reach $16 billion by the year 2002 and encouraging at least another 2,000 agrifood businesses to become active exporters to Asia, thereby contributing to stronger rural industries and communities. A total of 10,000 jobs are expected to be created in the Australian economy as the Supermarket to Asia Council’s goals are achieved, and a further $23.7 million over three years from 1999-2000 has been committed to continue and augment the government’s Supermarket to Asia Strategy. A total of $9.2 million for a food and fibre chains program has been allocated to assist Australia’s food and fibre industries build more competitive supply chains into global export markets, based on closer cooperation along the chain from the producer to the consumer, as well as $3.1 million over the next three years for a new industries development program to better identify potential new industries and Australian agrifood products and help overcome barriers facing innovative export orientated rural producers.

A further $6.6 million has been committed to the Supermarket to Asia technical market access program which has increased market access for a range of Australian agrifood exports to Asian markets and is actively negotiating to further reduce technical market access barriers. A Quality Food Australia program has been implemented to allow Australian food exporters with appropriate food safety and quality assurance systems in place to use the QFA logo and benefit from joint promotions and advertising campaigns in selected Asian markets. Air and sea freight export has been established to bring together transport providers and exporters, state governments, airport lessees-authorities and port authorities to generate practical solutions that will streamline the export chain.

In relation to veterans’ affairs, the coalition believes strongly that the Australian veteran community deserve generous support, care and compensation through a simple, fair and responsive system unique to their needs. It is also vital that the service of our veterans continues to be honoured publicly and proudly by their fellow Australians and particularly by the generations who have never known or witnessed the harrowing experience of war. I congratulate the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Bruce Scott, on the great work that he has done with the veterans in my electorate of Makin.

In conclusion, I would like to touch on the GST debate and inform the House, for the benefit of members opposite, that the coalition believes in a taxation system that provides for $12 billion of personal income tax cuts, that will reduce the price of diesel in rural and regional Australia, that will ensure that 80 per cent of taxpayers pay a marginal rate of not more than 30 cents in the dollar and that will give states increased state government services such as schools, hospitals and police. That is under the coalition, of course. However, under Labor—with the roll-back, rollover, lay down, roly-poly policy on a destination to nowhere—cuts to services and increases to income tax are the things Beazley is planning for us. We, the electorate of Australia, say, ‘No, thank you.’ I congratulate the Howard government on its achievements and commend the bills to the House.

Mr LEE (Dobell) (9.11 p.m.)—As the honourable member for Makin finished on the GST, perhaps I can begin with the GST and ask the honourable member, figuratively, whether she has spoken to any of her small business constituents. If they have views in any way similar to the views of small business representatives in the electorate of Dobell, they would be telling her that small business is very concerned about the massive compliance costs being imposed on them by the Howard government’s GST. The honourable member for Makin claimed that state governments will be much better off under the government’s GST package. She claimed that schools, hospitals and the police will have more funding from their state governments because of the miracles that will be worked by this GST. I hate to break it to the member for Makin, but her own state government—the Liberal Olsen government in South Australia—has already said that it ex-
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Prospects to be worse off for at least the first six years of the GST package. The Howard government has given a short-term guarantee which will leave state governments such as the one of the honourable member’s own state in a worse position. It is for that reason that the honourable member for Makin should understand that her state Liberal colleagues are expressing concern about the fact that the GST will deliver nowhere near as much money as people such as the Prime Minister and the Treasurer claim.

Tonight I want to spend most of my time discussing a number of issues in education. Mr Deputy Speaker Hollis, I am sure you will remember that before the last budget the Prime Minister claimed that his 1999 budget would be ‘an education budget’. That was his description in the week leading up to the budget. When that budget was finally revealed we saw a continuation in the cuts to higher education. We saw no growth funding for TAFE, vocational training. We saw the abolition of the equity based scholarships for kids from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to afford to go to university. We saw a significant increase in the funding for non-government schools and a 20th of that increase in funding for government schools. There was a 20 to one difference in the extra funding provided for private schools as compared to government schools. My worry is that the Prime Minister thinks that is an education budget. In the four years that John Howard has been the Prime Minister of Australia we have seen a billion dollars cut from federal funding for higher education. We have seen the abolition of the growth funding that the former Labor government was providing to ANTA for vocational education and training. We have seen the introduction of the enrolment benchmark adjustment—that evil EBA that does not just take money from government schools and deliver it to private schools. It is worse than that. It takes money from government schools and puts it into Peter Costello’s pocket. It puts it into the consolidated revenue account.

The EBA seeks to take money away from the government school system if there is a shift in the percentage of students attending government schools. If the percentage balance between government and non-government schools changes in a state, the state loses funding. This can happen even if there is actually an increase in the number of students attending government schools. It is an outrage that none of the government’s own backbenchers have been speaking out about the unfair deal in the federal government’s inadequate funding for government schools. Tonight I also want to refer to a few announcements that I made last night in a speech to the Sydney Institute. The Labor Party is very keen to make sure that people are aware of a number of positive initiatives that we intend to launch in education. Many of these will be announced between now and the next election but a little later I will say a few things about the two announcements that were made last night.

I draw to the House’s attention that a couple of weeks ago the honourable member for Dickson and the Leader of the Opposition launched the Labor Party’s Workforce 2010 discussion paper, which outlined four initiatives. First of all, there is a proposal to develop skills profiles to identify areas where workers were at risk of losing their jobs. Secondly, we have a proposal for retraining workers who are at risk, involving targeting some retraining money for them. Thirdly, we intend in government to establish a national workforce forecasting council. Fourthly, we have provided a commitment to maintain a role for the federal government in the job market. We know that this government has deliberately set out on a course to destroy the CES and to put Employment National in its place. We know that Employment National is on a clear path to being undermined and shut down under this government.

The reason why the opposition is putting so much emphasis on education and training is that we believe that is a crucial part of transforming Australia into a knowledge nation. We know that many of our traditional industries are going to face greater competition due to globalisation and the information technology revolution. We know that the way that people live, work and learn is going to keep changing because of globalisation and the IT revolution. We have to work to secure for Australia the high value, high wage jobs
of the future. These are the businesses that can create, use and transform knowledge. In many ways Australia’s future is in the hands of people like the medical researcher who is working on a new diagnostic test to identify or help cure disease, the industrial chemist developing better ways to manufacture Australian products, perhaps in a factory in the Illawarra, or the computer engineer who is designing the software that improves communications for people who live in remote communities. Australia must be investing in this research if we are to make sure that we develop intellectual property that generates royalty payments and licence fees for our country.

We are certainly going to have to pay to use the intellectual property developed in other countries. We will have to pay money to use diagnostic tests, industrial manufacturing processes or computer software that is developed in other countries. But we will need to make sure that Australia is investing enough today so that we do not face a massive deficit in intellectual property that will swamp our balance of payments. New opportunities for our nation because of investment in reskilling our workers and investment in research will generate new opportunities for the whole country. New opportunities for our nation because of investment in reskilling our workers and investment in research will generate new opportunities for the whole country. New opportunities for our nation because of investment in reskilling our workers and investment in research will generate new opportunities for the whole country. 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New opportunities for our nation because of investment in reskilling our workers and investment in research will generate new opportunities for the whole country.

The Prime Minister is fond of telling us that, as far as he is concerned, the Australian economy is in a stronger position than at any time since the Second World War. That is according to John Winston Howard. The problem for the Prime Minister is that, at the time when he claims the economy is strong, Australia’s investment in research and development has actually been declining. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has been keeping these statistics for 20 years and the last two years are the only ones on record when Australia’s private research and development has actually declined. Public investment in research has also declined because of the massive cuts that this government has made to our universities. When public and private investment is declining, it is no wonder that people realise that there is a crisis looming.

If our country were positioning itself for the Information Age, you would expect that the percentage of national income invested by the Commonwealth government in education, training and research would be increasing. In fact the reverse is occurring. We have the three per cent of GDP being invested by the Commonwealth government in education, training and research declining to 2½ per cent of GDP. I do not know of any other advanced country that has deliberately reduced its national investment in this area at the same time as private research has been declining. While Australia’s investment in research, education and training is falling off as a percentage of GDP, our competitors are doing the reverse. In the United States, President Clinton has recently announced an extra $US2.8 billion for research. Britain, under Tony Blair, has just announced an extra $1 billion in a white paper. But in Australia Dr Kemp’s research white paper released two days before Christmas did not have one extra dollar for the nation’s research effort.

The point is that we have to work towards addressing problems in the education, training and higher education sector. Last week I had the privilege of visiting Oatlands School in Tasmania. I was very impressed by the great work that is taking place at the school, under principal Keith Wenn, in seeking to lift retention rates. The students there are learning all sorts of skills in aquaculture and are also learning how to restore some of the historic crafts that used to be used in town. I had the privilege of meeting a couple of the students who have restored a horse-drawn cart, which I am sure will be put to good use in the town in years to come. Certainly Dick Adams, the federal member for Lyons, is very proud of the good work that takes place at Oatlands School, and I think there are many things that other schools could learn from that school.

One of the most important things we can do in education is to improve the quality of teaching that is taking place in our schools,
and I will say something more about that a bit later. In the last few months, we have had quite a few people seeking to once again breathe life into the plans of the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs to deregulate higher education in Australia. People would remember that last September I released Dr Kemp’s cabinet submission which outlined his plan to deregulate student fees, introduce voucher funding and replace HECS with real interest rate student loans. In the last two months, we have had the national convention of the Young Liberals endorsing the deregulation of fees at universities and calling for the introduction of vouchers. We have also had a few vice-chancellors calling for student fees to be deregulated at all universities and others, such as Gavin Brown from the University of Sydney, have called for a smaller group of Ivy League universities to have their fees deregulated.

The one thing that I do agree with Dr Kemp, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, on is that higher education in Australia is in a crisis. In his own cabinet submission he said that the quality of university teaching and research has been undermined by the higher student-staff ratios, the less frequent lecture and tutorial contact, and the run-down in research infrastructure. As far as we know he was right—we hope he was not lying to his colleagues in cabinet—when he said:

... eight institutions appear to be operating at a deficit and some regional campuses are at risk.

This crisis should be no surprise, given that the Howard government has taken $1 billion out of higher education. To those few who still believe that Dr Kemp’s deregulatory plan is the solution, I make these simple points. First, Labor will not support deregulation of student fees. Increasing the burden on students will make it impossible for students from low and middle income families to be able to afford to study at the best universities. Students have already been hit with HECS increases of up to 125 per cent, making average students fees in Australia now comparable to those in the United States. The reason the majority of vice-chancellors oppose deregulation is that they understand that the newer, smaller and regional universities will be the ones that are hardest hit. Regional universities know they will not be able to charge the high fees which the sandstone universities will be able to command. They know they will lose the best researchers and lecturers to the sandstone universities.

We also oppose the introduction of voucher funding, because that would simply divert scarce public funds from our public universities to private universities such as Bond University and Melbourne University Private. We also reject the proposal to scrap HECS and replace it with a real interest rate system of student loans because that is unfair. Real interest rate loans mean that the longer you pay the more you pay. If you have a low income after graduation, it will take you longer to repay your debt so you will pay more. If you cannot find work immediately after graduation, or if you volunteer to work for an overseas charity for a year or if you take time off work to raise a family, you will also take longer to pay so you will pay more.

In New Zealand, the introduction of deregulated fees for universities and real interest rate student loans have driven graduates overseas. Many of them are now never likely to return because their debt has grown exponentially. Australia’s universities are in a crisis; we agree with the government on that. But the challenge is not to make it worse by falling for the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs’s argument that the only solution to the funding crisis is the Howard government’s deregulatory model.

I turn to some issues in schools. First of all, I place on record the simple fact that a lot of good teachers are out there working in schools. Many of those teachers are changing people’s lives every day in every school. The best teachers know that no matter how well they teach today they are going to have to do even better in the future. It is important that teachers, parents and governments understand that the most important thing we can do to improve the quality of student outcomes is to invest more in teacher quality. There has been some interesting research in the United States by Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, the professor of education at Standford University and the Executive Director of the National Commission on Teaching and Amer-
ica’s Future. She has made very strong findings that the best way to improve student performance is to invest in teaching quality. For that reason, last night the Labor Party made two commitments to lift the standard of teaching quality. We intend to introduce teacher development contracts and teacher excellence scholarships.

The teacher development contracts will be a partnership between a federal Labor government and teachers who share a commitment to improving student results by lifting teacher quality. Teachers will be offered by their employer, whether it is the state or a private school, the opportunity to undertake a course of study to improve their teaching skills. If a teacher decides to take up one of the teacher development contracts, the course will be funded by the Commonwealth government. The Labor government would also agree to provide an incentive payment of around $2,000 upon completion of the course. The part of the contract that the teacher has to contribute is their time, because they would be expected to complete the course after normal school hours or at weekends or in the school holidays. Our priority with the teacher development contracts is to target teachers who are forced to teach outside their area of expertise. The contracts may also be offered to try to encourage more teachers to have a better understanding of using IT in the classroom. They could be used to recognise excellent teachers and to help them share their knowledge with other teachers and other schools. We are very keen to work with the states and the territories, the deans of education, the government and non-government sectors, and teachers to develop appropriate courses to improve classroom teaching practice.

The second part of our undertakings announced last night was the Teacher Excellence Scholarships. A Beazley Labor government will offer scholarships to high achieving school students to encourage them to study education. We will be focusing this on the areas of undersupply which, at the moment, are in maths, science and IT. There is strong evidence that Australia has a growing shortage of these qualified teachers and, when some people are claiming that up to 25 per cent of the teachers in Victoria who teach maths and science are not properly qualified to teach in those areas, we have to take urgent action. Labor’s Teacher Excellence Scholarships will provide a subsidy for the HECS debt that otherwise would be payable. That is worth about $1,500 per year for the years that a teacher stays in the profession.

Finally, I want to repeat a few remarks I made last night about my disappointment in the New South Wales Teachers Federation’s decision last week to place bans on the English language literacy assessment test in New South Wales. I understand the ban was imposed because the federation opposed literacy teachers being moved to the schools which were identified as having the greatest literacy problems. It is hard to believe that a progressive union would oppose targeting literacy teachers to the school students with the most serious literacy problems.

Labor’s position on testing is clear. First, we support basic skills tests; second, we support targeted intervention to address the problems identified; and, third, we support the right of parents to know how their child is progressing at school. The difference between Labor and Liberals is that Labor supports the testing and the Liberals oppose providing the additional funding to provide the remedial teachers to address the problems. For these reasons, I believe that there are a number of issues that need to be addressed and discussed. Labor’s positive new initiatives will give us a chance to debate these issues in more detail at a later time.

Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (9.31 p.m.)—In rising to speak to Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 1999-2000, I think it is right that we should review where we are—the ‘state of the nation’, as the Americans call it. I cannot speak for the whole nation of Australia; all I can do is speak for the part of the nation that I represent. I would like to think that I can speak with some authority because I would like to think that I have made myself familiar with the problems and the issues in that area.

In my electorate, the first town of major size is Mareeba. When you drive into Mareeba, there are tobacco signs all over the town. It used to have a tobacco industry. When I was elected to parliament, there were
660 tobacco farmers. I would presume there were probably two workers for every farmer, so some 2000 people depended for their livelihood on that industry. It has absolutely nothing to do with people not smoking. In fact, people are arguably smoking more now than they were at that time. If you allow for the black market tobacco being sold extensively throughout the country, there is a greater consumption of tobacco in Australia than there was then.

But, of course, it is no longer Australian tobacco. We deregulated that industry and, where manufacturers were once forced to use 50 per cent Australian content, now they are not. The tariffs that facilitated that arrangement were removed completely. Under WTO, all we had to do was reduce them by 30 per cent, but we abolished them completely. With that we have all but abolished the tobacco industry. We now no longer have 660 farmers; we have 130 farmers, and even they are doing it very hard.

On the left-hand side as you drive into Mareeba, half of the main street is taken up by a huge timber mill. That timber mill has not worked since the days when the ALP government, under World Heritage, closed the timber industry in North Queensland. In fact, in every major town between Mareeba and Ingham, with the exception of Innisfail, you can actually see from the highway a huge timber mill that has been closed down. Each of those timber mills represented on average employment for about 70 people, and there is a timber mill in every one of those towns. I am referring to 10 major towns.

In the middle of the town are all the tobacco industry buildings and, as you drive out of the town, there are the meatworks. The meatworks were closed during the TB eradication campaign that removed 600,000 head of cattle from our two million head of cattle that we had in Far North Queensland. Approximately five meatworks were closed in North Queensland, and among them was the Mareeba meatworks.

The next town you come to is Tolga. Its landscape is dominated by two peanut silos. The government of the day and the ministers must bear the shameful burden of having made the decision to raise the amount of poison that is allowed in the peanuts being imported into Australia. Why a country that prides itself on its clean, green image would allow a dramatic increase in the amount of poison being consumed by Australians, breaking the regulations that had existed for many years in Australia and allowing a high content of poison so that peanuts could effectively come in from places like China and the United States that were not coming in before, is beyond the wildest stretches of my imagination.

I have not got time tonight, but I will be speaking extensively on milk tomorrow morning. Suffice to say that milk farmers in the electorate of Kennedy, as well as throughout Queensland, as I understand it, have received a letter from their factory. It says, ‘You will no longer get 58.9c for your fresh market milk. On 1 July, after deregulation, you will get 41.5c for your milk.’ I deeply regret that the minister’s public statements concerning this seem to indicate somehow that his deregulation package is an achievement. Let me say clearly and unequivocally that no intelligent, sensible person in this country could have coped with an outcome that would see a huge diminution in our exports—as Victorian milk is no longer sent overseas but tumbled back into New South Wales and Queensland—which has already seen a 20 per cent or 30 per cent increase in prices to consumers, with a 30 per cent decrease in prices paid to the farmers and a takeover of almost the entire Australian industry by a big European Corporation—Parmalat. As the farmers go broke—with a 30 per cent decrease in their gross income, of course, they must—they have to sell their only liquid asset—their shares in their cooperative. And the only buyer out there is the big European Corporation Parmalat.

Let me move on. In the Ravenshoe area, the next town if you are driving south from the top of the electorate, the grape industry is significant. It is not huge, but it is significant. It is big in Charters Towers. Suffice to say that the Kennedy electorate probably contains about one-third to one-quarter of Australia’s northern grape production. We have now been told that Californian grapes will be allowed into this country. Californian grape
growers pay their pickers, their labour, $4 an hour. We, by law, have to pay our pickers around $11 an hour. Since it is a high labour input product, we have absolutely no hope of successfully competing against the United States. The minister has obviously taken advice from his department, and I would strongly recommend that the minister check out his advice in future because there have been public statements, which have been reported to me, that there will be a minimal effect upon the Australian market because the growing seasons do not overlap. This is obviously advice that he has received from his department. The towering ignorance of the public officials who would have given that advice to the minister have brought him what can only be humiliation in the eyes of the esoteric Australian public. There should be some sanctions upon this level of incompetence by the primary industries department, as well as AQIS. I will talk about that at a later stage.

I rang the biggest grower in Northern Australia earlier this evening and I asked, ‘What is our season?’ He said, ‘I started picking in August and I am still picking now,’ which of course is March. He said, ‘We can hold them in storage now with the gas arrangements for up to four months.’ If you would like to add that up, you will realise that the growing season in Australia is almost the whole year. The Americans, technologically, may even be a little bit ahead of us, so they would be able to produce for most of the year as well. Yet we have a statement coming out from a responsible person, obviously on the advice of his department, telling him that the growing seasons do not overlap. Maybe I have been brought up wrongly—maybe there are 30 months in the year.

There are a lot of little heroes in the next town who decided to bring in durian from overseas, which is the most expensive fruit in the entire world. The durian is the creme de la creme of fruits. They applied to AQIS to bring this fruit in. AQIS applied to them three criteria: if they wanted to bring in durian because there is a seed weevil in the Thailand durian industry. They had to have every single seed inspected by an AQIS inspector; they had to pay that AQIS inspector; and the inspection had to be done by an AQIS inspector. Those were the three criteria: AQIS had to do the inspection; they had to be paid by the Australian farmers; and every single seed had to be inspected.

The Thailand farmers applied to bring durian into Australia. They did not have to pay for an AQIS inspection. They did not have to have an AQIS inspector. They did not have to inspect every seed. So not one single one of those three criteria applied to the Australian farmers was applied to the Thailand durian farmers. These young men and some older men who have invested, in at least one case, almost their entire life savings in their durian farms on the basis that the same rules would be applied to Thai farmers as was applied to Australian farmers now find out that a different set of rules applies to foreign farmers than applies to Australian farmers. This would be in keeping with the towering incompetence of AQIS. The performance of that particular group of people is a disgrace to every single person in this House.

I would like to move on to the sugar industry. I do not blame this government or the last government for the plight of the sugar industry. There are international conditions which are driving the price down, something which happens regularly in the sugar industry. Just as regularly in the sugar industry the price rises. It is a cyclical commodity. I do not have time tonight to outline why it is a cyclical commodity; suffice to say that it is a cyclical commodity. We can ride the down roller-coaster. We have no difficulties in riding the down roller-coaster: we have ridden it every single time this century. But every single time this century we have been, in retrospect, blessed with enlightened governmental leadership. Every single time this century that we have been caught in this bind, we have had development bank loans available to us. The difference is that all the sugar farmers who now find themselves in such dire jeopardy have had imposed upon them interest rates of between 8½ and 11 per cent.

In Queensland, Bill Gunn, the Deputy Premier, and I were assigned by cabinet the task of setting up the Queensland Industry Development Corporation and to oversee it. It was based—just the same as Theodore and
King O’Malley had based their Commonwealth Bank and Black Jack McEwen had based his primary industries bank, his AIDC Bank and his Commonwealth Development Bank—on the premise that government can borrow money at the moment for around four or five per cent. So if government can borrow money at four or five per cent, and you have as safe a security value as you have in the sugar industry—I am not saying you have that in every agricultural industry but you most certainly have it in the sugar industry—then of course the government can loan out money to them at that interest rate. If you had a little bit of enlightened government, they would say, ‘Maybe we should give them a bit of help during this period of trial because if the industry falls over in certain areas we will not be able to put it back together again.’ If you close a mill, you cannot just go around and open up another one because it costs $70 million or $80 million or $100 million to open a mill if it closes down and becomes u/s. If you applied a very small amount of $10 million or $15 million, you could probably deliver interest rates at 2½ per cent to this industry. That is what has happened in almost every single case where this industry has gotten into trouble this century.

But that is not happening now because the last government—I must say with the cooperation and enthusiastic support of people on this side of the House as well—sold off the Commonwealth Development Bank. Heaven only knows, generation after generation of ALP leadership must have turned in their graves. The likes of King O’Malley, Chifley and Theodore, who sacrificed their political life to deliver to this country a way of fighting off the interests of international big banking interests, surely must have turned in their graves.

The trawling industry employs 700 or 800 people in the electorate of Kennedy. That industry has been told by Minister Hill—he claims it is his decision; I think it is really the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority’s decision—that trawling, which occurs on only about 18 per cent of the Queensland coastline now, must be curtailed. There is only a very small proportion of the area of the Queensland coast that is now trawled. Obviously you cannot trawl reefs or any areas where there are bommies. You cannot trawl in close because your nets will get snagged. In any event, legally you can trawl only a very small area. We now have DMVs on our fishing vessels so we can establish where they are at any point in time, so we can most adequately police these rules. I will not go into the details, but they had been told that they have to effectively reduce their catch by five per cent a year for the next seven years. If you take 30 per cent off a person’s gross income and his cost structures stay much the same, clearly you are going to be taking 100 per cent of his net. So the trawling industry in Queensland is looking at the valley of death.

In terms of what this means to individuals, I had a group of fishermen in my office and one of the wives broke into a bit of a trot running up and down my office. She was yelling at the top of her voice and my secretary came in twice to see whether the police were needed or an ambulance was needed, because quite clearly the stress had got to this young lady and it was affecting her very severely. Later on in the evening I and the local president of the QCFO were walking up the street together and one of the other fishermen from the meeting was sitting on a chair in the main street of Innisfail crying his eyes out. That is what these things mean to people.

I move on to the western part of my electorate. Charters Towers has for probably the last 15 years been a goldmining town. The Reserve Bank board appointed by the last government and the current government decided to flog off our gold reserves in one huge hit, clearly demonstrating to the world that Australia did not consider that the gold price was going to stay up and showing that the third biggest producer of gold in the world considered that gold really did not have much of a future. It was a clear and unequivocal signal which brought the price of gold throughout the world tumbling by 25 per cent and arguably 30 per cent. That had enormous ramifications for the stock market. Some three of our mines had fallen over, as mines often do. Where normally they would be pumped and rolled back up onto their feet by another float on the exchange, of course no money could be raised and those mines
closed their doors, putting some 200 or 300 people in Charters Towers out of work.

The wool industry, the great mainstay of the mid-west plains of North Queensland, is an industry where Doug Anthony, a great Australian who did not march to the drum of the ecocrats, the economic rationalists, and their ilk, introduced the minimum price scheme for wool. The price for wool and the income that this nation enjoyed from wool went up 300 per cent in the 2½ years after that man, with very great courage, initiative and leadership, introduced that scheme. When the pygmies of the Labor government, Mr Keating and Mr Kerin, removed that scheme, the price went down 300 per cent. Surprise, surprise! So Australia’s biggest export earning item, earning us that year $6,000 million, plummeted to below $3,000 million. The number of sheep in this country has dropped dramatically, by 30 or 40 per cent, so the herd is not there to earn the money even if the price were to be brought back. But, with the weak-kneed, supine, pathetic trading policies of the government of Australia for the last 15 years, does anyone seriously expect that we are going to be able to in any way assert a positive upward influence upon the market?

Once upon a time John McEwen got all the sugar producers together, exactly the same as later on the Arab countries did with the oil exporting countries, and said, “We are going to reduce the production of sugar throughout the world by”—I cannot remember the figure—“around 10 per cent.” That had an enormous salutary effect upon the price of sugar worldwide; in fact, it drove up the price of sugar very significantly worldwide. The aluminium producers did it: they drove the price up 30 or 40 per cent. Brazil led the coffee industry, following the example years before of John McEwen, and were able to drive the world’s coffee prices up 30 or 40 per cent with a similar sort of approach. But supine trading attitudes, the WTO grovelling sycophancy of this place, have left this country with the most pathetic trading arrangements that we have ever seen in our nation’s history.

I do not have time to talk tonight about the removal of some 700 or 800 jobs from the railways in the electorate of Kennedy. It could be much more; it is very hard to establish an exact figure. Suffice to say that in my old state electorate fettlers alone were reduced from over 400 to 92. Some 50 Telstra workers were removed. In closing, let me say this: there is no future for agriculture in this country. There is no way that we can compete against European sugar when, on the figures that the Parliamentary Library has given to me, at the present moment the subsidy tariff level of European sugar is 340 per cent. We cannot compete against that. (Time expired)

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (9.51 p.m.)—The bills currently before the House, Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 1999-2000 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 1999-2000, indicate a fiscal policy slide by the government. The Howard government forever boasts that it is a superior economic manager, but its record suggests otherwise. A decline of about $2.5 billion for 2000-01 in the budget surplus shows that all it is is rhetoric. It has all the hallmarks of the failed economic doctrine of Reaganomics during the 1980s. Just like the United States under Reagan, we are seeing a rapid deterioration not just in our fiscal position but also in our current account deficit and in our national debt. And this is after the government ran around the country in its debt truck in 1996.

Foreign debt is now 25 per cent higher than when Labor left office. However, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will not see this additional expenditure outlaid on essential services such as health, education or providing much needed assistance to regional Australia. Oh no, what do they do? They pour the money into their propaganda drive for the GST, with the aid of the party of political frauds, the Australian Democrats. You always expect the coalition to be the protectors of the privileged in our society, but to see the Democrats fall over backwards to accommodate the Howard-Costello doctrine just so that they could be seen as political heavy-weights is just too amazing to be real. But it is. And who will suffer? Most of Australia and especially my constituents in the electorate of Fowler.

My office has received hundreds of calls regarding the introduction of the GST, many
of them from small businesses and a sizeable proportion from people who live in the surrounding Liberal electorates of Macarthur and Hughes. These people are frightened. They are not convinced by the government’s rhetoric that the GST is the way forward, the way to bring Australia into the 21st century. These people are supposed to be the backbone of the coalition’s support since the 1996 election. This support is fast eroding. Most of the small businesses in my electorate have small cash flows. They are family businesses which struggle to compete in the dog-eat-dog economic environment of 2000. Any little assistance they can get they accept with glee, but this government has provided them with the proverbial kick in the guts. I think the members for Macarthur and Hughes should be quite concerned about the attitude of their constituents to the GST.

Age pensioners are even more concerned about the impact of the GST. Many pensioners in my electorate are totally confused because everybody they speak to tends to provide them with different information about the GST. The crux of the matter is that they all feel that the Howard government is after them. They have paid taxes all their lives and here they are in their twilight years being belted again when they should be being looked after. The government will respond and say that they are providing an increase to age pensioners of four per cent from 1 July, which is about $7.25 for a single pensioner and $6 a week for a member of a pensioner couple. However, a number of economists have placed on the record that inflation will exceed five per cent from the initial impact of the GST. So, effectively, the real increase in the age pension will be two per cent.

Another so-called sweetener is the one-off payment. Pensioners are being told that they will be getting $1,000, $2,000, whatever you like, and they do not know who to believe. When I tell them that the payment is $1 for each $1 of savings and investment up to a maximum of $1,000, they are in shock. Why? Because many of them survive on the minimum of savings. So, effectively, they will receive little or no compensation for the imposition of a GST.

In Fowler we have the lowest percentage of self-funded retirees in Australia. The pension is their only means of survival. This is the system that the Prime Minister has put in place to make life better for those on struggle street. And this is while frequent flier points are GST exempt. What a joke! What about the GST on insurance? A longstanding resident of Liverpool came to me at my office last week quite disturbed by the calculation of his premium to insure his car. He is having to pay 10 per cent of his premium from 1 July as well as paying a stamp duty on the original premium of five per cent. This aged pensioner does not have the ongoing capability to keep on paying this sort of money. And likewise for other aged pensioners. The Howard government is also keen to slug residents of caravan parks and boarding houses. How callous can you get? There are GST exemptions for other renters, but these battlers are being hammered for an extra five per cent if they are resident for 28 days or more and 10 per cent for less than 28 days. Come on!

In Fowler, we have the Lansdowne Caravan Park with approximately 350 residents who are going to have this imposition as well as a tax on everything else. ‘Don’t worry,’ the government says. ‘The Prime Minister is out there looking out for you.’ Yeah, right! It is not just the elderly and renters who are being affected by this ghastly tax; it is also our youth. Angry university students have spoken to me about the GST and how it will affect their ability to continue their higher education. What this country is crying out for is a highly trained and educated workforce in the 21st century. Australia has the capability of being a world leader in research. In fact, I believe it is imperative for Australia to be totally focused on becoming the ‘knowledgeable nation’.

A middle economy like Australia will struggle to compete against a mega economy like the United States or against the cheap labour driven economies of Asia. But the countries we are competing against are grabbing our best minds. This is how the Howard government treats our brightest. A classic example of the brain drain from this country is a photograph produced in the Australian
This is a very interesting photo. It is a photo of Harvard University’s Boston Demons, which has 21 Australians, including eight Australian scientists, eight Australian computer industry specialists and five Australian investment finance executives. In light of this, the Howard government and sections of the media are concerned about a skills shortage in Australia. Why? Since the Howard government’s election in 1996, the vocational education and training sector has seen more than $1 billion taken away. And the government and business have the hide to complain about skills shortages! They would rather this money go into advertising the largest tax hike in over half a century than into training our kids to be world leaders. The corporate world would rather line their fat pockets with the proceeds of their own greed than invest in skills training. There will be a dark cloud approaching in the distance if this funding shortfall is not reversed.

We have undoubtedly the most destructive, ideologically driven minister of education in this country’s history. He will also be remembered as a failed minister. His proposed reform, a demand driven system with fee and admissions deregulation and a loan scheme, was scuttled by cabinet after the public outcry that ensued. In other words, the member for Goldstein was intent on having our youth, and their parents, pay ridiculously high costs for education—and then there would have been the killer blow of the GST as well.

Added to this, we have the debacle of Job Network and Employment National. In the recent contract announcements, Employment National was removed from my electorate. Despite Employment National’s experience and ability to provide the services expected by its clients, the government decided that the people of Liverpool no longer required the service. Isn’t it amazing that my electorate, with an unemployment rate more than double the seat of Parramatta, has increased its number of sites by one while Parramatta has received an additional six. This is yet another example of pork-barrelling by this government.

Whilst this government is engaging in its favourite pastime of pork-barrelling, it will not provide a cent to the Western Sydney Orbital Road Project. This is after former minister John Sharp stated in November 1996 that the federal government would provide $109 million over four years. The minister promised $109 million over four years. So where is it? Nothing has been set aside since. Instead, the federal government has informed the New South Wales Minister for Transport, Carl Scully, that they do not have any money for the project. ‘If you want the road, have a toll,’ the federal government says. Why have a toll road? It is obvious, isn’t it? The government can collect a 10 per cent GST on top of the toll. Motorists have to pay for the road and the GST as well. Not only do the people of Western Sydney miss out on road funding but they have to pay a tax to use a road they are already paying for. How cynical is that! The New South Wales government, local government, community groups and business have expressed the need for this project. With about 80 per cent of interstate trucking between Melbourne and Brisbane coming through the region, this project is absolutely crucial in relieving traffic congestion. Nowhere is this more evident than in the central business district of Liverpool. Traffic on the Hume Highway, which encircles Liverpool, causes gridlock in the city streets during peak hours. Motorists and buses can face a half-hour delay to get across the Hume Highway on some afternoons. At the same time, delays on this nation’s busiest interchange highway reduce traffic to a crawl.

What is the cost of this to the nation’s commerce and industry? Obviously, the Treasurer is not counting the cost of idle trucks stuck in traffic, of wages paid to drivers who sit and wait and of accidents which result from the frustration of motorists who have to put up with this appalling road system. The Western Sydney Orbital would make a huge difference and would result in savings to the economy. Travel between Prestons and Wentworthville could be reduced by 30 minutes. But this Treasurer cannot see that. He has no vision when it comes to overcoming the real problems affecting our economy. By contrast, the Carr Labor government has a vision for a growing and prosperous Western Sydney. The Howard
government is only interested in ripping the heart out of it.

Mr EDWARDS (Cowan) (10.06 p.m.)—I am very pleased to join this appropriations debate because I want to draw to the attention of the House, and particularly of the government, some issues which are of great importance to people in my electorate. In drawing them to the attention of the government, I want to rely on some letters and articles which have been printed in the paper, because I want the government to know that it is not just coming from me. These issues are coming from true-blue Australians out there in the electorate who are concerned about a number of issues that are confronting them. The first one relates to the care of frail aged in Australia, and I want to quote from the editorial in the West Australian today. The West Australian is a paper which I would judge to be fairly conservative, and I think its editorials over a long period of time have reflected that. Under the heading ‘Bishop should admit her failings’, the West Australian says this:

Federal Aged Care Minister Bronwyn Bishop has tried a range of diversionary tactics to deflect attention from her shortcomings in dealing with the nursing-home issue.

She would be better advised to accept her responsibilities and admit her failings, rather than trying to heap blame on others. It is perfectly obvious that she and her bureaucrats have failed the residents of Melbourne’s Riverside Nursing Home.

It is clear that the portfolio is a mess. Mrs Bishop knows—or should—that our parliamentary system has a convention of ministerial responsibility. This means that ministers should accept responsibility for the actions (or lack of them) of their departments.

Ministers are obliged to supervise the work of agencies under their control to ensure that they carry out their responsibilities properly. They are accountable to the electorate for the performance of departments covered by their portfolios.

It might well be that Mrs Bishop’s department was lax in responding to complaints about Riverside, including that some residents had been bathed in a kerosene solution to treat scabies. But it ictivelys her job to ensure that the department works eff, and that nursing homes meet acceptable standards of care.

Mrs Bishop has failed to explain why the most effective measure of spot checks has not been used to monitor standards in nursing homes.

Even when the Federal Government finally acted, it did so in an insensitive manner which reflected political expediency rather than care for the welfare of residents. The decision to close the home and abruptly move residents upset some of the frail old people and their loved ones.

It is almost beyond belief that such precipitate action should be taken without consultation with the people who are most affected by it.

WA’s Judy Moylan was demoted for ineptitude in dealing with aged care. Prime Minister John Howard must be considering a similar fate for Mrs Bishop.

That is the editorial of the West Australian this morning. In the last Howard government there were several ministers and parliamentary secretaries who were sacked for, I think, travel rorts and, in some cases, conflicts of interest. The Prime Minister thought it was important enough to sack those people for those rorts, but he does not appear to think it is important enough to sack a minister who has mismanaged the care of our frail aged and who has shown a complete lack of interest and responsibility in her portfolio. I wonder what message the Prime Minister thinks that sends to the community of Australia. Is he saying that it is okay to rort the older people of Australia but if you rort your travel claims you are going to be sacked? That is just not appropriate as far as I am concerned, and I think the Prime Minister is going to have to examine the standards that he has set.

The other issue I want to deal with relates to the GST. It relates to the GST in a couple of areas. The first one I want to deal with is a letter to the ACCC—a copy of which was sent to me. Under the heading ‘Re: Dual Pricing/Pre and Post GST’ it says:

After the recent ACCC statements regarding dual price ticketing and that clothing prices may not rise by as much as 10% with Big W retail chain we now request a directive as to

• How the ACCC wish us to comply with regards physically remarking (pricing.)
• How should products be remarked, where the removal of Pre GST sales tickets will ac-
tually damage the presentation of the goods, thus their sales value.

• When can we start remarking our stock, with a dual price system.

• If the sales prices does not raise by 10% without reducing our Pre GST margin, then advise what the percentage increase would be.

This particular store started in Western Australia and now has some franchise businesses around Australia. Under the heading ‘Background’ they say:

We have eight stores nationally with over 60,000 products which are individually barcoded. Each and every item of clothing we carry in our stores in Sales tax free. We have now set up plans for the dual marking of stock. We must firstly by computer records identify individual stock items, print tickets for these goods, department by department, store by store, then freight them nightly and then have our staff match the new tickets with the existing stock items. We estimate the cost of compliance in reprinting to be approx $5000, freight (air express) to be $1600. Software support costs at $900. The wage costs can only be estimated at around $39,000.

That is a staggering figure. It is worked out by 40 product groups multiplied by 1.5 people multiplied by 6.5 hours multiplied by eight stores at approximately $12.5 per hour. They go on to say:

Our timetable plan forecasts that to meet the July 1 deadline we needed to start on the 15th of February, to leave at least 3 working days breathing space to overcome unforeseen hurdles. We delayed this due to the uncertainty created by the comments in Parliament then subsequently by your department. Can a written answer be forwarded in a timely manner please.

That letter was dated 18 February. Today I received a copy of a second letter that the same group has sent to the ACCC. It reads:

Subject: waiting for your answer

Dear sirs,

Some weeks ago now we sent both a fax and emailed list of questions which we asked for a timely response. We received a telephone call, however, it was requested that the response be in writing. We have tried everything in our power to ensure that we as a company will comply with the new standards, including forward planning, attending 4 information seminars, internal meetings regarding pricing and compliance etc.

Unfortunately, the standards have not been set in a timely manner. We have rumour and hear say (not law) to go by.

He can say what he likes but until it is written down, debated in both houses and had royal assent, what is it apart from a wish?

As we stated in our letter, we could not wait for the procrastination of the Government.

When we are given instructions or rules we can act. At the moment we are playing a game where the umpires do not have a set of rules and they are making decisions on the fly.

We have been in business for 30 years and we are not used to making decisions on the run.

We have come up with a logistical plan to ensure that we comply by the 1st of July and we have acted.

We did not receive your written response, which demonstrates one of two things or both;

1) You are unable to respond in a timely manner

2) You are not sure what response to give, therefore it is better not to respond to the question

This is a family business, one which has generated business outside of Western Australia. They are just one group that I can bring to the attention of the House and of the government that is facing this uncertainty, an uncertainty that is going to cause them a great deal of problems in relation to compliance. They want to do the right thing. They have tried to do the right thing. But they are not getting the sort of support from the ACCC or the government that they should be getting. I do not care whose problem it is but it is about time, in the interests of and fairness to these business people around Australia, that these issues were sorted out. The government ought to start to prioritise these things, and they ought to do it with a sense of urgency.

The other area I want to draw some attention to is caravan parks. I know that there is a day of action planned over here in Canberra next Tuesday. It is very difficult for people from Western Australia to get here, people from Cowan who would like to be here. They have told me that. They have sent me copies of a couple of letters that have gone off to the Prime Minister, and they are quite happy for me to read them into the Hansard so that people in the eastern states know that their
brothers and sisters in Western Australia are facing the same sorts of problems and the same sort of uncertainty, and they want to make sure that their voices are heard with those others next Tuesday. This first letter is from Shirley and George Jackson of the Kingsway Tourist Park in Landsdale, a very nice part of the Cowan electorate. They wrote:

Dear Mr Howard,

My wife and I are Aged Pensioners...When it was necessary to move from our home in the country to the metropolitan area for health reasons, we conducted a thorough investigation on what type of home our limited funds would purchase. We were then concerned that our Police Force was completely unable to prevent home invasions, often by drug-crazed youths who can bash elderly and defenceless residents for ridiculously small amounts of cash or valuables. We then investigated Park Homes within the safe and secure environs of a Caravan Park. We found that in this Park, there has never been a robbery or home invasion. Management patrol the Park during the day and night, no vehicle can pass the boom gates without an electronic pass and we believe that it is indeed a safe place to live, especially for the elderly. I am in my 75th year and this type of safe and secure life is very important in old age. Who knows how my old body would react to a physical beating? I just want to say that security for aged people is a very big issue, and I think we should bear that in mind when we talk about things like the GST and the impact it is going to have on the group housing within caravan parks.

We listened with interest to your Party's stand on GST during the last election and we were happy to support your efforts to modernise our Tax system, especially when your Candidates pledged that GST would not apply to rental fees for those people who chose to reside permanently in Caravan Parks. We are permanent residents in a solely park home village (this means that there are no caravans at Lakelands Village at Gnangara, also a lovely part of the electorate of Cowan). We are concerned that we will have to pay GST on half of our rent. Tenants who rent in residential areas will not. This means that those of us who...
rent sites in park home villages will remain financially worse off—worse off than pensioners who rent homes in the suburbs GST free, as they will receive the same compensation package as us. In addition to people receiving pensions, many residents in this and similar parks are self funded retirees and others on low incomes. The imposition of this tax on the rent will make life extremely difficult for all. Here in WA we pay a higher than normal rate for our electricity and are denied the government concession for this outlay, unlike the pensioners living in the residential areas.

The government states that owners of park home villages and also the caravan parks where there are many permanent residents, both in caravans and park homes, are being given a choice between two options—to charge GST and receive input tax credits, or not to charge GST and receive no input tax credits. Given such a choice most operators would prefer to receive tax credits which would not be passed on to us...From our perspective the government is more concerned about the operators of parks than it is about the people who provide the operators with their incomes.

We feel we have been treated most unfairly by the government and trust that you will give consideration to our concerns as we and so many many others will have a real struggle to survive in the future. We have no other option but to stay where we are and cut back on the necessity of life, our food.

As I said, that was signed by Tom and Beryl Taylor. I have used these letters and the quotes from the West Australian to endeavour to get through the wall that the government has thrown up—a wall from behind which they refuse to listen or show any real concern or compassion for people like the constituents I have identified here tonight.

I do not think the government should be afraid to make changes. If they consider that these people are being treated unfairly, then in my view they have a duty to make changes, particularly if—as the minister at the table, Mr Anthony, knows—certain assurances and promises were made that people living in park homes and caravan parks would not be subject to the GST. There is a real concern and a real sense of disappointment on the part of many people who feel they have been misled. I do ask the government to take note of the very genuine concerns that many people right across Australia have.

In conclusion, I want to compliment the Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence on the lunch that they held today for the East Timor veterans. I thought it was a great gesture and one which those troops richly deserved. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the speeches that were made, and I particularly enjoyed the speech made by the Commander of the INTERFET forces. I think the atmosphere that was generated today is something that those veterans will carry with them for the rest of their lives. I hope that the statements that were made today about the need for governments and countries to stand behind their veterans will be remembered by this government when it comes time to deal with the very real health issues of Vietnam veterans and their children.

Debate (on motion by Mr Sciacca) adjourned.

COMMITTEES
Selection Committee
Amended Report
Mr NEHL (Cowper)—I present the amended report of the Selection Committee relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private members’ business on Monday, 13 March 2000. Copies of the report have been circulated to honourable members in the chamber.

Amended report—by leave—adopted.
The report read as follows—

Amended report relating to the consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 13 March 2000

The Selection Committee has amended its determination relating to the order of precedence and times to be allotted for consideration of committee and delegation reports and private Members’ business on Monday, 13 March 2000. The amended order of precedence and the allotments of time determined by the Committee are shown in the list.

COMMITTEE AND DELEGATION REPORTS

1 PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND REGIONAL SERVICES—STANDING COMMITTEE: Report on inquiry into infrastructure and the development of Australia’s regional areas.

Time allotted — 25 minutes.
Speech time limits —
First two Members speaking — 10 minutes each.
Other Members — 5 minutes each.


The Committee determined that statements on the report may be made — all statements to be made within a total time of 20 minutes.

Speech time limits —
Each Member — 5 minutes.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS
Order of precedence

Notices

Mrs Crosio to present a bill for an act to provide for the establishment and administration of a scheme to guarantee the payment of wages and accrued liabilities owed to employees in the event of employer insolvency, and for related purposes. (Employee Protection (Employee Entitlements Guarantee) Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Kerr to present a bill for an act to provide for a civil forfeiture scheme for the proceeds of criminal activity and other related purposes. (Criminal Assets Recovery Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Kerr to present a bill for an act to amend the National Crime Authority Act 1984 and other related purposes. (National Crime Authority (Amendment) Bill 2000 — Notice given 17 February 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Ms Macklin to present a bill for an act to amend the law in respect of the prohibition of discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace, and for related purposes. (Sex Discrimination Legislation Amendment (Pregnancy and Work) Bill 2000 — Notice given 6 March 2000.)

Presenter may speak for a period not exceeding 15 minutes —pursuant to sessional order 104A.

Mr Adams to move:
That this House:

(1) notes that dumping of cement from Indonesia, China, Malaysia and Thailand is significantly undercutting Australian cement prices;
(2) notes substantial industry investment and cost cutting has made the Australian cement industry cost competitive, but the companies cannot compete against imports being sold below their cost of manufacture;
(3) notes dumping is threatening the viability of Australia’s cement industry operations, with a real threat of plant closures unless urgent action is taken; and
(4) calls on the Government to
(a) recognise the threats to the cement industry by dumping;
(b) recognise the efforts of the Australian industry to comply with environmental safeguards that the dumping countries are not being made to follow;
(c) ensure that immediate action is taken under our current anti-dumping legislation to protect the Australian industry; and
(d) take steps to protect all industries that are susceptible to dumping. (Notice given 25 November 1999.)

Time allotted — remaining private Members’ business time.

Speech time limits —
Other Members — 5 minutes each. Mover of motion — 10 minutes.

The Committee determined that consideration of this matter should continue on a future day.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion (by Mr Anthony) proposed:
That the House do now adjourn.

Kirkpatrick, Private Jack Simpson

Ms HALL (Shortland) (10.26 p.m.)—Earlier this year, I asked all members of the House to join me in a campaign to have the brave deeds of Private Jack Simpson Kirkpatrick recognised posthumously by awarding him the Australian Victoria Cross. I thank all those members who have supported my campaign.

Every Australian learns as a school child of the brave deeds of Private Jack Simpson Kirkpatrick. Each year on Anzac Day we revisit the tale of his brave and courageous deeds. We hear how he and his donkeys rescued over 300 men before he was eventually killed while rescuing yet another injured An-
zac. His acts of bravery, lack of fear, courage, and commitment to his Anzac mates epitomise the Anzac spirit and legend.

Jack was a colourful character. He jumped ship when he heard of the war between Great Britain and Germany. He enlisted as Jack Simpson on 23 August 1914, because he thought that they would not allow a deserter to enlist. As I have said, he rescued over 300 people but he survived only 24 days. He did everything that any soldier could possibly do to be awarded the VC but, unfortunately, he was not. He was recommended for the VC officially on 3 June 1915 and also by Colonel Monash—later General Monash—in a submission to Divisional Headquarters on 20 May 1915. The recommendation reads, in part:

Private Simpson and his little beast earned the admiration of everyone at the upper end of the valley. They worked all day and night throughout the whole period since the landing, and the help rendered to the wounded was invaluable. Simpson knew no fear and moved unconcernedly amid shrapnel and rifle fire, steadily carrying out his self-imposed task day by day, and he frequently earned the applause of the personnel for his many fearless rescues of wounded men from areas subjected to rifle and shrapnel fire.

Unfortunately, Jack was recommended under the wrong category of heroism, and the VC request was denied. In 1967, Australian leaders tried to correct the error by sending a petition to the war office, signed by Prime Minister Holt, the Governor-General, the Chief of General Staff and other leaders on behalf of the Australian people. The request was denied as it would be setting a dangerous precedent. This was incorrect because a precedent had already been set. In 1907 two British officers, Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill, were posthumously awarded the VC for actions in South Africa 28 years previously.

As well as contacting other members of this House, I wrote to the Prime Minister to seek his support, because I thought that it was really important to do that if I were to have any chance of success in having Jack Simpson posthumously awarded the Australian VC. Unfortunately, that support was not forthcoming. I received a reply from Bill Heffernan, on behalf of the Prime Minister, which says:

Despite the admiration and affection that Australians have for Simpson, it is no longer possible to support further recognition as you have proposed. There were so many Australians who served heroically during World War I, many making the ultimate sacrifice. To now single out one brave soldier of this period would not be appropriate. The judgements of commanding officers of the time on how Simpson’s service was recognised should be respected and their decisions allowed to stand.

Mr Howard, that is what I am asking for. I would like to see justice. I would like to see their decision respected, and I would like Private Simpson Kirkpatrick to be awarded the VC—the VC that his superiors recommended him for. Prime Minister, please, honour our one of our greatest Anzacs and support his being awarded the VC posthumously.

Child Abuse

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (10.31 p.m.)—Recently in my electorate, I had the pleasure of attending the official launch of a very worthwhile support group—Advocates of Survivors of Child Abuse. There is no doubt that the implications of child abuse for society are very significant. We see it in the number of people who, having been abused as children, turn to drug addiction and who are involved in child prostitution and then who become prostitutes as adults. Some 80 per cent of those prostitutes have themselves been abused as children. Of course, if we look at suicide figures and other variables, there is no doubt that being abused as a child is one of the most significant and important contributing factors. Because of this, it is important that we look at the impact of child abuse in our community. Within the Sutherland shire, there have been two tireless workers, Jenny Walker and Liz Mullinar, who brought forward the Advocates of Survivors of Child Abuse initiative. They have arranged support groups for sufferers, which has led to an increasing awareness of child abuse generally. This will provide great long-term benefits for those in my electorate.

When Liz Mullinar began to recall her suppressed memories of child abuse, she sought help—only to find that the New South
Wales state Labor government was abrogating its responsibility to provide services in this area. There is no doubt that support in this area will greatly assist the mental health of not only teenagers but also adults. If we can provide early assistance to those young people who have been abused, then perhaps the incidence of drug abuse and prostitution may not be as great. In my own electorate, where youth suicide is a significant factor this may be alleviated if there are places for people to go and talk to someone about the impact of their early experience of child abuse, because much child abuse happens within families. Of course, the sad fact of the matter is that many of those who were abused as children become abusers themselves in later life. The provision of support groups and counselling services for young people who have been abused will help them to find support from others who have also had that experience. This can be very influential in their lives. This initiative was certainly one that received wide community support in my electorate—there was a significant turn-up—and encouragement for the group. The local council is providing them with financial support.

The federal government has an important coordination role in matters relating to the well-being, health and development of children. It is concerned about any existence of child abuse and neglect in the community. I am very pleased to see the minister at the table, as he would have overseen quite a number of initiatives in this area. In the 1998-99 budget the government increased anti-child abuse funding by $4.3 million, bringing the total to $12 million in federal funding over four years. The coalition government became a signatory to an international agreement against the commercial sexual exploitation of children at the World Congress in Stockholm in August 1996. In conjunction with state and territory governments and non-government organisations, we are continuing the commitment to the national plan of action against the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We are maintaining initiatives introduced under the previous Labor government—namely, the best practice parenting grants program, new approaches to men's parenting and parents with special needs, as well as the development of parenting information resources. We are continuing our support for the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse, which oversees activities to promote community awareness and understanding of child abuse. The national child abuse protection clearing house is being funded to continue collecting and disseminating information on child protection issues to policymakers. The federal government is also currently funding the good beginnings volunteer home visit program. (Time expired)

Workplace Relations: ACI

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (10.36 p.m.)—Tonight I would like to raise a matter of importance to a group of workers within my electorate of Chisholm. ACI is a multinational company which was bought by the US multinational Owens-Illinois in 1998. The company is one of the world's largest manufacturers of glass containers, the leading glass-forming equipment manufacturer, and has a major presence in plastics packaging. In my electorate of Chisholm, ACI manufactures dyes at the ACI mould plant in Lexton Road, Box Hill. Last December, just one week before Christmas, 83 workers were locked out by the company after ACI unilaterally ended negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The basic facts are these: ACI and the AMWU, on behalf of their workers, had been attempting to renegotiate an enterprise agreement. Employees were unhappy with the contents of the proposed agreement in relation to changes to working conditions and health and safety. Furthermore, the company would not commit to reclassifying workers skills, leaving them unable to follow a career path. ACI management also proposed changes that would lead to one worker doing the work of up to three others. After a series of mass meetings, the employees rejected the proposed document. This dispute was never about pay. Despite the rantings and ravings of the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, most workers and their unions try to achieve outcomes that better their conditions of work, rather than chasing exorbitant wage increases.
After the company's document was again rejected on 15 December, management locked out the workers. The Federal Court deemed this to be an illegal action and workers were sent back to work only to be locked out again on 29 December—at Christmas time, when families most need the money, denying workers access to their usual holiday pay over the Christmas close-down period. ACI has once again extended the lockout period until April, leaving the workers without pay and the site inoperative for some five months. The workers down at ACI in Lexton Road have occupied a part of the company's factory since they were locked out and, with the support of their union, they have remained in good spirits. I have visited the site on numerous occasions and have been impressed by the solidarity of the workers in the face of such adversity.

What sort of company would lock out their employees one week before Christmas? In Peter Reith's brave new world of industrial relations he likes to stereotype unionists as thugs ripping off the system whilst businesses are portrayed as innocent victims. This simplistic view of the world may serve Peter Reith's ambitions to hold himself up as the pin-up boy of the Right, but it does not provide much comfort to workers locked out because they refuse to sign up to an agreement that undermines their working conditions. The truth of the matter is that ACI can afford to halt production for months knowing they can afford to absorb the losses. Many are now asking: what is the hidden agenda behind a lockout of five months? Could the company be considering closing the plant and importing the products? Are workers facing redundancy? The company should come clean on its intentions.

ACI can obviously sustain the profit loss from the shut-down. This is a luxury the employees cannot afford. All a worker has is their labour. They cannot seek other employment or live off the dividends of their shares or interest of their investments. They have mouths to feed, mortgages and rent to pay, commitments to meet. Herein lies the fundamental imbalance between employers and employees. Some of the workers have applied for income support through the Centrelink office. Whilst those with spouses have been able to achieve some financial relief through their partner, those who are single have been ruled ineligible for payments.

When I asked for advice from the minister in the chamber tonight he confirmed that, under a section of the Social Security Act, these workers were denied access to Centrelink payments. It appears the workers are caught because the AMWU sent a notice of intended industrial action to ACI in November that has not been withdrawn. Under the act this constitutes 'industrial action' and hence they are disqualified from receiving Newstart allowance, despite the fact that they are not on strike; they have been locked out by ACI. This anomaly requires some further examination and as this dispute continues to drag on it is one I intend to pursue. Preliminary legal advice provided to me states that the minister may have erred in his interpretation of the act.

I would like to end my comments tonight by praising all the employees down at Lexton Road who have kept a vigil for so long—their union, the AMWU, their delegates and organiser Peter—and their families for supporting them through this testing time. As everyone in this House should know, workers—even highly skilled tradesmen such as those at ACI in Box Hill—face an uncertain future in the manufacturing industry. To endure a lockout due to the intransigence of a company travelling very well financially is a hardship no Australian worker should have to put up with. I ask all members of the House to remember that these 83 guys are not just union members or workers. They are 83 people supporting families who have responsibilities and needs. They deserve respect and, above all, they need this parliament to reintroduce industrial relations powers to ensure that—(Time expired)

Taiwan: Presidential Election

Mr ANDREW THOMSON (Wentworth) (10.42 p.m.)—Last week I had the pleasure of spending three days in Taiwan, observing the presidential election campaign that is under way there. I met with one of the candidates, I met with some senior business leaders, including the Governor of the Bank of Taiwan, and I had the opportunity to speak to some
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ordinary folk. I can report to colleagues that it is a free, fair contest and that is something we should celebrate. People in Taiwan have a great affection for Australia and I think that a lot of our national interest is vested in their security.

What I would like to raise in the House tonight is the unacceptable escalation in hostile rhetoric, vis-a-vis Taiwan, that you hear these days from political figures in Beijing and the People’s Republic. This rhetoric has come a long way in the last year. It began a year or so ago when Jiang Zemin was asked at a conference in Shanghai what the government’s policy was towards reunification with Taiwan and he refused to rule out the use of military force. Time passes and last week the government issued a white paper—that is, formal government policy—in which it declared its intention to use military force to effect the reunification with Taiwan on certain conditions. As far as I know, it is the only country in what you might call the civilised world that has a policy of using military force. I find that unacceptable.

The conditions began with the notion that if Taiwan declared independence they would use military force to invade. It then went a little further in the white paper—that is, formal government policy—in which it declared its intention to use military force to effect the reunification with Taiwan on certain conditions. As far as I know, it is the only country in what you might call the civilised world that has a policy of using military force. I find that unacceptable.

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I rise to urge the government to honour its 1998 election promise to Bendigo and get on with developing a new radiotherapy facility for the Bendigo region. On 25 September 1998 the former Premier of Victoria, Mr Jeff Kennett, on behalf of the Howard government, announced in Bendigo that the service was to be introduced. The significance of that date was no surprise as it was in the heat of
the federal election campaign. We had a desperate state Premier eager to assist his former colleague, who was the Liberal candidate for Bendigo in that election, announcing a project that was predominantly funded by the Commonwealth during a federal election campaign. Bendigo has still not received that service.

The provision of radiotherapy services in regional centres is crucial to assisting those who need those services as it means they can have their families and those responsible for the treatment close at hand and not have to travel large distances before and after the treatment. Blatant pork-barrelling is one thing, but to use an extremely sensitive issue like the provision of radiotherapy in regional centres—for treating people with one of the worst illnesses imaginable—must surely rate as one of the most barbaric acts I have witnessed in 22 years of political activity. I am extremely concerned at the blatant small-minded game of politics that is being played by the federal Minister for Health and Aged Care over this facility. The state Minister for Health, Mr Thwaites, signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal government in November, last year. It is the very same memorandum of understanding that was signed by the former state coalition health minister, Mr Knowles, but now the federal health minister is refusing to sign off on that agreement. In fact, the federal minister now claims to have doubts about the viability of the project. He said in a letter to Mr Thwaites on 1 February:

I have some concerns about the ability of the population to sustain a radiation oncology centre to provide the appropriate standards of care in a cost-effective manner.

The same memorandum of understanding that was signed by the former state coalition health minister, Mr Knowles, but now the federal health minister is refusing to sign off on that agreement. In fact, the federal minister now claims to have doubts about the viability of the project. He said in a letter to Mr Thwaites on 1 February:

I have some concerns about the ability of the population to sustain a radiation oncology centre to provide the appropriate standards of care in a cost-effective manner.

The Prime Minister has excluded 65 Bendigo Telstra jobs from his recent promise that there would be no more cuts to services and jobs in regional Australia. Remember the Prime Minister’s panic-stricken pilgrimage to some parts of regional Australia? He did not come to regional Victoria even though he was invited to do so. Regional Victoria had just recently ensured the demise of the Kennett government by voting overwhelmingly for the Bracks Labor government—little wonder the Prime Minister avoided country Victoria like the plague. He said that he would ensure there would be no further reductions in jobs and services to regional Australia. Now we see the potential for some 65 jobs to be lost in Telstra’s call centre. Telstra has stated that there are no plans to close the centre. I remember Telstra saying there would be no jobs transferred from Bendigo to Launceston in January 1998; in October 1998 all the jobs were transferred. So much for Telstra’s words. So much for the Prime Minister’s words. Not only is the government not hon-
ouring its promise to keep jobs and services in regional Australia but it is not honouring its own promise to bring a new and much needed service to the Bendigo area.

**East Timor: INTERFET**

*Mrs DRAPER (Makin) (10.51 p.m.)—* I rise tonight on behalf of all of my constituents in Makin, most particularly the friends and families of our INTERFET troops and men and women from the Australian Federal Police who served in East Timor, to thank the Prime Minister warmly and with heartfelt gratitude for honouring our Defence Force personnel in this place today. As a former serving member of the ADF in the Women’s Royal Australian Navy, I was very moved and very proud to be part of a welcome home function organised by the Prime Minister of Australia. I believe all Australians are justifiably proud of the professional and honourable manner in which our serving personnel carried out their duties while addressing the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in East Timor under some very difficult circumstances.

With contributions from 22 nations, INTERFET was a strong and dedicated multinational force. It fulfilled its mandate to restore peace and security to the territory of East Timor, with little resistance from the militia elements. The 22 contributing countries included Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Fiji, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States. INTERFET has achieved its mandate for peace and security in East Timor through a credible and deterrent security presence in all parts of the territory and preventing armed violence by any group in East Timor, including militia groups. In cooperation with Indonesia, they also developed agreed procedures for border management along the East Timor-West Timor border and created conditions and provided escort support for large numbers of displaced persons to return to their homes in East Timor.

INTERFET’s mandate to support wider UN operations and humanitarian assistance programs has also been met. These objectives have been achieved through the continued facilitation of the transition from the United Nations Mission in East Timor to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor and the conduct of humanitarian operations of an increasing size and effectiveness across East Timor. INTERFET was not a Blue Beret force. It was expected to be operational only until a United Nations peacekeeping operation was approved, assembled and deployed to East Timor. The Australian government has committed funds to raising a further two battalions to assist with the rotation of troops in East Timor. In conclusion, I would like to again take this opportunity to say thank you very much to our defence forces and Australian police serving Australia.

**Maher, Mr Michael**

*Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (10.55 p.m.)—* Tonight is the first opportunity I have had to bring to the notice of the House the Australia Day honour of an Order of Australia medal bestowed on the highly respected former New South Wales state member for Drummoyne and federal member for Lowe, Mr Michael Maher. If ever an award for selfless service to the community by a parliamentarian was deserved, this is it. Michael Maher was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for Drummoyne in 1973, where he became one of the most popular local state members of all time. He resigned from the New South Wales parliament in 1982 to contest the by-election in the federal seat of Lowe following the retirement of the former Liberal Prime Minister Sir William McMahon. Labor had never held Lowe. Michael Maher captured the seat in the historic by-election in 1982. This victory signalled the return of Labor to power in the 1983 federal election under Bob Hawke. Michael Maher had the distinction of successfully contesting Lowe in three consecutive years, in 1982, 1983 and 1984.

In his service in the New South Wales parliament from 1973 to 1982 and in federal parliament between 1982 and 1987, Mr Maher distinguished himself as the people’s politician. Whether dealing with a serious matter of state or attending to a neighbourhood dispute over a fence, Mr Maher’s appli-
cation to the task was constant. Over the years, I have witnessed numerous tributes paid to Mr Maher, from prime ministers to the ordinary person in the street. Perhaps the one that encapsulates the many qualities of this great parliamentarian is this. On one occasion, a lady said to me that, whenever she spoke with Michael Maher, he made her feel like she was the only person in the world that mattered. As a person who championed many causes, and in particular stood up for the plight of those forced to live in caravan parks, I am sure that if Michael Maher was standing in this House right now he would be expressing his horror that the GST will fall on those paying permanent caravan rents around Australia after 1 July of this year. On behalf of his family and his many, many friends, I salute Michael Maher OAM—truly a great Australian.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

House adjourned at 10.57 p.m.

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mr Anderson to present a bill for an act to amend the Interstate Road Transport Act 1985, and for related purposes.

Mr Anderson to present a bill for an act to amend legislation relating to aviation, and for related purposes.

Mr Anderson to present a bill for an act to amend the law relating to the jurisdiction of courts, and for other purposes.