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Thursday, 16 October 2003

The SPEAKER (Mr Neil Andrew) took the chair at 9.00 a.m., and read prayers.

ADDRESSES BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The SPEAKER (9.01 a.m.)—Further to my comments after question time yesterday, I wish to advise the House of security arrangements in Parliament House during the visits of President Bush and President Hu on 23 and 24 October 2003. In response to advice from relevant agencies, the President and I have agreed to a range of additional security measures to be implemented at Parliament House prior to and during President Bush’s visit.

The major changes are that some access roads leading to Parliament House will not be available to vehicles from midnight on 22 October. Parliament Drive, which surrounds the building, will be closed to general traffic—that is, non pass holders—from early in the morning until 1 p.m. on 23 October. The forecourt public car park will be closed from midnight on 22 October, and members of the general public will not be able to enter Parliament House on 23 October until after President Bush has departed the building, which is expected to be around 1 p.m., when there will be a return to normal arrangements.

Arrangements are being put in place to allow senators’ and members’ self-drive vehicles, Comcars, diplomatic guests and guests who are being dropped off to attend the President’s address to the parliament, to access Parliament Drive after 9 a.m. on 23 October. Pass holder access to Parliament Drive will be restricted from 9 a.m. Members of staff who cannot find parking at Parliament House in either the Senate or House of Representatives car parks before 9 a.m. on 23 October, and guests to the President’s address who are driving themselves, will be advised to park on the Melbourne Avenue median strip at the southern end of Parliament House. A shuttle bus will be available to drop them off at either the Senate or House of Representatives entrance. As mentioned, I expect a return to normal arrangements at around 1 p.m.

As part of the package of additional security measures, the existing temporary white barriers at the front of the building are to be moved. This will result in a variation to the existing authorised assembly area, which will move approximately 40 metres closer to Old Parliament House. The reason for the variation is to provide additional security for the visits while at the same time preserving an authorised assembly area for lawful demonstrations. This arrangement will also apply for the visit by President Hu on Friday, 24 October. The existing guidelines for the conduct of protests in the parliamentary precincts, as approved by successive Presiding Officers, will apply for the visits by President Bush and President Hu.

In relation to the visit and address by President Hu on Friday, 24 October, it is not proposed to close Parliament House to the public for any period of time on that day. However, as is the case with the address by President Bush, access to the House of Representatives galleries for the address by President Hu will be by invitation only. An information circular will be distributed to all building occupants today, advising in greater detail all the additional security arrangements that will be put in place for the visits.

Further to queries yesterday from several members about committee rooms, I advise the House that, while some committee rooms have been reserved for purposes related to the visits, there are still committee rooms...
available for booking by committees at all times. The only obvious limitation is the restriction on public access to Parliament House from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursday, 23 October 2003.

Mr Latham (Werriwa) (9.05 a.m.)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence, given the high level of public interest in this matter, and the interest of honourable members, can I clarify a couple of matters? The first is: are you confirming that the area for lawful demonstration—so described—will be the grassed area that slopes down towards Old Parliament House, between new Parliament House and Old Parliament House? The second matter is whether the tight security arrangements outlined apply just for the 23rd, the day of the address by President George W. Bush. The third matter to clarify, for the benefit of honourable members—and as someone who has a self-drive vehicle—is parking. Does that mean we need to be parked by 9 a.m. on the 23rd?

The Speaker (9.06 a.m.)—Let me confirm that the authorised assembly area remains as I have indicated. Yes, it is the grassed area between Parliament House and Old Parliament House. As for the arrangements for self-drive vehicles, I think you would be well advised to be parked by 9 a.m. I understand there will still be access because you are a pass holder, but my advice is that you would be well advised to be parked by 9 a.m. in order to minimise congestion and for security reasons. I have overlooked one of the points.

Mr Latham—The tighter security arrangements.

The Speaker—I respectfully refer the member for Werriwa to my statement, which outlines that the heightened security applies particularly on the 23rd. The arrangements for President Hu apply more in the chamber. Look closely to my statement, where that detail is given.

BUSINESS
Rearrangement

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Science) (9.07 a.m.)—I move:

That consideration of government business order of the day No. 1, Requirements for the declaration of Members’ Interests, be postponed until a later hour this day.

Question agreed to.

SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENT (FURTHER SIMPLIFICATION) BILL 2003

First Reading

Bill presented by Mr Anthony, and read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr Anthony (Richmond—Minister for Children and Youth Affairs) (9.07 a.m.)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Social Security Amendment (Further Simplification) Bill 2003 forms part of the measures being undertaken to give effect to the government’s commitment to implement a simpler and more coherent social security system.

The primary purpose of this bill is to consolidate the rules relating to rent assistance in the current rate calculators in chapter 3 of the Social Security Act 1991 in a proposed new part 3.7 of that act.

Currently, rent assistance provisions appear in many different locations in the act and there is much unnecessary duplication of corresponding provisions. Under the proposed changes, the general and specific rules for calculating rent assistance in relation to all social security payments will be in the one place. Simpler consolidated rules for rent assistance will benefit Centrelink customers.
It will be easier for Centrelink staff to work out a customer’s entitlement to rent assistance and to explain the basis of the calculations to customers.

As the consolidation of the provisions is essentially part of a housekeeping process by the government in relation to the social security law, customers will continue to receive the rent assistance that they currently receive under the existing provisions. There are a small number of minor changes to bring the law into line with current administrative practices, to ensure that the law reflects what people are currently receiving. The principal minor change to the rent assistance provisions is in relation to the payment of rent for temporarily separated couples for all social security payments and for respite couples other than those on pension rate calculator A. It is proposed to adopt a uniform rule for all rate calculators that accords with current administrative practices, so that it does not matter which partner pays or is liable to pay the rent in respect of the premises or lodgings.

The bill also deals with a number of other minor amendments.

First, the definition of compensation affected payments is amended. The amended definition will include certain supplementary payments which are paid as a result of a person being eligible for a social security pension, allowance or benefit. Other amendments ensure that these supplementary payments are recoverable from people who also receive an economic loss compensation payment. The changes will apply after 1 July 2004 but only for customers who receive both the social security supplementary payments and compensation payments from and after this date. Some small program savings will result from these changes.

Second, for consistency, the definition of ‘independence’ which currently applies to all youth allowance customers will now also be applied to disability support pension youth customers. This will result in a small number of customers receiving a higher amount of disability support pension payment.

Finally, there is a number of minor technical amendments being made to clarify the operation of the income and assets test provisions of chapter 3 of the Social Security Act.

I present the explanatory memoranda to this bill.

Debate (on motion by Ms Macklin) adjourned.

**TARIFF PROPOSALS**

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration) (9.11 a.m.)—I move:

Customs Tariff Proposal No. 6 (2003)

The tariff proposal that I have just tabled contains an alteration to the Customs Tariff Act 1995. The proposal formally places before parliament an alteration to part II of schedule 4 to the tariff to substitute item 22. Item 22 is being substituted to accommodate changes in technology in the oil and gas industries. The new item, in conjunction with its proposed by-law, will reduce the cost of certain goods imported for use directly in connection with the exploration for and discovery of oil and gas deposits and the pre-production development of wells on those deposits, by allowing duty-free entry of those goods, provided that substitutable goods are not available from Australian manufacturers.

These amendments not only address industry concerns but, by reducing the costs of imports, will maximise the recovery of Australia’s petroleum resources which is consistent with the objective of the government of encouraging a supportive environment for investment and enhanced productivity. A summary of the alterations contained in this proposal has been prepared and is being cir-
culated. I commend the proposal to the House.

Debate (on motion by Ms Macklin) adjourned.

BUSINESS
Rearrangement

Mr McGAURAN (Gippsland—Minister for Science) (9.12 a.m.)—I move:
That consideration of business intervening before government business order of the day No. 1 be postponed until a later hour of this day.

Question agreed to.

HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT BILL
2003
Consideration in Detail

Consideration resumed from 15 October.

Amendments (3) and (5).

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (9.13 a.m.)—These amendments to the Higher Education Support Bill 2003, which we began debate on last night, give effect to the commitment that Labor gave in our higher education policy to abolish all fee paying places for Australian undergraduates. We have said in our policy that we understand the need for current students to complete their courses. These amendments would prevent any more full fee paying Australian undergraduates from 2004. These amendments also go to another issue which I did not get time to comment on last night. Not only do Labor fundamentally oppose the idea that university degrees are up for sale to the highest bidder; we also want to draw the attention of the House to the fact that this legislation does not implement the promise that the Minister for Education, Science and Training set out when he originally introduced this higher education package.

At the time, he said that the legislation would allow universities to only—only—increase the number of full fee paying students in particular courses from 25 per cent to 50 per cent. But there is not in the legislation a fundamental cap of 50 per cent on the number of full fee payers. In fact, the legislation allows the minister to exempt entire courses from the 50 per cent limit provision and to allow universities to enrol 100 per cent full fee paying students in any course. That could mean that not a single HECS place would be available for Australian students in some courses.

I am glad that the minister is now in the House, because I would appreciate a response on this particular amendment. I think it is important for him to clarify which particular courses, in his view, are not going to be in the public interest. He has said that courses which are in the public interest will have HECS places attached to them. I would appreciate it if he could indicate whether they will have 50 per cent or some other number of HECS places attached to them. It is important for him to let the public know what sorts of courses he has in mind that should be 100 per cent full fee paying. Minister, are you going to say something? You do not have to, but are you going to?

The SPEAKER—Has the member for Jagajaga concluded her remarks? She still has time allocated.

Ms MACKLIN—I thought the minister might appreciate the opportunity to answer.

The SPEAKER—The member for Jagajaga would appreciate that I am the one who determines whether he might appreciate the opportunity or not.

Ms MACKLIN—Mr Speaker, it seems that the minister does not want to indicate—

The SPEAKER—I do not want to interfere in the debate, but I will recognise the minister, and what he does will be his business.
Ms MACKLIN—Mr Speaker, you would know, and I am sure the minister knows as well, that the purpose of the consideration in detail of bills is that we debate these fundamental issues in this House. In his public comments, the minister said that he had intended to limit the number of full fee payers to 50 per cent of particular courses. It is now clear in the legislation that that is not the case and that he intends to allow universities to have 100 per cent full fee paying students in some courses. So we could have any particular course, in any university, simply not offering any HECS places. I think it is extraordinary that the minister is prepared to allow this to be the case. Outside parliament, he says that those particular areas of study which are in the national interest will not be affected, but it is the minister who decides which areas those are. I think it is extraordinary that we are expected to trust one man in Canberra to decide what is in the national interest.

Not only are we being asked to trust him; we also are being asked to trust all of his successors to use this extraordinary power benevolently. That is not the sort of democracy most Australians want. I think it is extremely important that the minister indicates which courses will not have any HECS students in them and how he intends to determine which courses are in the national interest, because these issues are fundamental to the nature of our universities. That some students would not be able to get a HECS place in some courses is really a most extraordinary power contained in this legislation. I will leave it at that, on this matter, at the moment.

Mr WILKIE (Swan) (9.19 a.m.)—Last night I was addressing the parliament regarding these amendments to the Higher Education Support Bill 2003, and I would now like to conclude those remarks. Under this government, since 1998, full fee payers have been able to buy a university place ahead of people with higher marks. This is absolutely unacceptable. Degrees costing as much as $150,000 are available to those who can afford to pay. At the University of Sydney a full fee law degree costs around $85,000. The University of Queensland offers a full fee veterinary science degree for $144,000. The vice-chancellor of Melbourne University has priced a full fee medical degree at $150,000. I do not think this is really a bargain. It is appalling that, at a price, a person can get preferential treatment over those who are infinitely more qualified. These amendments deal with that issue.

Australians should not have to pay exorbitant fees to buy a university place; they are already contributing to our tertiary education system through tax and other forms of support. All Australian citizens should have an equal opportunity to get into university, based on ability. No Australian should be given preference simply because they can afford to pay more. Access to university should be based on achievement and potential, not on how much you or your family can afford to pay. The Howard government is intent on increasing the number of full fee paying places so that half of all university places could go to people who buy their way in. This is absolutely unacceptable. It means that more university places would be reserved for the wealthy and that more $100,000-plus degrees will be bought.

The government defend this proposal by saying that it does not mean only the rich can participate. They magnanimously offer to introduce a loan scheme. A loan scheme for education is absolutely unacceptable. When you consider the amount of interest that people would have to pay, it is easy to appreciate that they could not afford to send their children to university. I advocate that there should be no full fee places for Australian undergraduates and I advocate the abolition
of the real interest rate on postgraduate loans.

To put that in perspective, my electorate of Swan is relatively wealthy, by many standards, but I would argue that more than 90 per cent of families in my electorate could not afford to pay $100,000 to get their children into university. They simply could not afford to take out that loan in addition to the loans they would probably have for their house and other things. It would place an incredible burden on those families. We are not talking about people who have a reasonable income and who could take out these loans to pay for the education of their children. People paying these amounts of money are very wealthy; they are not average Australians. We would be creating a system in which only the rich can get their children into university.

The minister obviously got his degree at a time when the state paid for his education. I wonder if the minister himself could have obtained his degree if he had had to borrow $150,000 to buy his way into university. I do not think he could have. I do not begrudge the minister his education; I think he deserves it—he fought his way through university and earned that degree. But if he had had to pay for it himself, he probably would not have been able to afford it. So this is ridiculous.

I think the system where the minister has the discretion to say which courses will and which courses will not be covered is also absolutely unacceptable. I read in the paper how some of those courses that the minister believes should be cut—and the minister believes that the people who want to do them should have to pay—are not in the national interest. I think this system, where you have a minister determining what the situation is, is crazy. What happens in the future when another minister comes along? In one period you might have these courses not being open and then a few years later suddenly someone decides, ‘Oh no, there is a different minister with different ideas now. We will grant these courses access.’ It is a ridiculous system that should be abolished. I wholeheartedly support the amendments proposed by the shadow minister.

Mr Ripoll (Oxley) (9.23 a.m.)—What the Minister for Education, Science and Training and this government are asking us to do in the Higher Education Support Bill 2003 is to implicitly trust them—to trust the minister that he will always do the right thing. Some might say that we can trust this minister, but can we trust future ministers? We know that this minister will not always be the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Therefore when you put together legislation you have to make sure that it is robust enough, that it is rigorous enough, to withstand whoever might be in that position in the future and will have to administer these bills.

The legislation that the government is putting forward is completely unfair and completely at odds with what ordinary Australians and young people in this country need. It is completely at odds with what they want and with what they need. I do not know where the minister and the government have sought their advice—where they have consulted or where they have been able to divine that this is the sort of legislation that will bring forward an education system for the future and an education system that will actually provide for young people. How can providing zero per cent HECS places—none at all in any course—be good for young people or be good for the future of Australia? How can we trust the minister when he says that he wants us to give him the discretion to the decide which courses have no HECS places and which courses do have HECS places? I am not confident that we can trust
the minister on this; I am not confident that we can trust the government on this; and I know that the universities are not confident that they can trust the minister or the government on this either.

There is no way known that making courses cost around $150,000 is a good thing. There is no way that anybody—not even this government—can say that making courses cost $150,000 is a good thing for anybody. What it does is place an unbelievable burden on young people and their families. If they want to go forward in life, if they want to improve themselves, if they want to give themselves opportunities for the future then they will have to get themselves into great debt to do it or they will have to have the means to pay for these courses up-front. This is the sort of money that ordinary people do not have—$150,000 is a huge amount of money. In my electorate of Oxley $150,000 represents a home, an entire mortgage. It represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I can understand the minister when he says that maybe that opportunity should go towards education—that somebody should educate themselves. I agree; they should. But they should not have to pay $150,000 to do it.

People in this country have paid taxes, and their families have paid taxes, all their lives—and they will continue to pay taxes in the future. The courses that we provide now are an investment in this country, an investment in young people and an investment in the future. Excluding a certain class of person from having access to courses by making them out of reach excludes a whole range of young, smart, intelligent people who want the same opportunities as others. That is all I seek out of this.

The reason I am speaking on this bill today—and the reason I spoke yesterday and will continue to speak on these issues—is that I really believe that young people, no matter where they live, no matter what their background, no matter who they are, deserve the same opportunities. They deserve to have the same hope. Not everybody wants to go to university; it is not everybody’s dream—people have different dreams, different aspirations, and different wants and needs—but they all deserve the same hope that if they want to do that then they can. This bill does not offer that. It does not give them that hope. This bill actually says to them, ‘We are going to make it more difficult for you.’ The minister is shaking his head. He does not agree with what I am saying. But how can increasing HECS by 30 per cent—thus increasing a student’s debt—make it easier for them? It does not. How can deregulating the cost of university courses and giving universities the capacity—or the minister the capacity—to charge $150,000 for courses make it easier for young people to get a start in life? It does not.

This bill goes nowhere near making it easier for young people to attend university. It does not offer anything for the future of Australia. Instead of this being a bill about investing in education and investing in our young people, it is a bill that destroys their hopes. For me, that is something that we should all oppose and something that we should amend. Labor have moved these amendments because we believe in young people and we believe in giving them the same opportunities and the same hopes.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (9.28 a.m.)—I am very disappointed that the Minister for Education, Science and Training has not responded to the critical point that I have raised in the consideration in detail of this amendment. It is his legislation that is going to allow universities to have some courses where 100 per cent of the students are full fee paying students. He is going to be deciding that. He should tell the people, through
this parliament, what he considers to be in the national interest and why he thinks that it is okay for one man in Canberra to decide that.

Question put:
That the amendments (Ms Macklin's) be agreed to.

The House divided. [9.33 a.m.]
(The Speaker—Mr Neil Andrew)

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King, P.E.
Lindsay, P.J.
Macfarlane, I.E.
McArthur, S.*
Moylan, J. E.
Nelson, B.J.
Pearce, C.J.
Pyne, C.
Raddock, P.M.
Scott, B.C.
Slipper, P.N.
Somlyay, A.M.
Stone, S.N.
Ticehurst, K.V.
Truss, W.E.
Vale, D.S.
Washer, M.J.

* denotes teller

Question negatived.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (9.38 a.m.)—I move:

That the question be put on the bill as a whole.

Question put.

The House divided. [9.39 a.m.]
(The Speaker—Mr Neil Andrew)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
<th>75</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noes</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>14</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Thursday, 16 October 2003

Question agreed to.

The SPEAKER—The question now is that the bill be agreed to.

Question put.

The House divided. [9.45 a.m.]

(The Speaker—Mr Neil Andrew)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abbott, A.J.</td>
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<td>Andrews, K.J.</td>
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* denotes teller

Ayes……….. 75

Noes………… 64

Majority……….. 11
Question agreed to.

Third Reading

Dr Nelson—I seek leave to move the third reading forthwith.

The SPEAKER—Is leave granted?

Ms Macklin—No, leave is not granted. It is an outrage what this government is doing in imposing the gag.

The SPEAKER—The member for Jagajaga does not have the call. She has indicated that leave has been denied.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (9.48 a.m.)—I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the motion for the third reading being moved without delay.

Question put.

The House divided. [9.48 a.m.]

(The Speaker—Mr Neil Andrew)

Ayes............ 75

Noes............. 65

Majority........ 10

AYES

Abbott, A.J. Anderson, J.D.
Andrews, K.J. Anthony, L.J.
Bailey, F.E. Baird, B.G.
Baldwin, R.C. Barresi, P.A.
Bartlett, K.J. Billson, B.F.
Bishop, B.K. Bishop, J.I.
Brough, M.T. Cadman, A.G.
Cameron, R.A. Cauley, J.R.
Charles, R.E. Ciobo, S.M.
Cobb, J.K. Downer, A.J.G.
Dutton, P.C. Elson, K.S.
Entsch, W.G. Farmer, P.F.
Forrest, J.A. Gallus, C.A.
Gambaro, T. Gash, J. *
Georgiou, P. Haase, B.W.
Hardgrave, G.D. Hartsuyker, L.
Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Minister for Education, Science and Training) (9.51 a.m.)—I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (9.51 a.m.)—University staff around this country are on strike today against this Howard government legislation.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (9.51 a.m.)—I move:

That the question be now put.

Question put.

The House divided. [9.56 a.m.]

Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Minister for Education, Science and Training) (9.56 a.m.)—I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.
### AYES

- Abbott, A.J.
- Anthony, L.J.
- Baird, B.G.
- Barresi, P.A.
- Billson, B.F.
- Bishop, J.I.
- Cadman, A.G.
- Charles, R.E.
- Cobb, J.K.
- Dutton, P.C.
- Entsch, W.G.
- Forrest, J.A.
- Gambino, T.
- Georgiou, P.
- Hardgrave, G.D.
- Hawker, D.P.M.
- Hull, K.E.
- Johnson, M.A.
- Kelly, D.M.
- King, P.E.
- Lindsay, P.J.
- Lloyd, J.E.
- Macfarlane, I.E.
- McArthur, S.
- McKell, R.F.
- Moseby, F.W.
- O’Byrne, M.A.
- O’Connor, G.M.
- Plibersek, T.
- Quick, H.V.
- Roxon, N.L.
- Sawford, R.W.
- Sercombe, R.C.G.
- Smith, S.F.
- Tanner, L.
- Vamvakou, M.

### NOES

- Albanese, A.N.
- Beazley, K.C.
- Burke, A.E.
- Corcoran, A.K.
- Crean, S.F.
- Danby, M.
- Ellis, A.L.
- Evans, M.J.
- Ferguson, M.J.
- George, J.
- Gillard, J.E.
- Griffin, A.P.
- Hoare, K.J.
- Jackson, S.M.
- Katter, R.C.
- King, C.F.
- Lawrence, C.M.
- Macklin, J.L.
- McFarlane, J.S.
- McMullan, R.F.
- Molson, F.W.
- O’Byrne, M.A.
- O’Connor, G.M.
- Plibersek, T.
- Quick, H.V.
- Roxon, N.L.
- Sawford, R.W.
- Sercombe, R.C.G.
- Smith, S.F.
- Tanner, L.
- Vamvakou, M.

---

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley)—The question now is that the bill be read a third time.

Question put.

The House divided. [10.01 a.m.]

(The Deputy Speaker—Hon. I.R. Causley)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
<th>NOES</th>
<th>Majority</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>
Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (10.04 a.m.)—This government is seeking to gag this debate, to not allow the opposition to move its amendments.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley)—I understand it was agreed that there was a cognate debate on the bills.

Ms MACKLIN—There was. That was your mistake. I have the call.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I take the blame.

Ms MACKLIN—This government is seeking to gag debate on this legislation—the most significant legislation that we have seen—

Declaration of Urgency

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (10.05 a.m.)—I declare the Higher Education Support (Transitional Provisions and Consequential Amendments) Bill 2003 an urgent bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The question is that the bill be considered an urgent bill.

Question put.

The House divided. [10.09 a.m.]

(The Deputy Speaker—Hon. I.R. Causley)

Ayes.......... 71

Noes.......... 65

Majority....... 6

AYES

Abbott, A.J. Andrews, K.J.
Anthony, L.J. Bailey, F.E.
Baird, B.G. Baldwin, R.C.
Barresi, P.A. Bartlett, K.J.
Billson, B.F. Bishop, B.K.
Bishop, J.I. Brough, M.T.
Cadman, A.G. Cameron, R.A.
Charles, R.E. Ciobo, S.M.
Cobb, J.K. Downer, A.J.G.
Dutton, P.C. Entsch, W.G.
Farmer, P.F. Forrest, J.A. *
Gallus, C.A. Gambaro, T.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT
(TRANSITIONAL PROVISIONS AND
CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS)
BILL 2003

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 17 September, on motion by Dr Nelson:

That this bill be now read a second time.
Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (10.13 a.m.)—I move:

That the time allotted for the:

(a) second reading be until 10.25 a.m. today;

and

(b) remaining stages be until 10.30 a.m. today.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (10.14 a.m.)—I am moving an amendment—

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (10.14 a.m.)—I move:

That the question be now put.

A division having been called and the bells being rung—

Mr McMullan—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order about your proposition that this should be a one-minute division. There has certainly been new business introduced into the parliament. This is actually a subsequent and separate matter from the last division. By definition there must have been intervening debate or else no-one would have needed to move a gag motion. So it should be a four-minute division.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley)—The fact is that very little debate, if any, took place between the two, and that is why I called a one-minute division.

Ms Macklin—Mr Deputy Speaker, as you have just indicated yourself, there was a little bit of debate and for that reason it should be a four-minute division.
Thursday, 16 October 2003

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I think the words that I heard were fairly unintelligible; therefore, there was no debate.

Mr Zahra—Are you hard of hearing now? Can’t you hear? The problem with the Nationals is that they can’t hear anything!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for McMillan seems to have a very short memory!

Mr Zahra—There is nothing wrong with my memory.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I will deal with the member for McMillan after the division.

Question put.

The House divided. [10.16 a.m.]

(The Deputy Speaker—Hon. I.R. Causley)

Ayes............. 71
Noes............. 65
Majority......... 6

AYES

Anthony, L.J. Bailey, F.E. Prosser, G.D.
Baird, B.G. Baldwin, R.C. Randall, D.J.
Barresi, P.A. Bartlett, K.J. Schultz, A.
Billson, B.F. Bishop, B.K. Secker, P.D.
Bishop, J.J. Brough, M.T. Smith, A.D.H.
Cadman, A.G. Cameron, R.A. Southcott, A.J.
Charles, R.E. Ciobo, S.M. Thompson, C.P.
Cobb, J.K. Downer, A.J.G. Tollner, D.W.
Dutton, P.C. Entsch, W.G. Tuckey, C.W.
Farmer, P.F. Forrest, J.A. * Wakelin, B.H.
Gallus, C.A. Gambare, T. Williams, D.R.
Gash, J.C. Georgiou, P.
Haase, B.W. Gallus, C.A.
Hartsuyker, L. * Gehrig, P.D.
Hockey, J.B. 
Hunt, G.A. Johnson, M.A.
Jull, D.F. Kelly, D.M.
Kemp, D.A. King, P.E.
Ley, S.P. Lindsay, P.J.
Lloyd, J.E. Macfarlane, I.E.
May, M.A. 
McGauran, P.J. Molyan, J. E.
Nairn, G. R. Nelson, B.J.

NOES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Andre, P.J. Beazley, K.C.
Bereton, L.J. Burke, A.E.
Byrne, A.M. Corcoran, A.K.
Cox, D.A. Crosio, J.A. *
Danby, M. * Edwards, G.J.
Ellis, A.L. Emerson, C.A.
Evans, M.J. Ferguson, L.D.T.
Ferguson, M.J. Fitzgibbon, J.A.
George, J. Gibbons, S.W.
Gillard, J.E. Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P. Hall, J.G.
Hatton, M.J. Hoare, K.J.
Irwin, J. Jackson, S.M.
Jenkins, H.A. Katter, R.C.
Kerr, D.J.C. King, C.F.
Latham, M.W. Lawrence, C.M.
Livermore, K.F. Macklin, J.L.
McClernard, R.B. McFarlane, J.S.
McLeay, L.B. McMullen, R.F.
Melham, D. Moshfield, F.W.
Murphy, J. P. O’Byrne, M.A.
O’Connor, B.P. O’Connor, O.M.
Organ, M. Pliibersek, T.
Price, L. R.S. Quick, H.V. *
Ripoll, B.F. Roxon, N.L.
Rudd, K.M. Sawford, R.W.
Sciaccio, C.A. Sercombe, R.C.G.
Sidebottom, P.S. Smith, S.F.
Swan, W.M. Tanner, L.
Thomson, K.J. Vamvakinou, M. *
Wilkie, K. Windsor, A.H.C.
Zahra, C.J.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I said that I would deal with the member for McMillan. I
will give him time to reflect until after the 
next division if he would like to reconsider; 
otherwise I will have no option but to deal 
with him. The question is that the time allot-
ted in connection with the bill be agreed to.

A division having been called and the 
bells having been rung—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Lock the 
doors. Sorry, open the doors; it is not quite 
time.

Mr Leo McLeay interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I remind the 
member for Watson that I have already spo-
ted to the member for McMillan and I will 
do the same with him. If the member for 
Watson continues, he will be dealt with.

Mr Price—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on 
a point of order. The doors were not opened 
when you asked for them to be reopened.

Opposition members interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Put paper on 
your head. I cannot hear you.

Mr Price—Mr Deputy Speaker, when you 
asked that the doors be reopened, there was 
one door that was not reopened. I asked you 
to allow all members to come into the cham-
er.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I dare say 
that with the noise in the chamber the atten-
dants did not hear.

Question put.
The House divided. [10.20 a.m.]
(The Deputy Speaker—Hon. I.R. Causley) 

Ayes.............  72
Noes.............  65
Majority.........  7

AYES

Anthony, L.J.  Bailey, F.E.  Bishop, J.I.  Brough, M.T.
Baird, B.G.  Baldwin, R.C.  Charles, A.G.  Cameron, R.A.
Barresi, P.A.  Bartlett, K.J.  Cobb, J.E.  Ciobo, S.M.

NOES

Andre, L.J.  Burke, A.E.  Beret, L.J.  Corcoran, A.K.
Byrne, A.M.  Cox, D.A.  Danby, M. *  Crosio, J.A. *
Ellis, A.L.  Evans, M.J.  Ferguson, M.J.  Edwards, G.J.
Griffin, A.P.  Griffen, J.E.  George, J.  Emerson, C.A.
Hatton, M.J.  Jenkins, H.A.  George, J.  Ferguson, L.D.T.
Irwin, J.  Kerr, D.J.C.  Gillard, J.E.  Fitzgibbon, J.A.

AYES

Billson, B.F.  Bishop, B.K.
Bishop, J.I.  Brough, M.T.
Cadman, A.G.  Cameron, R.A.
Charles, A.G.  Ciobo, S.M.
Cobb, J.E.  Costello, P.H.
Downer, A.J.G.  Dutton, P.C.
Entsch, W.G.  Farmer, P.F.
Forrest, J.A. *  Gallus, C.A.
Gambbaro, T.  Gash, J. *
Georgiou, P.  Haase, B.W.
Hardgrave, G.D.  Hartsuyker, L. *
Hawker, D.P.M.  Hockey, J.B.
Hull, K.E.  Hunt, G.A.
Johnson, M.A.  Jul, D.F.
Kelly, D.M.  Kemp, D.A.
King, P.E.  Lewis, S.P.
Lindsay, P.J.  Lloyd, J.E.
Macfarlane, I.E.  May, M.A.
McArthur, S. *  McGauran, P.J.
Moylan, J. E.  Nairn, G. R.
Nelson, B.J.  Panopoulus, S.
Pearce, C.J.  Prosser, G.D.
Pyne, C.  Randall, D.J.
Ruddock, P.M.  Schultz, A.
Scott, B.C.  Secker, P.D.
Slipper, P.N.  Smith, A.D.H.
Somlyay, A.M.  Southcott, A.J.
Stone, S.N.  Thompson, C.P.
Tiechurst, K.V.  Tonneller, D.W.
Truss, W.E.  Tuckey, C.W.
Vale, D.S.  Wakelin, B.H.
Washer, M.J.  Williams, D.R.
Thursday, 16 October 2003

McClelland, R.B.
McLeay, D.
Melham, D.
Murphy, J. P.
O’Connor, B.P.
Organ, M.
Price, L.R.S.
Ripoll, B.F.
Rudd, K.M.
Sciaccia, C.A.
Sidebottom, P.S.
Swan, W.M.
Thomson, K.J.
Wilkie, K.
Zahra, C.J.

McFarlane, J.S.
Mcmullan, R.F.
Mossfield, F.W.
O’Byrne, M.A.
O’Connor, G.M.
Pflibersek, T.
Quick, H.V. *
Roxon, N.L.
Sawford, R.W.
Sercombe, R.C.G.
Smith, S.F.
Tanner, L.
Vanvakinou, M. *
Windsor, A.H.C.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga) (10.22 a.m.)—The Higher Education Support Bill 2003 is all about putting up university fees so that Australian students and their families have to pay another 30 per cent on top of what this government has already imposed on them. This government wants to allow universities to charge $150,000 for a university degree, even though the Minister for Education, Science and Training got his medical degree for absolutely nothing. This minister would not have gone to university and paid $150,000—he has admitted that—but he wants to impose on other medical students that they will pay $150,000 to go to university. That is the implication of what is being debated here today.

The government also wants to tell universities how they will run their industrial relations. It wants to instruct the universities about what will be taught in our universities. How is it that this minister in this place knows better than every university around the country what should or should not be taught in our universities? It is an absolute disgrace that this man, with his big boots, is going to get around this country and tell universities—with his jackboots on—what is going to be done in universities. I move:

That so much of sessional and standing orders be suspended as would prevent the member for Jagajaga moving the following motion:

That this House reconsider the exercise of standing order 92—limitation of debate—for this bill and now allow a full debate on a matter of supreme national importance for the future of Australia’s university system.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The bill is under the guillotine and your motion cannot be accepted. It being 10.25 a.m., the time allotted for the second reading debate of the bill has expired. The question is that the bill be now read a second time.

Question put.

The House divided. [10.29 a.m.]
(The Deputy Speaker—Hon. I.R. Causley)

Ayes…………… 72
Noes…………… 65
Majority……… 7

AYES

Abbott, A.J. Andrews, K.J.
Anthony, L.J. Bailey, F.E.
Baird, B.G. Baldwin, R.C.
Barresi, P.A. Bartlett, K.J.
Billson, B.F. Bishop, B.K.
Bishop, J.J. Brough, M.T.
Cadman, A.G. Cameron, R.A.
Charles, R.E. Ciobo, S.M.
Cobb, J.K. Costello, P.H.
Downer, A.J.G. Dutton, P.C.
Entsch, W.G. Farmer, P.F.
Forrest, J.A. * Gallus, C.A.
Gambaro, T. Gash, J. *
Georgiou, P. Haase, B.W.
Hardgrave, G.D. Hartsuyker, L. *
Hawker, D.P.M. Hockey, J.B.
Hull, K.E. Hunt, G.A.
Johnson, M.A. Jull, D.F.
Kelly, D.M. Kemp, D.A.
King, P.E. Ley, S.P.
Lindsay, P.J. Lloyd, J.E.
Macfarlane, I.E. May, M.A.
McArthur, S. * McGauran, P.J.
Moylan, J. E. Nairn, G. R.
Nelson, B.J. Panopoulos, S.
Pearce, C.J. Prosser, G.D.
Pyne, C. | Randall, D.J.
Ruddock, P.M. | Schultz, A.
Scott, B.C. | Secker, P.D.
Slipper, P.N. | Smith, A.D.H.
Somlyay, A.M. | Southcott, A.J.
Stone, S.N. | Thompson, C.P.
Ticehurst, K.V. | Tollner, D.W.
Truss, W.E. | Tuckey, C.W.
Vale, D.S. | Wakelin, B.H.
Washer, M.J. | Williams, D.R.

**NOES**
Adams, D.G.H. | Albanese, A.N.
Andren, P.J. | Beazley, K.C.
Brereton, L.J. | Burke, A.E.
Byrne, A.M. | Corcoran, A.K.
Cox, D.A. | Crosio, J.A. *
Danby, M. * | Edwards, G.J.
Ellis, A.L. | Emerson, C.A.
Evans, M.J. | Ferguson, L.D.T.
Ferguson, M.J. | Fitzgibbon, J.A.
George, J. | Gibbons, S.W.
Gillard, J.E. | Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P. | Hall, J.G.
Hatton, M.J. | Hoare, K.J.
Irwin, J. | Jackson, S.M.
Jenkins, H.A. | Katter, R.C.
Kerr, D.J.C. | King, C.F.
Latham, M.W. | Lawrence, C.M.
Livermore, K.F. | Macklin, J.L.
McClelland, R.B. | McFarlane, J.S.
McLeay, L.B. | McMullan, R.F.
Melham, D. | Mossfield, F.W.
Murphy, J. P. | O’Byrne, M.A.
O’Connor, B.P. | O’Connor, G.M.
Organ, M. | Pilbersk, T.
Price, L.R.S. | Quick, H.V. *
Ripoll, B.F. | Roxon, N.L.
Rudd, K.M. | Sawford, R.W.
Sciaccia, C.A. | Sercombe, R.C.G.
Sidebottom, P.S. | Smith, S.F.
Swan, W.M. | Tanner, L.
Thomson, K.J. | Vamvakinos, M. *
Wilkie, K. | Windsor, A.H.C.
Zahra, C.J. |  

* denotes teller

**AYES**
Abbott, A.J. | Andrews, K.J.
Anthony, L.J. | Bailey, F.E.
Baird, B.G. | Baldwin, R.C.
Barresi, P.A. | Bartlett, K.J.
Billson, B.F. | Bishop, B.K.
Bishop, J.I. | Brough, M.T.
Cadman, A.G. | Cameron, R.A.
Charles, R.E. | Ciobo, S.M.
Cobb, J.K. | Costello, P.H.
Downer, A.J.G. | Dutton, P.C.
Elson, K.S. | Entsch, W.G.
Farmer, P.F. | Forrest, J.A. *
Gallus, C.A. | Gambaro, T.
Gash, J. * | Georgiou, P.
Haase, B.W. | Hardgrave, G.D.
Hartsuyker, L. * | Hawker, D.P.M.
Hockey, J.B. | Hull, K.E.
Hunt, G.A. | Johnson, M.A.
Jull, D.F. | Kelly, D.M.
Kemp, D.A. | King, P.E.
Ley, S.P. | Lindsay, P.J.
Lloyd, J.E. | Macfarlane, I.E.
May, M.A. | McArthur, S. *
 McGauran, P.J. | Moylan, J. E.
Nairn, G. R. | Nelson, B.J.
Panopoulos, S. | Pearce, C.J.
Prosper, G.D. | Pyne, C.
Randall, D.J. | Ruddock, P.M.
Schultz, A. | Scott, B.C.
Secker, P.D. | Slipper, P.N.
Smith, A.D.H. | Somlyay, A.M.
Southcott, A.J. | Stone, S.N.
Thompson, C.P. | Ticehurst, K.V.
Tollner, D.W. | Truss, W.E.

**Third Reading**
The **DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Hon. I.R. Causley)—It being 10.30 a.m., the time allotted for the remaining stages of this bill has expired. The question is that the remaining stages of the bill be agreed to.

Question put.
The **House divided.** [10.36 a.m.]

(The **Deputy Speaker**—Hon. I.R. Causley)

Ayes .......... 73
Noes .......... 65
Majority ...... 8

**AYES**

Bill read a second time.
Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.
Thursday, 16 October 2003

Tuckey, C.W. Vale, D.S.
Wakelin, B.H. Washer, M.J.
Williams, D.R.

NOES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Andren, P.J. Beazley, K.C.
Brereton, L.J. Burke, A.E.
Byrne, A.M. Corcoran, A.K.
Cox, D.A. Crosio, J.A. *
Danby, M. * Edwards, G.J.
Ellis, A.L. Emerson, C.A.
Evans, M.J. Ferguson, L.D.T.
Ferguson, M.J. Fitzgibbon, J.A.
George, J. Gibbons, S.W.
Gillard, J.E. Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P. Hall, J.G.
Hatton, M.J. Hoare, K.J.
Irwin, J. Jackson, S.M.
Jenkins, H.A. Katter, R.C.
Kerr, D.J.C. King, C.F.
Latham, M.W. Lawrence, C.M.
Livermore, K.F. Macklin, J.L.
McClelland, R.B. McFarlane, J.S.
McLeay, L.B. McMullan, R.F.
Melham, D. Mossfield, F.W.
Murphy, J. P. O’Byrne, M.A.
O’Connor, B.P. O’Connor, G.M.
Organ, M. Piibersek, T.
Price, L.R.S. Quick, H.V. *
Ripoll, B.F. Roxon, N.L.
Rudd, K.M. Sawford, R.W.
Sciaccia, C.A. Sercombe, R.C.G.
Sidebottom, P.S. Smith, S.F.
Swan, W.M. Tanner, L.
Thomson, K.J. Vanvakinou, M. *
Wilkie, K. Windsor, A.H.C.
Zahra, C.J.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

Mr Zahra—Mr Deputy Speaker, if you found any comments that I made earlier offensive, I apologise and I withdraw them unreservedly.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I thank the member for McMillan.

Sitting suspended from 10.40 a.m. to 2.00 p.m.

BALI: COMMEMORATIVE SERVICE

The SPEAKER (2.00 p.m.)—I would like to take this opportunity to express on behalf of all parliamentarians our appreciation to the departmental officers, the parliamentary officers and those civilians who were responsible for the very appropriate and moving commemorative service that we have just experienced.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr ANDERSON (Gwydir—Deputy Prime Minister) (2.00 p.m.)—I am sure the House will understand that in the current circumstances the Prime Minister has been delayed for a few moments. He will be here very shortly. In his absence, I inform the House that the Minister for Foreign Affairs will be absent from question time today. He is travelling to Thailand to attend the 15th APEC joint ministerial meeting. The Prime Minister will answer questions on his behalf.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Trade: Live Animal Exports

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (2.01 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Can the minister confirm that the National Farmers Federation, the Cattle Council of Australia, the Sheepmeat Council of Australia, WoolProducers, the Australian Meat Industry Council, the Western Australian Meat Marketing Co-operative, the Sheep Breeders Association of Western Australia, the Western Australian Farmers Federation, the New South Wales Farmers Association, the Australian Veterinary Association plus 21 government backbenchers all oppose the return of the sheep laden MV Cormo Express on quarantine grounds? Why does the minister think only he is right and everyone else is wrong on the dangers of bringing the sheep back?
Mr TRUSS—All honourable members have been following with concern the plight of the 52,000 or thereabouts sheep on board the Cormo Express. The vessel is in Kuwait and is about to leave for the return journey to Australia. The government have been involved in extensive negotiations with countries around the world. We have been supported in those negotiations by the industry itself to seek to find an alternative destination for the sheep. That remains our priority. Even if the vessel is most of the way home and we uncover a satisfactory destination, the vessel will be diverted to that destination. A second vessel is being prepared in Australia to take on additional feed and supplies because it is quite clear that, once the vessel leaves Kuwait, the next load of feed and provisions that it will require will have to come from Australia. So we are undertaking a lot of preparation work in that regard.

It would clearly be irresponsible for the government not to also be considering what options are available in the event that we are unable to find a destination for the sheep close to where they are. In that regard we have looked at a couple of options—slaughter at sea or some other location or the alternative of bringing them back to Australia. Those negotiations and those scientific studies are well advanced. You indicated that a number of industry bodies have expressed concern about the sheep coming back to Australia, including the Australian Veterinary Association. To be fair, you must also acknowledge that that association has issued a press release saying how unsatisfactory slaughter at sea would be. So I think the Veterinary Association’s commentaries on the issue demonstrate how challenging and difficult this situation is.

The government have no intention whatsoever of compromising Australia’s enviable quarantine status. We will not in any way be putting at risk our clean and green image. The work that is being done would put in place a quarantine regime the like of which we have never seen in this country. It is not the kind of quarantine regime that you would have for a routine import. This is an emergency situation and it requires an emergency response and a tighter rein of quarantine than you would normally have.

The industry associations have identified some of the disease and pest issues that have to be addressed. We are confident that those issues can be effectively addressed; indeed, the industry associations themselves have identified many of the ways that that risk can be reduced to the kinds of levels we would expect in relation to our trade with other parts of the world.

I would remind the House that these are Australian sheep and we are proposing to bring them back to Australia. They have not left the vessel and it is an enclosed vessel. So the risk of any kind of infection coming on board is quite low. Nonetheless, we are not prepared in any way to compromise our nation’s clean and green image, and the quarantine plans put in place will take no shortcuts.

Finally, it is by far the best option for us to be able to unload these sheep in other parts of the world. That is still our primary objective and we are working to achieve that end. But if that cannot be achieved, then we have in place and will be able to put in place a satisfactory arrangement so these sheep can be brought home to their native country, Australia.

Automotive Industry: Performance

Dr SOUTHCOtt (2.05 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources. Would the minister inform the House of recent developments in the automotive sector? How is this sector contributing to job creation and the strength of the Australian economy?
Mr IAN MACFARLANE—I thank the member for Boothby. He is certainly a staunch supporter of the automotive industry. He has in his electorate not only Mitsubishi but also a number of component manufacturers. As I mentioned in the House the other day, Mitsubishi in particular are embarking on an almost billion-dollar expansion and renovation program which will cement their place amongst auto manufacturers in Australia for many decades to come. The automotive sector is a driving force behind the solid growth in the Australian economy.

Today, the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries has lifted industry expectations even higher. The 2003 forecast for the sale of new motor vehicles in Australia has been lifted officially to 900,000 vehicles. That is a 9.2 per cent increase on last year’s record sales and again demonstrates that this industry goes from strength to strength. This sector continues to benefit from and enjoy very substantial and very important growth as a result of the federal government’s policies; not only those policies as they specifically relate to the automotive industry but also those policies which deliver economic certainty and consumer confidence.

The growth in the automotive market in Australia is not the only thing benefiting our automotive sector. We are also receiving a substantial benefit from the growth in automotive sales in over 30 countries which we export to. This week we will see Holden launch the Commodore in Thailand, again a substantial step forward—and somewhat enhanced by the Commodore taking centre stage on the basis that it will be the official vehicle used in the APEC summit in Bangkok. Holden are only one of the companies that stand to benefit from the outcomes of the free trade agreement which we are currently talking with Thailand about. They say it ‘could deliver substantial opportunities for General Motors in the region’.

Perhaps the most well-known export that Holden currently has is the Monaro or, as it will be known in the US, the Pontiac GTO. This is a fantastic vehicle, slightly rebadged and restyled. It is still an Australian built vehicle of enormous quality and fantastic performance. It will be marketed as a Pontiac because the Americans like that name. It is another clear example of how Australian vehicles are exciting buyers the world over. None of this would have happened without the continued support of this government. None of this would have happened without the $4.2 billion that this government has committed to future investment in the industry in the next 10-year plan.

It is also appropriate in concluding that I recognise the imminent retirement of a very inspiring industry leader. Peter Hanenberger, as the CEO of Holden, has made an enormous contribution to the automotive industry in Australia and he is certainly going to be a loss to the industry. At the same time I wish to welcome his successor, Denny Mooney, who has big shoes to fill but, I am sure, will see Australian General Motors Holden, along with all the other automotive companies in Australia, continue to grow over the next decade.

Immigration: Visa Approvals

Mr CREAN (2.10 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister and I refer to my question to him yesterday regarding the granting of a visa for the two children he met on our recent trip to Bali. Given that the government has refused three visa applications for these children to visit their father, has the Prime Minister now had the opportunity to raise this matter with his minister for immigration as promised? Will the Prime Minister, in a special act of compassion, now allow these children to come to Australia and visit their father at the Baxter detention centre?
Mr HOWARD—In answer to the Leader of the Opposition, I inform him that I am still considering the matter.

Economy: Performance

Mr PROSSER (2.11 p.m.)—My question is directed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer inform the House of recent indications of household wealth and economic strength?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Forrest for his question. I can inform the House that yesterday the Australian Treasury and the Australian Bureau of Statistics released the annual data for private sector wealth in Australia, which showed that, as at June 2003, private sector wealth in Australia stood at $4.325 trillion, increasing by $553 billion in the year to June or by 14.7 per cent.

According to this series, since March 1996 private sector wealth has increased by $2.2 trillion or 109 per cent; that is, the wealth of Australians has increased by 109 per cent since March 1996, an average increase of 10.7 per cent per annum. Since 1996 Australians on average have doubled their wealth. All members of the House will welcome the fact that Australians have had an increase in the value of their assets and that the net wealth of Australian households has increased by so much.

Consumer sentiment was released yesterday, which is at a nine-year high. That is consistent with the fact that unemployment is now at a 13-year low. In addition to that, the retail turnover has been very strong in the last year. Notwithstanding the fact that wealth has increased for Australians on average over the last year by such a large amount—by 14.7 per cent—there are those in Australia who are still doing it tough, particularly in rural Australia where they have been affected by drought.

There are those who are still locked out of the labour market because we do not give them a go. We should not forget those people who have been affected by the labour market laws in this country which still keep people who want to work out of work. That is why this government intends to proceed with its reform program. The results for average wealth and incomes in Australia are quite clear but we need to go further. The government’s program needs to be implemented to give those who have not shared in all of that prosperity a better go in the future.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.14 p.m.)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon members of a delegation comprised of parliamentarians from Papua New Guinea. On behalf of all members of the House, I extend to our guests a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Environment: Murray River

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (2.14 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. I refer to the minister’s claim yesterday that the scientific report released yesterday did not support the return of an additional 1,500 gigalitres to the Murray River, and I ask: doesn’t the report conclude that substantial improvement to ecological habitat condition is largely achieved by the 1,500 gigalitres scenario and that 1,500 gigalitres would provide the greatest benefit to river red gums, the greatest reductions in salinity, substantial reductions in algal bloom risk, the greatest improvement to waterbird populations, the greatest improvement to floodplain vegetation, the greatest improvement to wetland vegetation and the best outcomes for the Coorong and the Murray mouth? Why didn’t the minister tell the truth about this report?
The SPEAKER—The member for Wills will reframe the latter part of his question; it ought not to contain an imputation. I am allowing the question to stand; I am merely asking him to rephrase the latter part of the question.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Mr Speaker, will the minister now tell the truth about this report?

The SPEAKER—The member for Wills is aware of the fact that the implication is that the minister has not told the truth. Questions should not contain implications. I ask the member for Wills to rephrase the latter part of his question or I will rule the question out of order. The member for Wills might consider that, given my own interest in these matters, that would involve my taking quite a substantial step.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—Yes, Mr Speaker. I am happy to ask the minister the question which I asked him concerning the contents of the report and its impact in relation to salinity, algal bloom risk, waterbird populations, floodplain vegetation, wetland vegetation and the best outcomes for the Coorong and the Murray mouth.

Mr TRUSS—Mr Speaker, not only was the latter part of the question from the honourable member for Wills—which you rightly ruled out of order—inappropriate but also the earlier reference where he misrepresented what I said yesterday was inappropriate. The clear facts are that if you put water down the Murray River it can achieve ecological benefits and environmental benefits, and if you have got more water to use then you can achieve more. That is clearly self-evident and the report makes that clear as well. What the honourable member for Wills is trying to avoid is the embarrassment of the Labor Party’s policy in relation to this matter, which is essentially to put 1,500 gigalitres down the River Murray—who knows where, who knows when, who knows why and who knows what it is going to achieve? Just take 1,500 gigalitres and put it down the river without any outcomes in mind, without any planned process and without any objectives to be achieved. What is very clear from the report is that carefully managed water for environmental purposes is able to achieve substantially more than just indiscriminate flows. That is the work that the government is doing in relation to the development of the first step proposal concerning the Living Murray, where we are identifying key icon sites and looking at ways of acquiring water to achieve the objectives that we have for those icon sites. So the clear emphasis in the report is that we need to manage our environmental flows just as much as we need to allocate various amounts of water.

Of course, the key alarm that everyone feels in the Murray-Darling Basin region, when it comes to the Labor Party policy concerning environmental flows, is that they are promising to put down 1,500 gigalitres for no identified purpose but they have allocated only $150 million for that purpose. That is a clear sign that Labor intend to just take this water off people without any compensation, without any consideration of the economies in regional areas and without any care for the people who will be adversely affected. So, not only is their policy ill designed and without clear direction; it is also one which will seriously damage regional New South Wales and indeed the whole of inland Australia, because they propose to take water off people without any compensation.

Trade: World Trade Organisation

Mr SECKER (2.19 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry representing the Minister for Trade. Would the minister advise the House of the government’s response to the
Mr TRUSS—I thank the honourable member for his question, because he represents an area where an increase in agricultural trade would be of enormous benefit to the economy of the region. Since the setback at Doha, Australia has been active in endeavouring to re-engage the nations who have a particular interest in developing a freer and fairer trading regime and get this multilateral process back on track. The multilateral trade negotiations remain the government's No. 1 trade priority.

Dr Emerson interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Rankin!

Mr TRUSS—and we are certainly redoubling our efforts to get WTO members back to the negotiating table to ensure that the Doha objectives can indeed be achieved. As the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources said a few moments ago, the potential for bilateral trade agreements is significant, offering real benefits to Australia. But if we can achieve a widespread multilateral agreement—

Dr Emerson interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Rankin defies the chair!

Mr TRUSS—then clearly other benefits will also flow in very significant quantities back to our country. The Minister for Trade is in Bangkok at present and he is calling together key WTO members, in the company of WTO Director-General Dr Supachai, to capture the work that has been done in Cancun. Some progress was made in the agricultural negotiations at Cancun, but unfortunately, because the meeting broke up before it got to the discussions on agriculture, a lot of that could not be put into text and into agreement.

Australia is determined to ensure that there is no backtracking, that there is no loss of the progress that was made at Cancun. The meeting that Minister Vaile is currently convening in Bangkok will, hopefully, build on the negotiations that occurred at Cancun and enable the Doha Round to make another step forward. There will be enormous benefits to Australian agriculture in electorates like Barker if we are able to get a fairer and freer trading regime. The Cairns Group proposals, for instance, if accepted would increase average farm cash incomes on broadacre and dairy farms in Australia by between $11,000 and $15,000 a year. So it is very well worthwhile doing and the efforts of the trade minister are to be commended in getting the Doha Round back on track and making sure that progress continues to be made.

Health: Pneumococcal Disease

Ms GILLARD (2.22 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Can the minister confirm that on 18 September this year the National Health and Medical Research Council endorsed the new—eighth—edition of the Australian Standard Vaccination Schedule, including a number of new vaccines and one against pneumococcal disease? Isn’t it the case that the government is refusing to fund the provision of the vaccine against pneumococcal disease, which kills more Australians than meningococcal C, for which there is a government funded vaccination? Minister, what advice is available to the government on the likely number of deaths from pneumococcal disease in the next five years and how many of those deaths would be prevented if the vaccines were funded?

Mr ABBOTT—I thank the member for Lalor for her question. At this stage I cannot give the member the detailed information that she seeks, but I can tell her that the gov-
ernment is ensuring that people in high-risk categories are being immunised against pneumococcal. All Indigenous children and all children living in Central Australia are being immunised against pneumococcal and, obviously, the government continues to talk to our expert advisers in these areas.

**Indigenous Affairs: Employment**

Mr TOLLNER (2.23 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Would the minister outline to the House the government’s efforts to build stronger Indigenous communities by acknowledging corporate leadership in employing more Indigenous Australians?

Mr ANDREWS—I thank the honourable member for Solomon for his question and for his ongoing interest in the employment of Indigenous Australians, particularly those in his electorate in the Northern Territory. In 1999 the Australian government introduced the Indigenous Employment Policy and, since then, has expended more than $200 million on it. The Corporate Leaders for Indigenous Employment program is part of the policy, which also includes the Job Network and the Indigenous Small Business Fund.

I am pleased to inform the House that, from 1999 until August this year, the partnership between the Australian government and business has seen more than 75,000 Indigenous job seekers helped by the Job Network and nearly 40,000 being placed in jobs. In addition, more than 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been assisted under the Indigenous Employment Policy. Last night the member for Solomon, along with a number of other members of this House, attended the Corporate Leaders for Indigenous Employment awards in the Great Hall here at Parliament House. This was an opportunity to recognise and congratulate the efforts of 70 Australian companies that have joined this partnership with the Australian government, with commitments to some 4,000 jobs for Indigenous Australians. This is something which I believe we can all be proud of.

To give the House an indication of the sort of work which is being done under this program, the winner of the main award last night was Mr Barry Orr, who received the prestigious Neville Bonner Memorial Award for what is really inspirational work with the Indigenous community stores in remote areas of the Northern Territory. Last year Barry Orr, together with his wife, Colleen, and his family, moved from Mildura in country Victoria, where he was employed by Woolworths, to the Wugularr community outside Katherine to manage a Fred Hollows Foundation and Woolworths project to make nutritional food and fresh produce available to remote communities.

This project has had two quite significant outcomes for the people of the community: firstly, it has led to full-time employment for people in the community through the management and conduct of the store, and, secondly, through the introduction of more fresh produce on a regular basis, it has also had a significant health outcome for the Indigenous people living in the community. I take this opportunity to congratulate all those who were involved in the Indigenous employment program, particularly the 70 corporations around Australia and their leaders, and the winners of each of the awards last night.

**Health: Pneumococcal Disease**

Ms GILLARD (2.27 p.m.)—My question is again to the Minister for Health and Ageing. I refer to your last answer, Minister, and I ask you to confirm that the recommendation of the National Health and Medical Research Council is that all Australian babies be given the new vaccine against the deadly pneumococcal disease. Minister, what do
you say to the parents of a newborn child who are told by their doctor that the vaccine is recommended for their infant, but who are also told that it will cost $500 to vaccinate their newborn baby and who are simply not able to afford to do so?

Mr ABBOTT—If the child is in a high-risk category, that vaccination is funded by the federal government. As for the recommendation of the expert committee, the government is still considering it.

The SPEAKER—Before I recognise the member for Ryan, I point out to the member for Lalor that her question was directed to the minister and not to the chair.

Telstra: Services

Mr JOHNSON (2.28 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. Would the minister inform the House and the Ryan electorate what regulatory arrangements are in place to safeguard the interests of the Australian community in relation to the provision of Telstra services? How does ownership affect this regime?

Mr WILLIAMS—I thank the member for Ryan for his question. I am very pleased to inform the Australian public and the Ryan electorate that the Howard government has a very proud record when it comes to regional telecommunications services. It is a record that Labor can only dream of. That has not stopped the opposition, however, from conducting an irresponsible scaremongering campaign over the full privatisation of Telstra.

The fact is that there is an extensive regulatory regime safeguarding the interests of Australian consumers in relation to services provided by Telstra. This regime will remain in place after full privatisation. In fact, not only will all the current safeguards remain; there will be additional safeguards for Australian consumers under the government’s response to the regional telecommunications inquiry—the Estens inquiry. The government retains the ability to regulate the telecommunications industry and, if necessary, introduce new regulatory safeguards.

Mr Tanner interjecting—

Mr WILLIAMS—Australian telecommunications consumers currently enjoy some of the world’s strongest safeguards, including the universal service obligation, the customer service guarantee, the right to untimed local calls and the digital data service obligation. The introduction of full and open telecommunications competition has also brought many benefits to all Australian consumers.

Mr Tanner interjecting—

Mr WILLIAMS—Consumers have enjoyed a real decrease in—

The SPEAKER—The member for Melbourne clearly believes that unless he gets the attention of the chair he has no need to adhere to the standing orders. I will not sit here and wait while the member for Werriwa persistently interjects. If he continues to do so I will deal with him.

Mr Latham—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The minister is reading out a statement word for word. That is why the House does not take him seriously.

The SPEAKER—I warn the member for Batman!

Mr WILLIAMS—Consumers have enjoyed a real decrease in prices for telephone
services of 20.7 per cent since 1997. The introduction of the customer service guarantee by this government has meant that, for the first time, companies have had to comply with strict time frames for installation and repair of phone services or pay compensation. Before the introduction of the customer service guarantee, the most remote customers in Australia could expect to wait up to 27 months for attention. Under the CSG they can now expect their service to be connected within 20 days of making the request.

The government has accepted all 39 recommendations of the Estens inquiry, and this is another example of a longstanding commitment to regional telecommunications services. The inquiry recommended that Telstra be required to maintain an ongoing local presence in regional, rural and remote Australia into the future.

The SPEAKER—The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts will resume his seat.

Mr Albanese—Mark your place!

The SPEAKER—I warn the member for Grayndler!

Dr Emerson—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I seek leave for the minister to be able to incorporate the rest of his answer in Hansard.

The SPEAKER—I warn the member for Rankin! That was a mischievous point of order and absolutely without foundation. I had already dealt with the matter when it was raised by the member for Werriwa. The member for Rankin is warned.

Mr WILLIAMS—The Estens inquiry recommended that Telstra be required to maintain an ongoing local presence in regional, rural and remote Australia into the future. In response to that the government have announced a firm commitment that we will impose a licence condition requiring Telstra to prepare a plan setting out the activities and strategies it will undertake to maintain its local presence in regional areas.

There is a range of other matters that have been dealt with in the response to the Estens inquiry. The government is also imposing a licence condition on Telstra to provide a minimum equivalent throughput speed of 19.2 kilobits per second for dial-up Internet access over the fixed line network and a Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme to provide financial incentives to service providers.

The Howard government has a genuine commitment to the maintenance of services to rural and regional areas. This contrasts starkly with the hypocritical, Johnny-come-lately actions of the Labor Party in feigning an interest in rural and regional services. The real commitment of the Labor Party to services in rural and regional areas is demonstrated by what the Labor Party did when the Commonwealth Bank was privatised. What the Labor Party did was precisely nothing.

Mr Tanner—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I ask that the minister table the document he has just read into Hansard.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—I am waiting for the member for Melbourne to resume his seat so I can deal with the matter. Was the minister reading from a document?

Mr WILLIAMS—I was referring to notes.

Health: Pneumococcal Disease

Ms GILLARD (2.36 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and it refers to the recommendations of the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation that all Australian babies be vaccinated against the deadly pneumococcal disease. Given the minister’s special responsibility for children, what does
he say to the 10,000 families in his own electorate of Richmond with weekly incomes of less than $500 who will now face a bill of $500 to vaccinate their newborn babies against the deadly pneumococcal disease as a result of the government’s refusal to fund this vaccination?

Mr ANTHONY—I thank the member for Lalor for her question. It was shame she did not invite me to the meeting that she had in Tweed Heads only last week. It was interesting that, with all those who attended—there were meant to have been hundreds there, but I think there were 50 or 60—there was not one comment about bulk-billing or about the fall in bulk-billing. Indeed, the terms were very general, particularly about hospitals—

Mr Latham—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The question goes to the health care of babies, and I do not think it is a thing that should be politicised in this fashion.

The SPEAKER—Order! I presume the point of order is relevance. I was listening closely to the minister’s reply. It is not unusual for ministers to have some preamble to the answer, but he ought to be coming to the question of immunisation.

Mr ANTHONY—Thank you, Mr Speaker. Health is an issue of concern to all Australians—and of course it is of concern to the good residents of Richmond. It is interesting that, on the points raised earlier in the House about other medical issues, a lot of the fear and drama painted by the Labor Party was unfounded.

But on the issue of immunisation—to answer the question—it is interesting to note that, when we came in to government, the level of immunisation was at the lowest of the OECD countries. When Labor left the treasury bench in 1996, it was at 71 per cent. It was this government that introduced the regime to ensure that more Australian children were immunised—indeed, 91 per cent. As for the actual answer to your question, I think the Minister for Health and Ageing quite adequately answered it in response to the previous question.

Education: Higher Education

Mr BALDWIN (2.39 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Education, Science and Training. Would the minister advise the House of the benefits that will flow from the government’s higher education reforms? How is the tertiary education sector responding to these reforms and other proposed changes?

Dr NELSON—I thank the member for Paterson for his question. When he is not fighting for Newcastle University, he is fighting for Hunter Valley Grammar School, Raymond Terrace Primary School or Gloucester High School. This government is undertaking a major reform of Australian universities because it is in Australia’s long-term interests. The government is proposing to invest an extra $10 billion of taxpayers’ funds in universities in the first 10 years and $1½ billion of additional public money in the first four years, which includes $122 million extra money for regional and rural campuses and up to some 25,000 scholarships for young people, worth up to $24,000, to help them with their education costs when they are at university. In addition to that, the government is increasing the funding to train nurses and teachers—expanding the places in the first five years by 6,500 as well as fully funding 25,000 overenrolled places.

Today there is a strike which is being conducted throughout Australia’s publicly funded universities. Some 80,000 employees in Australian universities are going on strike. This is a strike that is supported by the Australian Labor Party. The average Australian must ask themselves: what is the strike about? It is about this: the government has
the Australian taxpayers’ chequebook out and is about to write a cheque for $1½ billion for the first four years and, before the first $404 million of extra money is delivered to universities, the government is asking the universities to formalise what already occurs—and that is that every enterprise agreement will include a clause that says, ‘You, the employee of the university, have the right to negotiate an enterprise agreement through your union or staff association but, if you choose to negotiate an individual Australian workplace agreement with the university, you are free to do so.’

What the government is saying to universities on behalf of Australian taxpayers is, ‘Please, do not discriminate against or in favour of unions and please ensure that every employee knows that they are free not only to be represented by their union but also to negotiate an individual agreement,’ and that the arrangements in the universities should not be outside the norms that the community expects. The average working Australian has been through major change in the last 10 to 15 years. As a result of their sacrifices, this country is now going very well—but no less should apply in Australian universities.

There is another strike planned for 4 November. The strike on 4 November is being run by the New South Wales Teachers Federation. Whereas the member for Jagajaga was scheduled to address a university strike this morning in Canberra, I will be most interested to see whether she will be attending the strike organised by the New South Wales Teachers Federation throughout TAFEs in New South Wales—a strike which is opposing not an optional 30 per cent increase in funds which is being proposed for universities but a 300 per cent increase in TAFE fees imposed by the New South Wales government.

Unlike universities, TAFEs cater for a disproportionately large number of low-income people who come from the poorest families in the country. Unlike in university, there are no loan schemes. If you do not pay the fee when you get to the TAFE gate, they send you away. I would be interested to know whether the member for Jagajaga will be lining up, shoulder to shoulder, with the New South Wales Teachers Federation and opposing the 211 per cent increase for a welding course at the Queanbeyan campus of the Illawarra Institute of TAFE. I would be very interested to see whether the member for Jagajaga will be going down there with the member for Jagajaga. The message needs to be sent: if the Labor Party wants to be consistent—and it is very, very inconsistent—it needs to stand up and go along to that strike. This government does not encourage strikes but, if there is going to be one, the member for Jagajaga ought to be there. I apologise for going on, Mr Speaker, but I have worked out how the Labor Party works.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister has the call.

Dr NELSON—The Australian newspaper are running a series entitled ‘Pursuing opportunity and prosperity’. On Monday they ran a feature on education. They rang the Leader of the Opposition and said, ‘We’d like a forward-thinking contribution to the paper which addresses the real issues facing Australia in education.’ Who did they send? They sent the member for Werriwa, who of course talked about performance based pay. Today when there is a strike at universities they send the member for Jagajaga because what they want is short-term opportunism and ideological dogma. In fact, as the member for Werriwa said, on 18 December 2000:
Higher education policy should allow for fee de-regulation. We need to stop poncing around with education policy.

**United Nations: Nuclear Disarmament**

Ms JANN McFARLANE (2.45 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister and it refers to Australia’s participation in the United Nations disarmament discussions currently under way as part of the 58th session of the UN General Assembly. Prime Minister, will the Australian government vote in favour of the two resolutions to be considered by UN members and supported by the New Agenda Coalition entitled ‘Towards a nuclear weapon free world: the need for a new agenda’ and ‘Reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons’? If not, Prime Minister, why not?

Mr HOWARD—I have to say to the honourable member that I am not aware of the text of those resolutions and therefore I cannot answer the question. I will get some advice on that and, if I can, I will inform the honourable member before she departs this place to return to her electorate.

**Health: Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders**

Mr JOHN COBB (2.46 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Would the minister inform the House what action the government has taken to improve the health of Indigenous Australians around Australia in areas like my electorate of Parkes?

Mr ABBOTT—I regret to inform the member for Parkes that Aboriginal health is one of the most intractable problems that Australia faces. On all of the indicators—life expectancy, infant mortality, incidence of diabetes—Aboriginals do significantly worse than the general community. I can also inform the House that the government are spending more, and spending it more creatively, in an attempt to make a difference.

This year we are spending $258 million on Indigenous specific health programs. This is a 50 per cent real increase on Indigenous health spending since 1996. I will give just a few examples of where we are making a difference. Thanks to a federally funded project at the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service, the incidence of low birth weight babies has dropped from 17 per cent in 2000 to nine per cent this year.

In another federally funded project for the Nganampa Health Council in South Australia, the incidence of low birth weight babies has dropped from around 15 per cent in the mid-1980s to just five per cent now. Also, immunisation rates amongst Indigenous people there have gone from 60 per cent to almost 100 per cent, thanks to this federally funded project. Another federally funded project, in the Torres Strait, involves comprehensive diabetes management and has led to a 32 per cent reduction in hospital admissions amongst Indigenous people. In the current financial year we are spending over $16 million to support 67 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs to try and rein in substance abuse amongst Indigenous people. There are a whole range of factors that contribute to Aboriginal ill health—isolation, lifestyle, diet. Most of these are not readily amenable to government influence, but the government are determined to work with Indigenous people to try to produce better services, better structures and better communities to help produce the stronger social fabric which will ultimately produce healthier and happier people.

**Health: Tough on Drugs Strategy**

Ms BURKE (2.49 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Given the Prime Minister’s continual assertion that there is clear evidence that the government’s Tough on Drugs policy is working, why has his health minister been sitting on a report since last
November which is highly critical of this policy? Is the Prime Minister aware that the report found that the government’s Tough on Drugs policy has triggered an explosion in hepatitis C infection and that the government has abrogated responsibility by refusing to provide leadership and resources to fix this urgent public health problem? Now the report has finally seen the light of day, when will the Prime Minister implement measures to stem the flow of this serious and highly contagious disease?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Chisholm for this question. When I said to the Australian public that I believed our Tough on Drugs policy was working, what I was referring to was the decline in the death rate from heroin overdoses. What I was referring to was the fact that this has happened in partnership with the states—all of the state Labor governments. I am pleased to say that this is an issue where, by and large, the state Labor premiers of this country—to their credit—have taken a bipartisan approach.

In our view the Tough on Drugs strategy is one of the reasons why—it is not the only reason—there has, for the first time in years, been a decline in the death rate from heroin overdose. In fact, one of the most identifiable declines has occurred in the state from which the honourable member for Chisholm comes from, and this is the state of Victoria.

I am also referring to the fact that illicit drug use has fallen and that the education program that we conducted has resulted in a very positive response. The survey that was carried out indicated that it led to a very steep increase in the regularity with which parents spoke to their children about drug abuse. We have now invested in the order of $1 billion—the largest ever investment by a national government—in a Tough on Drugs campaign. We have got record heroin and cocaine seizures, we are seeing a reduction in heroin death rates, we are seeing an increase in parental awareness of the challenge of drugs, we are seeing a reduction in illicit drug use and the honourable member has the nerve to suggest that our program has been a failure.

The SPEAKER—I call the member for Cowper.

Ms Burke—Your report said it!

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Cowper might care to resume his seat until this extraordinary exchange between the member for Chisholm and a number of people on my right has ceased.

Employment: Statistics

Mr HARTSUYKER (2.52 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Would the minister advise the House of current levels of long-term unemployment, as released today by the Australian Bureau of Statistics?

Mr ANDREWS—I thank the honourable member for Cowper for his question, and I say to him and to the House that the Australian government’s record on employment is excellent. We saw this last week with the release of the unemployment statistics, which showed that the unemployment rate in Australia was below six per cent for the second month in a row for the first time in 13½ years. To the member for Cowper, I say: there is more good news. The Australian Bureau of Statistics in its data for the month of September has indicated that long-term unemployment—that is, those who are unemployed for 12 months or more—is now at its lowest level in 13 years. Seasonally adjusted long-term unemployment fell by 9,900 in September, a 7.5 per cent drop on August.

In fact, the long-term unemployment figure is 207,000 below the peak of 329,000, which was recorded in May 1993 under the
Keating Labor government. There has been a fall of more than 200,000 from the peak in May 1993, under the Australian Labor Party in government, of some 329,000. The level of the very long-term unemployed—those who have, unfortunately, been unemployed for more than two years—has also fallen by almost 40,000 since this government came to power. There is always more that we can do in this regard, but this is very good news in relation to unemployment. It indicates once again that the economic policies of this government, aimed at making Australia a prosperous nation, are working for unemployed people.

Military Detention: Australian Citizens

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (2.54 p.m.)—My question is to the Attorney-General. Can the Attorney-General confirm whether David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib have been tortured while in US custody at Guantanamo Bay, as claimed by Australian lawyer Richard Bourke on Wednesday? Further, is the Attorney-General aware of the comments made by the International Red Cross about their concerns over the treatment of such detainees? Will the Attorney-General inform the House of the steps his department is taking to establish the truth of these claims? If they are confirmed, what will the Attorney-General do about them?

Mr RUDDOCK—I am aware of some of the matters raised by the honourable member. The Red Cross visited Guantanamo Bay recently, and their report was unusual because it indicated they had some disagreement with the practice of ongoing detention of people in this circumstance. That is a matter about which this government has a different view, but they did raise that matter. In the context of torture, having only seen the prisoners in the last few weeks, the Red Cross gave no indication in their report that torture was evidenced.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—But they don’t do that.

Mr RUDDOCK—They do not normally comment on other matters either, but they did on this occasion.

Mr Kerr interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Denison! The minister is responding to the question.

Mr RUDDOCK—The further point I would make is that I have seen reports from the President of the United States in which he said that he would not expect that agents operating on behalf of the United States would torture detainees. I have also seen the reports of Australian officials who have on a number of occasions visited Guantanamo Bay and seen both of the detainees. There were no reports to them of any torture. That is the background to the matter. I have seen the reports, and I have asked for inquiries to be made as to whether there have been any further developments.

Employment: Work for the Dole

Mr TICEHURST (2.57 p.m.)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Employment Services. Would the minister advise the House of the outstanding contribution that Work for the Dole participants have made over the years to improving their local communities?

Mr BROUGH—I thank the member for his question. There have been some 271,000 participants since 1997 contributing to Work for the Dole, in over 15,000 projects. It is very interesting—and I think this statistic will stun most people in the House—that that equates to over 38,000 working years of work that Work for the Dole participants have put into communities right around this country. They have done a fantastic job, doing work that otherwise would not be done, meeting their mutual obligations and doing
something positive for themselves and their wider community. That is 38,000 working years of worthwhile activities building better and stronger local communities. Today I received from the member for Hume an email he received from the Harden Shire Beautification Program.

Mr Wilkie interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Swan!

Mr BROUGH—The local shire council has got behind Work for the Dole, and a bit of that email is worth reading because it goes to the heart of what a wonderful program this is. It says:

Some of the tasks include:
Finalisation of the Lighthorse Memorial—Done
Repair and renovate classrooms within the Trinity Education centre for occupation by the TAFE Riverina—Done ...
Repair and renovate a community respite centre within the Trinity Centre—Done ...
Remodel and re-paint hospitality areas at the Harden Picnic Race Club—Done
Install a full irrigation system for the use at the Harden Picnic Race Club—Done ...

Mr Wilkie interjecting—

The SPEAKER—I warn the member for Swan!

Mr BROUGH—The email continued:
Renovate, repair, re-paint and construct a Tourism and Regional Produce Centre in Murrumburrah—Underway.

The list goes on and on. This is a small community council that is working collaboratively with Work for the Dole, the Howard government, its unemployed and the local community to do a fantastic job in providing better facilities for its local community and opportunities for the unemployed and allowing the unemployed to meet their mutual obligations. When you look at 38,000 working years of community work being undertaken by these people, you can only but wonder what it is that makes some of those in the Labor Party throw the barbs that they do and fail to recognise the benefit, not only to the individual but also to the local community and the nation, of Work for the Dole.

Superannuation

Mr ANDREN (2.59 p.m.)—My question is to the Prime Minister: could the Prime Minister explain why the government appears unwilling to allow debate and passage of my private member’s bill on freedom of choice for members in relation to their superannuation; and why should members be locked into a scheme if they believe it to be excessively generous and completely insulated from market reality?

Mr HOWARD—Mr Speaker, through you, I must confess that all of the details of procedures which have brought about what he claims to be an unwillingness to debate his private member’s bill I am not aware of, but I will take the opportunity of finding out. If there is anything I can usefully add to what he already knows, then I will do so. We have no desire as a government to stifle debate on these matters. I think the honourable member’s views on these issues are ventilated from time to time. He has a right to do that but, on the other hand, we have agendas that we have to implement on behalf of the Australian people. It is also the case that in relation to private member’s bills, there are other private member’s bills, and there is absolutely no attempt by us to stifle debate.

Tourism: Rugby World Cup

Mr KING (3.01 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister for Small Business and Tourism.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order!

Mr Laurie Ferguson interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Reid! The House will come to order.
Mr KING—Would the minister advise the House how the government is helping to boost tourism numbers in Australia, particularly during the Rugby World Cup?

Mr HOCKEY—I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the member for Wentworth on his leadership of the Australian parliamentary rugby team, which won the recent world cup for the first time from New Zealand. It was a great event involving all members of parliament and just a few former Wallabies—they were all part of the squad. The Rugby World Cup is truly a great event for Australia and, importantly, it is a great tourism event for Australia. We are expecting in excess of 40,000 international visitors over the next few weeks and more than 100,000 Australians are travelling interstate for the Rugby World Cup. The event, involving 44 matches, is being held over 40 days. At the same time that we are using this event to broadcast to more than four billion people over 40 days worldwide, the Australian government—through the Australian Tourist Commission—has commissioned additional advertising in key markets such as the United States—

Mr Crean interjecting—

Mr HOCKEY—The member for Hotham has a problem with us advertising Australia offshore; is that right? It is extraordinary.

The SPEAKER—The minister will not respond to interjections and will address his remarks through the chair.

Mr HOCKEY—We believe we should be promoting Australia offshore. Five million visitors come to Australia every year, and it is directly linked to the marketing efforts of the Australian government through the Australian Tourist Commission. We are about trying to encourage more tourists to come to Australia, because it creates jobs in regional Australia and it creates jobs in metropolitan parts of Australia. Significantly, for every visitor that comes to Australia more wealth is created for Australians—and that is great for Australia. We welcome the Rugby World Cup. We want to see the Wallabies win the World Cup. We want to see a greater tourist opportunity for Australia so that we can promote a great country to the rest of the world.

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

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Questions on Notice

Mr MURPHY (3.04 p.m.)—On 11 August this year, questions Nos 2189 and 2190 to the Minister for Transport and Regional Services first appeared on the Notice Paper in my name. Now that it is more than 60 days since those questions first appeared, I would be grateful if you would send a letter to the minister and ask him for a prompt reply to those questions.

The SPEAKER—I will follow up the matter raised for the member for Lowe as the standing orders provide.

Addresses by the President of the United States of America and the President of the People’s Republic of China

Mr ORGAN (3.05 p.m.)—My question is to you, Mr Speaker: arising out of your letter to all senators and members today wherein you state that Presidents Bush and Hu, following their addresses to the parliament, will soon afterwards depart Parliament House, will members be given the opportunity to meet with both gentlemen following their addresses or at any other time next week?

The SPEAKER—I cannot respond to the member for Cunningham’s question, simply because the program of both presidents is in the hands of the Ceremonial and Hospitality Branch of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. It is not something over which the Speaker has any control.
Addresses by the President of the United States of America and the President of the People’s Republic of China

Mr STEPHEN SMITH (3.05 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, my question to you follows on from the honourable member’s question in respect of the arrangements for the joint sitting of parliament. I refer to the advice from you and the President of the Senate to members and senators today, which advises:

Members will occupy their usual seats, with senators being allocated seats between members or spare seats.

Prior to coming down for question time, the attendant, through the internal mail system, handed to me a proposed plan for those seating arrangements which does not reflect that advice. Members from this part of the chamber, including me, are proposed to be seated elsewhere. For the present, I quite like sitting where I am, and I wonder if you could clarify the advice, please.

The SPEAKER—The member for Perth’s comments are entirely accurate, but what happened subsequent to the letter being sent out was that the whips, not unreasonably, approached the Speaker’s office to say—I hope I am representing both the Chief Government Whip and the Chief Opposition Whip fairly—that they had mutually agreed on an alternative plan. It was not a matter that caused me any alarm and that is why the plan that has been distributed to you is not the plan that I had originally envisaged. The alternative plan does not, however, involve opposition members sitting on the government side or government members sitting on the opposition side, so I am not anticipating that there would be any difficulty with members over that alternative plan.

Divisions

Ms PLIBERSEK (3.07 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, at about 10.15 this morning the Deputy Speaker called a one-minute division subsequent to a previous division, despite the fact that he admitted that there was intervening debate between the two divisions. He used the excuse that the debate was short and unintelligible. Could you advise us whether a new precedent has been set—that the Speaker or a deputy may decide how long to ring the bells, subject to the length of the intervening debate or whether he or she considers it intelligible?

The SPEAKER—If there were any disputes with the proceedings of the House at any time, but particularly during the morning, it ought to have been raised at that time.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! I am responding, I would have thought, in good faith to the member for Sydney’s reasonable question to me. I am not aware of having said anything that should have been deemed provocative. I simply indicate that matters such as she has raised ought to have been raised at the time. In addition to that, I have every confidence in the Deputy Speaker’s management of the House.

Mr Hatton interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Blaxland will be aware of the fact that he skates on very thin ice with a comment like that.

Divisions

Ms PLIBERSEK (3.08 p.m.)—Perhaps I did not explain myself well enough, Mr Speaker. The Deputy Speaker at first said that the intervening debate was short. When we raised that issue with him, he then used another excuse, which was that the debate was unintelligible. He used two excuses. We did raise the issue at the time, and he ignored our questions and proceeded with the one-minute division. Will you take that up with him and check the record?

The SPEAKER—I will take the matter up with the Deputy Speaker and view the
tape, but I stand by my earlier statement. I am particularly conscious of the fact that it was a very sensitive debate in a compressed time frame this morning. For that reason I am, as always, confident that the Deputy Speaker would have acted responsibly. I will nonetheless view the tape and discuss the matter with him and the clerks.

Divisions

Ms PLIBERSEK (3.09 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, there was another issue raised during the debate this morning. At around 10.20 a division was called. One of the doors to the chamber remained closed, possibly preventing access to the chamber. It was this door here. I would like to know whether that is appropriate in a division and, if not, what action will be taken to ensure that that does not occur in the future.

The SPEAKER—The member for Sydney would be aware that that is not appropriate, that it is a very rare event and that any occupier of the chair would want all of the doors open and all of the doors shut at an appropriate time. Once again, that is something that, had members been aware of it, should have been raised—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Adams—We did raise it!

The SPEAKER—Once again may I remind those in the House of what is common courtesy. I was responding in a nonprovocative way to a remark made by the member for Sydney. She gave me no intimation that the matter had been raised, and I was responding quite reasonably—I would have thought—and I would have expected the same courtesy to be extended to me. I thank the member for Lyons for his indication. I have indicated to the member for Sydney that I will follow that matter up.

Ms Plibersek—It was raised at the time.

The SPEAKER—The matter has been dealt with.

PAPERS

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.10 p.m.)—Papers are tabled as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the papers will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings and I move:

That the House take note of the following papers:

Electoral Matters—Joint Standing Committee—Reports—


Debate (on motion by Mr Latham) adjourned.

ADDRESSES BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The SPEAKER (3.11 p.m.)—The resolutions adopted by the House on 8 October 2003 invited the Hon. George W. Bush, President of the United States of America, and His Excellency Hu Jintao, President of the People’s Republic of China, to address members and senators in the House of Representatives chamber. I advise the House that the times for these addresses have been fixed as follows: for President Bush, 11.15 a.m. on Thursday, 23 October 2003; and for President Hu, 10 a.m. on Friday, 24 October 2003.

SPECIAL ADJOURNMENT

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.12 p.m.)—I move:

That, unless the Speaker, or in the event of the Speaker being unavailable the Deputy Speaker,
fixes alternative days or hours of meetings, the House:

(1) at its rising today, adjourn until Thursday, 23 October 2003, at 11.15 a.m.;

(2) at its rising on 23 October 2003 after an Address by the President of the United States of America, adjourn until Friday, 24 October 2003, at 10 a.m., and

(3) at its rising on 24 October 2003 after an Address by the President of the People’s Republic of China, adjourn until Monday, 3 November 2003, at 12.30 p.m.

Question agreed to.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER
Address by the President of the People’s Republic of China

Mr EDWARDS (3.12 p.m.)—Mr Speaker, could those of us who have to catch planes back to the more distant states be given any idea of how long the sitting might go for on Friday?

The SPEAKER—I ask the Leader of the House to respond as to whether he has any indication.

Mr ABBOTT—I have not been given any specific length of time by the President of the People’s Republic of China, but I imagine a ceremonial address of this nature would not go for an inordinate length of time, and I would be fairly confident that a lunchtime or early afternoon flight—

Mr Melham—Castro does four hours!

Mr ABBOTT—I think the President of China is a reformed member of a certain political party, and I think that the member would be safe to catch an early afternoon flight back to Perth.

The SPEAKER—For the information of members, particularly the member for Cowan, I indicate that the Serjeant-at-Arms has said that it is anticipated that the sitting would not extend much beyond an hour. I hope that is helpful to the member for Cowan.

PAPERS

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.15 p.m.)—I present papers on the following subjects, being petitions which are not in accordance with the standing and sessional orders of the House.

Relating to digital mobile phone coverage in Mole Creek—from the member for Lyons—304 Petitioners

Relating to payment of Medicare rebates—from the member for Warringah—17 Petitioners.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Telstra: Regional Services

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

The Government’s support for selling Telstra without any guarantees for future regional telecommunications services.

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 TANNER (Melbourne) (3.15 p.m.)—As we move towards the end of yet another fun sitting week, we look across at the benches of the National Party and see their faces turning glum. They are becoming sadder by the minute, as they realise they will soon have to crawl back yet again with their tails between their legs to their electorates and the people they are supposed to represent, to hide in their offices to try to minimise the degree of exposure they will have to people in country Australia—the people they are supposed to be representing in this parliament—because they do not want to have
to explain to them why they support selling Telstra. Yet again they will crawl away from this place, where they have already voted to sell Telstra, and do everything they possibly can to avoid being held to account for it in country Australia.

Mr Speaker, hasn’t it been a fun couple of months for the National Party? They almost got a new leader—not quite, but almost. They have a new communications minister, and isn’t he a beaut! He is sitting right here in front of me. And they have a new name. So they have had a really good couple of months. I am fascinated by this new name—I am genuinely fascinated by it. Some highly paid consultant has come to the National Party and given them this flash of inspiration. This would have to be the mother of all makeovers. They are changing their name from the National Party to the Nationals. Possibly the Australian Labor Party could change its name to Labor. Wouldn’t that be an extraordinary revelation for the people who vote for us? There are thousands of wizened old farmers out there, west of Coonabarabran, with their feet on the barbed wire fence, chewing away, saying, ‘Did you know the National Party has just changed its name. Our party, the party that represented us for many years, has just changed its name.’ And boy, are they excited about it!

I am trying to work out why they have done this; I have a few theories as to why they might have. Possibly they are going to have two separate legal entities; they are all going to be members of two separate parties. Up here, where they vote for the sale of Telstra, they are going to be members of the National Party; but back home, where they say they are opposed to the sale of Telstra, they are going to be members of the Nationals. Of course that is what they have already done. The federal conference of the Nationals said that they oppose the sale of Telstra until services in the bush are up to scratch; but the members of the National Party who were here voted in this very House only a few weeks ago in favour of the sale of Telstra.

Possibly it is a cunning plan to get members such as the member for New England and the member for Kennedy back in the fold. I can see that the member for New England is tempted. Possibly there is a cunning plan on the part of the National Party that, if they change their name to the Nationals and tell people they are actually opposing the National Party, they will get genuine country representatives like the member for New England back in the fold.

There is a third possibility though, and that is that the National Party are trying to make out that they have merged with One Nation and therefore will pick up all their votes. Think about it: One Nation plus one National Party. Put them together and you get two sorts of nationals, and you end up with the Nationals. One plus one equals two. That is the sort of mathematical precision that really appeals to people in the National Party—scientific politics that pick up all those votes that they have lost over the last few years to One Nation.

It is stretching things a bit, I admit, to say that the change of name is to welcome the new Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, who is sitting opposite me. I must confess that I am missing Dick Alston already. Digital Dick is dead, and I am missing him already. I apologise for not mentioning Peter and Lindy; I might get to them a bit later on. But I am missing digital Dick already; he is dead and we have a new incumbent. But, no sooner had we discovered that Dick was no longer the minister, it all started to come out. We found he had a family trust that actually had shares in Telstra—something like $70,000 worth. They are very big on family trusts on
that side. They cannot understand why their public responsibilities should get in the way of managing their share portfolios in the most prudent and appropriate way. We have heard Senator Alston’s defence: it was his mum. The Warney defence: it was his mum that did it.

The only thing that puzzles me about Senator Alston’s mum being his excuse here is why didn’t he think of this earlier. Why didn’t he realise that his mum was a very convenient scapegoat for one or two other things? We remember the plasma TV scandal. Technically speaking—and the minister has put forward some highly technical legal defences on this matter of the family trust—he could have said that his mother owned the plasma TV. She lent it to him; it is his mum’s. According to my rough calculation, I think the minister’s mum had about a one-millionth interest in that plasma TV. That is roughly about the shareholding in Telstra—about a one millionth interest. He could have technically claimed that it was his mum’s TV, and the fact that he had it for months watching the football was really nobody’s business.

Mr Kerr—it was good enough for Shane Warne.

Mr TANNER—he was watching Shane Warne as well. But now, as I have pointed out, we have a new minister. Didn’t he have a great start the other day and didn’t he follow it up brilliantly today? He has been out buying his akubra and getting the Drizabone bush gear out, ready to go out there and convince country people that Telstra ought to be sold. They have a new strategy: they are going to bore them to death. We have Daryl and John—Hall and Oates. They are going to bore country people to death; they are going to send them to sleep and slip through the Telstra sale while they are still asleep.

I am afraid that it is not going to work. That kind of strategy is pretty smart, but I do not think it will work, because country people know what privatising Telstra actually means. Country people know that a privatised Telstra will be a giant, private monopoly that will be too powerful for any government to effectively regulate and will leave town faster than the banks. There have been many surveys to show what country Australia thinks about the government’s proposal to sell Telstra. The member for New England has done a survey, and he got a response of over 95 per cent saying ‘Don’t sell Telstra’; the member for Calare had a similar response. But they are not the only ones doing surveys.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—What about Alby?

Mr TANNER—as the member for Burke points out, the member for Hume did a survey and he discovered that the vast bulk of his constituents—his country constituents—opposed the sale. The member for Dawson did a survey and she discovered that her constituents, to the tune of 86 per cent, opposed a sale. But they are not the only ones doing surveys. The member for McEwen—Hyacinth Bucket, as we know her and love her—has recently put out a telecommunications survey, and it has the following questions: what telecommunications services do you most rely on in your home or in your business? How would you rate these services, from 1 to 10? Which of these services most needs improvement? How important is access to high-speed Internet—and so on. There is one big question missing: do you want to sell Telstra? I have not been able to find it. I am not quite sure why the member for McEwen has forgotten to put that on her survey. It could have slipped off at the printer’s. That is an excuse that I am familiar with.
Mr McMullan—Her mum took it off.

Mr TANNER—That is another good possibility. These surveys have provoked the National Party into action. They went en masse to the Prime Minister to complain about the fact that the member for Hume was doing surveys and criticising the National Party for supporting the sale of Telstra. This is monumental hypocrisy. The Nationals are out in their electorates saying, ‘We are opposed to selling Telstra. We want to make sure we get decent regional services.’ At the same time they are going to the Prime Minister and formally complaining about the member for Hume for criticising them for supporting the sale. Almost every day we have new revelations about the fraud that this government is seeking to impose upon Australia and upon country Australia with respect to the privatisation of Telstra.

A couple of weeks ago, the chairman of their own inquiry, Dick Estens, admitted that services in regional Australia are not up to scratch. At their own conference the Deputy Prime Minister—the Leader of the Nationals or the National Party or whatever they are called—admitted that services are not up to scratch and effectively said, ‘Black is white. We are not going to support the sale of Telstra until services are up to scratch’—after having already supported the sale by voting for it in this very House. A few weeks ago, the CEO of Telstra, Ziggy Switkowski, was awarded a new contract which enables him to earn up to $7 million a year based on incentives. But what are those incentives connected to? Are they connected to services? Are they connected to the standard of Internet delivery in the bush? Are they connected to mobile phone coverage? No, they are not. They are connected to the share price, cash flow, financial incentives—nothing to do with services in regional Australia.

Last week it was revealed that the figures The Nationals claim as the basis for their argument that country services are up to scratch are completely phoney. I described them some months ago as Saddam Hussein referendum figures, and I did not know how right I was. They were completely phoney; they were based on a dubious averaging of monthly figures to claim that, generally, about one per cent to two per cent of phones throughout Australia each year have a fault—when, in fact, the real figure is in the vicinity of 10 per cent, 15 per cent, 20 per cent or more. Telstra even admits that it is probably around 10 per cent or more.

It was similarly exposed, through the same Senate inquiry process, that the Nationals’ claims of future proofing Telstra and its network, and guaranteeing a standard of regional services into the future, are complete nonsense. There is absolutely nothing—not one clause, not one word in this legislation—which provides any guarantee whatsoever for people in country Australia with respect to future regional services. All it does is set up a framework which empowers a future minister to set requirements—but does not guarantee that any such requirements will be imposed—and a five-yearly review, appointed by the minister, where the government is under no obligation other than to table the outcome of the review. It was admitted in this inquiry that it is highly conceivable that a requirement such as that there is one Telstra shop in Gundagai and one technician in Kalgoorlie could be sufficient to satisfy a nominal requirement about Telstra’s regional services.

We have discovered that Telstra are still installing pair gain systems, which inhibit dial-up Internet speeds—even though they claimed that they worked. We have discovered that Mr Estens has admitted that his recommended 19.2 kilobits per second data speed is inadequate, and we have discovered,
only over the last 24 hours, that the way the government are proposing to implement this is a complete fraud. Rather than universal provision, which is what they said they were going to do, they are supposedly going to provide it ‘on demand’, provided Telstra are not prevented from delivering it by circumstances beyond their control. That is code for, ‘When we get around to it, we might give it to a few people.’ So even this totally inadequate and very basic level of Internet service is still going to be denied to many country people.

Now, of course, we have got Telstra’s BigPond email service in complete chaos, with speeds roughly the speed of carrier pigeon—with not quite the reliability—and all of this in a context where the government says that regional telecommunications services are up to scratch, everything is fine, everything is going well, Telstra is fine to be privatised.

The National Party might change their name, they might pretend, out in the bush, that they are opposed to the sale of Telstra, and do something different here; they might claim to be the representative of country people; but nothing is going to save them from the wrath of people in their electorates on this issue. The National Party might be made up of people who are a bit silly, but the people who vote for them are not, and they are going to see absolutely, right up square, what this party are about. They are betraying their origins, they are betraying the people who have loyally voted for them for many years, they are betraying those constituents, those activists, those hardworking people who have handed out how-to-vote cards—and I was one of them many years ago, when I was 10, as people may remember. They are betraying all those people, because they have not got the guts to stand up to the Liberal Party and say, ‘Don’t sell Telstra, because it is of fundamental importance to people in country Australia.’

People in country Australia know the reality of telecommunications services in Australia. They know the network is crumbling. They know that staff have been cut back dramatically by Telstra and that services are deteriorating. They have got huge problems with Internet drop-outs, email blackouts and mobile phone coverage, and the fact that these things are not reflected in the official statistics has now exposed the statistics as a lie. We have phoney statistics from the ACA, based on dubious methodology, that ultimately mean nothing.

People in country Australia know that prices and line rental fees are going up. Telstra is still effectively a monopoly in most parts of Australia, subject to inadequate competition. Broadband rollout has virtually stalled in many parts of Australia, and we are still nationally way behind the vast bulk of equivalent countries. People in rural Australia know what selling Telstra means: it will be a giant private monopoly, it will be too powerful for any government to effectively regulate, it will focus on the most lucrative markets in the bigger cities and it will leave town faster than the banks. That is what will happen. That is what people in country Australia know and that is why the National Party should be honourable. They should stick to representing their constituents; they should stick to their traditional position on these issues. It does not matter what they are called—

Mr Wilkie interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. I.R. Causley)—The member for Swan has been warned already today.

Mr TANNER—The National Party, the National Country Party, The Nationals or One Nation, if they want to merge with them—they have an obligation to country
people and they should deliver on that obligation. *(Time expired)*

Mr WILLIAMS (Tangney—Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts) (3.31 p.m.)—Isn’t it a strange spectacle to see the member for Melbourne talking about country Australia?

Mr Tanner—That is were I come from.

Mr WILLIAMS—He revealed his attitude to it by referring then to thousands of wizened old farmers, as if wizened old farmers represent country Australia. I thank the opposition for providing this opportunity to bore the Labor Party to death with facts. The Labor Party is hell-bent on running a scare campaign and, not surprisingly, the scare campaign and the factual situation bear no similarity at all. The Howard government are proud of their record in providing telecommunications services to regional and remote areas, and we are continuing to work to improve telecommunications in these areas. The Labor Party asks the people to believe that it is concerned about their access to telecommunications services, but regional Australia knows better.

The member for Melbourne repeatedly refers to his by-line that telecommunications services will leave the country faster than the banks. What he also ought to point out is that the Labor Party were responsible for the Commonwealth Bank leaving the country areas. The Labor Party privatised the Commonwealth Bank and did not do anything at all to protect the banking services in rural, regional and remote areas that had been provided by what was previously a wholly government-owned bank.

Labor have really shown no genuine interest in the needs and concerns of regional Australia. The opposition can only dream of achieving the sort of record that the Howard government have established in improving telecommunications services. But this does not seem to stop the Labor Party from conducting an irresponsible campaign of scaremongering and misinformation. The glib warnings of the dire consequences for regional and remote Australia if Telstra should be fully privatised have no factual foundation. As long as they foster fear and uncertainty in the Australian community, they will be achieving what they set out to do.

The opposition is seriously and deliberately ignoring the existence of guarantees for future regional telecommunications services. Let us look at just how misleading and irresponsible the opposition is on this point. Australian telecommunications consumers currently enjoy some of the world’s strongest regulatory safeguards. These safeguards include the universal service obligation, the customer service guarantee, the right to untimed local calls, retail price controls on Telstra and the digital data service obligation.

Through the universal service obligation, all Australians enjoy the right to receive a telephone service. This safeguard is not going to be weakened or removed. The customer service guarantee is a world leading initiative that establishes a regime whereby companies who fail to comply with set time lines for connection and repair of telephone services must pay a financial penalty to the customer. This safeguard is not going to be weakened or removed. The right to an untimed local call is enshrined in legislation, and the government has no intention of removing this right. The digital data service obligation provides all customers with a 64 kilobytes per second service on request. This means that all Australians have access to their dedicated high speed data services. All these consumer safeguards continue into the future.

The introduction of full and open telecommunications competition in 1997 has brought benefits for all Australian consum-
ers, not only those in rural and regional areas. As a result of full competition, the number of telecommunications companies has grown from three to 89, and 40 per cent of these companies offer services to regional Australia. Consumers have also enjoyed a real decrease in prices for telephone services. That decrease is a real 20.7 per cent since 1997. According to an independent report commissioned by the Australian Communications Authority, competition has led to consumer benefits of a value between $595 and $878 per household in 2001-02. It has led to increased profits of $900 million per year for small business.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that the introduction of the customer service guarantee by the government has meant that, for the first time, companies had to comply with strict time frames for installation and repair of phone services or they would have to pay compensation to the customer. Before the CSG most remote customers in Australia used to wait for up to 27 months for a phone to be installed. Now customers can expect a service to be installed within 20 days. It is important to note that the guarantee applies to all telecommunications companies and not just Telstra.

The fact that this fundamental safeguard can be imposed across the board surely demonstrates the capacity of the government to protect consumers regardless of ownership arrangements. The opposition’s scaremongering that a fully privatised Telstra will be beyond regulatory control shows little faith in the power of the government and of the parliament to regulate the telecommunications industry. Labor, by adopting that position, is demonstrating that it has little faith in its own ability to govern if it were to achieve government. Indeed, this seemed to be reflected in a joint media statement issued on 2 October by the member for Melbourne and the opposition Senate whip, Senator Mackay.

This press release set out the opposition’s great fear that Telstra would lobby for an end to the price control regime following its privatisation. Interestingly, it also pointed out that Telstra had refused to rule out political donations to political parties.

Is the member for Melbourne putting on the public record that future Labor governments would be too weak to resist lobbying attempts, regardless of their merit? Is the member for Melbourne telling us that, if the Australian Labor Party were to receive a political donation from Telstra, an elected Labor government would abandon its responsibilities to safeguard the interests of the Australian community? These are serious questions and we call on those opposite to tell the Australian community why they have no intention of acting any more responsibly in government than they do in opposition.

I have had drawn to my attention evidence given to a Senate committee by the ACCC commissioner Mr Ed Willet last Tuesday. He was asked if the ACCC’s ability to effectively regulate the telecommunications industry relied on the government being part owner of Telstra. He said:

None of our role relies on partial ownership or on any ownership issue. Our role is a regulatory one and it relies on our powers under legislation. In case there was any confusion on this point, Mr Willet went on to say:

It might be worth noting at this point that privatisation of Telstra or any other business enterprise does not go directly to our responsibilities. Our roles are indifferent as to ownership. They apply to all businesses and they rely on legislation.

In case there was any confusion on this point, Mr Willet was asked by a Labor senator about the impact of Telstra’s view that it should be regulated less. This is what he said in response:

... I am yet to meet a monopoly infrastructure owner who does not want to be regulated less. I do not find that surprising ...
He then, importantly, said:
I do not think it goes to what we do, or would go to how we treat or regulate Telstra, privatised or not.

Despite the opposition scaremongering, it is clear from Mr Willet’s comments that regulation of the telecommunications industry and regulation of Telstra has nothing to do with ownership issues.

The opposition’s insistence in this debate, and its misleading claims that a fully privatised Telstra will lead to a deterioration in services to remote and regional Australia, completely ignores the reality of the government’s regulatory power and it completely ignores the government’s longstanding commitment to a regime that protects regional telecommunications services. Looking to the future, the government appreciates the need to continue to support the often unique needs of regional Australia. The government has decided to accept all 39 recommendations of the Estens inquiry. This is another example of the government’s commitment to regional Australia and also of its willingness to put in place measures to protect regional Australians into the future.

The inquiry recommended that Telstra be required to maintain an ongoing local presence in regional, rural and remote Australia into the future. In response, the government have announced that we will address this through a new licence condition. This licence condition will require Telstra to prepare a plan setting out the activities and strategies it will undertake to maintain its local presence in regional areas.

The Labor Party seems to have ignored the fact that the government has plainly stated that it accepts all the recommendations of the Estens inquiry. The Labor Party also fails to appreciate that there is a number of ways that this local presence plan recommendation can be implemented. In this case, the government will use its power to impose a licence condition. The government has introduced legislation requiring current and future governments to conduct regular independent reviews of the adequacy of regional communication services and to formally respond to the reviews. The government has introduced legislation that will for the first time require a strategic regional telecommunications plan to be put in place.

Other activities to improve the quality of services to remote and regional Australia include requirements that Telstra provide a formal undertaking to the government to raise the reliability of its worst performing exchange service areas, to improve underperforming pair gain systems and to upgrade older radio concentrator telephone systems. The government, as I said in question time, is also imposing a licence condition on Telstra to provide a minimum equivalent throughput speed of 19.2 kbps for dial-up Internet access over its fixed line network. The government is well aware of the future telecommunications challenges in regional Australia and this is clearly demonstrated by the $181 million it has committed in response to the Estens inquiry.

The major component of this is a more than $140 million commitment for a national broadband strategy to provide access to affordable broadband services in regional Australia. A higher bandwidth incentive scheme will provide financial incentive for service providers to offer services in rural and remote areas at prices broadly equivalent to those available in urban areas. Everyone recognises that broadband is the big future issue for regional Australia. This package demonstrates a real and genuine commitment to support the future telecommunications needs of regional Australia.

The fact is that there is an extensive regulatory regime safeguarding the interests of
Australian consumers in relation to services provided by Telstra. This regime will remain in place after Telstra’s full privatisation. In fact, not only will all the current safeguards remain; there will be additional safeguards for Australian consumers under the government’s response to the Estens inquiry. The government will also retain its ability to regulate the telecommunications industry and if necessary introduce new regulatory safeguards in the future.

The reality is that the power of government through parliament to regulate the telecommunications industry is entirely unrelated to the question of who owns Telstra. The government’s pro-competition regulatory regime and the stringent consumer safeguards I have referred to will be totally unaffected by any change in the ownership of Telstra. It is these pro-competition rules and consumer safeguards, not the government’s part ownership of Telstra, that ensure that phone services remain affordable and that phone companies have to abide by strict service standards. These rules and safeguards are contained in legislation and will continue to apply regardless of any change in Telstra’s ownership. Telstra and other telephone companies will continue to be subject to all of these laws.

The government remain committed to maintaining, and improving where necessary, the standard of telecommunications service to remote and regional Australia. We have a substantial record of working to achieve this goal, and we are clearly committed to ensuring appropriate service delivery to remote and regional Australia in the future. The contrast with Labor could not be more stark. Labor failed to impose any requirements on the Commonwealth Bank to protect its services to regional communities before it was privatised. In his media release of 13 October the member for Melbourne displayed an astonishing memory lapse about Labor’s failures. He said that the Telstra sale legislation ‘would allow Telstra to leave town faster than the banks’. I ask the member for Melbourne: who was responsible for the Commonwealth Bank leaving town? *(Time expired)*

Mr MARTYN EVANS (Bonython) (3.46 p.m.)—This government has taken a great institution of Australia, the PMG—which under a former Labor government became Telstra, which became a very significant telecommunications provider in this country—and it has effectively turned that effective infrastructure provider, that effective institution builder, which provided telecommunications services in the Australian regional areas and innovative information technology services throughout the metropolitan area and the regional part of the Australian continent, into a private company.

That private company is now effectively a shareholder-dominated entity that is looking to provide profits and services that it can limit as much as possible in the interests of those shareholders; it is no longer about the interests of institution building in this country. Telstra is now very much dominated by the interests of its shareholders, by the company’s future profits and by the ways it can reduce services in the bush and limit the future provision of services in regional Australia so it can maximise those profits, because that is the only way it can build shareholder wealth. Unfortunately, it will do so by reducing services to the customers who will not deliver it the maximum profit. Regrettably, that is not in the interests of regional Australia; it is not in the interests of consumers in Australia. And the minister’s regime of regulation, the minister’s regime of regulatory controls, will not answer that critical question.

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts says that he
will impose additional controls if necessary, that we already have a substantial degree of regulation, and that his new and additional controls, which this government will impose as a result of the Estens inquiry, will be adequate to meet the needs of regional Australia—he did not mention metropolitan Australia; people living in metropolitan Australia also have significant needs in this era of communications, information technology and broadband services. Minister, if that were correct—if that were all true—then regional Australia would not be crying out and complaining about the service delivery they now have. They would not be saying that they do not have the broadband services that they need and that they are of an appalling standard, that their dial-up Internet lines constantly drop out, or that our service delivery needs to be significantly upgraded.

Minister, if under the current regulatory regime you were able to deliver an adequate standard of service to regional Australia, then the regional areas of South Australia, represented as they are by the Local Government Association of South Australia, would not have carried a resolution at their conference only a few weeks ago that called on this government not to privatise Telstra until services have been upgraded. So what makes you think that a new regulatory regime would be able to deliver an adequate standard of service? If the regulatory regime that we already have could answer these questions right now, then why haven’t you already done that? If your existing regulatory regime were able to answer those questions, you would have done so already.

This government has had this agenda on its books since it came to office some seven years ago. If the government had been able to deliver an answer to the needs of regional Australia—to the country towns and the electorate I hope to continue to represent after the next election, including Clare, Auburn and Saddleworth, in that significant area of South Australia, Wakefield-Bonython, which the Speaker and I currently share an interest in—then you would have done so in regulatory controls that you would have announced already. Why should we believe the minister about the proposals he has for the future if, in the seven years that it has had to deliver existing regulatory controls, the government has not been able to boost the broadband access of regional areas?

The government have not even been able to deliver an adequate dial-up Internet service for regional Australia; so why should we believe them about the future? They certainly cannot deliver adequate broadband Internet to regional Australian areas; so why should we believe them about the future? They cannot even deliver adequate broadband in the metropolitan half of my electorate now; so why should we believe them about the future? There are significant parts of the urban area of my electorate now which do not have appropriate access to ADSL, and I am sure there are many colleagues on both sides of this House whose urban electorates do not yet have full access to high-speed broadband now; so why should we believe the government about future accessibility to ADSL and broadband services?

Why is that important, Mr Deputy Speaker? Because Australia is now well down the list of OECD countries with broadband access. Australia, for example, has one-tenth the access to broadband services that Canada has and less than one-fifth of that of the United States. Australia is well below Korea—which is above even Canada and the US—Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Japan and Switzerland. Those OECD countries and others have much higher levels of access to broadband services and take-up of broadband services than Australia.
That is particularly important in the 21st century, when broadband will be the conduit—the railroad, the highway—down which many services like banking and access to entertainment and government services will be delivered, and not only in metropolitan areas. Already many government services are available online which are very hard to access in a physical sense. Access to services like government publications, regulations, legal services and registration of your vehicle or dog is available online, and they are much more difficult to access in a physical sense. The convenience of consumer services online, whether they are government or private services, will be denied to people who do not have access to broadband.

If you are a citizen of the 21st century and you want convenient, ready, cheap access to those services, especially in regional Australia, you will need access to broadband. If you want equitable access to education, you will need access to broadband services. If you want equitable, fair and reasonable access to your primary school, high school or tertiary education institution, you will need access to broadband. If your primary school in a regional town does not have access to high-speed broadband—and by that I do not just mean 256- or 512-kilobit access; I mean very high-speed two- to 10-megabit access—then you will need access to very high-speed services, and in regional Australia that is simply and utterly impossible. In many parts of the metropolitan area it is impossible.

It will be very important for our educational institutions—even for high schools and primary schools—to have reasonable and fair access under this current regime of regulation, Minister, let alone under a fully privatised Telstra because they will have absolutely no incentive to deliver that in regional Australia. They will have limited incentive to deliver it to the less well-off and less socioeconomically fortunate areas of metropolitan Australia. But for the smaller country towns—those one classroom regional Australian primary schools—there will be zero incentive for a fully privatised Telstra to deliver.

When it comes to broadband access, Minister, you may well not have discovered that technology. I suspect that, in the case of this minister, radio is a newly discovered technology. That may be unkind—I do not know—but the reality is that, for the children of the 21st century, broadband is going to be a very important access commodity in our country and regional areas and certainly in our metropolitan areas. In terms of equity of access, why should we deny any Australian access to these technologies? As Estens himself agreed, 19.2 kilobits on a dial-up basis simply does not cut the standard in the 21st century. I abandoned dial-up access at 19.2 kilobits something like 12 years ago, although I regarded it as a great innovation 15 years ago. The reality is that it is no longer viable in country Australia but many country Australians regard it as a luxury now, and they should not have to do so in 2003. Minister, your regulatory access does not deliver it to them today. Why should we believe you when you say that it will deliver it to them in the future?

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (3.55 p.m.)—I am delighted to speak on this MPI and respond to some of the absolute nonsense and hypocrisy that we have heard from the opposition. Before I continue, I take the opportunity to congratulate the new Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on his appointment. He has already demonstrated why the Prime Minister appointed him to this important portfolio; he has already left the shadow minister in his wake. I am sure that the people of Australia will benefit tremendously from the new minister’s stewardship of his portfolio.
I want to make sure that I get on the record up front the examples of Labor’s hypocrisy in relation to privatisation. Ten minutes go very quickly so, before I allow time to get away, I will mention some of the important Australian icons and institutions that Labor have privatised during their time in government. It is very important for the people of Australia to know exactly where the Labor opposition stand on these things. They might say one thing in opposition but when in government they do completely the opposite. For the benefit of the House and, indeed, the Australian people—and especially for the benefit of the constituents of my electorate of Ryan, who I know have a very strong interest in the privatisation of Telstra—the list is staggering. During its time in government the current opposition privatised the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation; the Moomba-Sydney pipeline; Aerospace Technologies of Australia Ltd; the Commonwealth uranium stockpile; CSL, formerly Commonwealth Serum Laboratories; Amdel; the Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Services; the Defence Services Housing Corporation loan portfolio; the Defence Force home loan franchise; and the Commonwealth housing loan assistance schemes.

These are just a handful of the many Australian institutions that were under government control, stewardship and management and that the opposition privatised during its time in government. Today in the debate we have heard the shadow minister, the Leader of the Opposition and all of those members opposite fail to be rigorous and complete in their presentation to the Australian people and say, ‘Yes, we also privatised. We were in the business of privatisation ourselves.’ This MPI is just another example of Labor’s misrepresentation and their mischief. It is an example of the fog of Labor’s hypocrisy, policy incompetence and ineptitude. All they do is oppose; they do not propose.

I think the member for Melbourne—the shadow communications minister—is a reasonable sort of guy. He believes in fairness, I think. He balances his very committed socialist leanings of nationalisation with hanging around the corridors of Melbourne merchant banks. I want to applaud him for his fairness in giving equal time to both sides of political philosophy. As the minister very appropriately and skilfully alluded, the government’s record on privatisation and of making it very clear to the Australian people where it stands has been excellent. It has been clear and coherent. The government has explained to the Australian people—and, for my part, the people of Ryan—that it supports privatisation. There has been no misrepresentation or mischief in the way that the shadow minister’s MPI reflects on the opposition.

We have gone to the Australian people at three elections and said, ‘We support privatisation.’ We have a genuine commitment to what privatisation will do in the interests of our country, in the interests of competition and in the interests of making sure that the consumers of Australia benefit from privatisation. One of the main points that the shadow minister and the opposition always fail to bring up is that the government has accepted all of the 39 recommendations of the Estens inquiry. The independent Regional Telecommunications Service Inquiry provided a very comprehensive assessment of telecommunications services in regional Australia. It made 39 recommendations to ensure that the government did not leave the people of Australia, including the bush, out of all the benefits of telecommunications and privatisation. The government accepted all of those recommendations.

I want to take the opportunity to mention two of the recommendations which are rele-
vant to this particular MPI, which are recommendations in relation to service adequacy. Recommendation 2.9 was that regional, rural and remote Australia not be forgotten and that the worst affected parts of rural and remote Australia be given special or additional attention from the government. The government has responded completely to recommendation 2.9. The government’s position is that the ACA will commence work immediately on identifying the worst performing ESAs using the network reliability framework, and Telstra will provide the government with a formal undertaking on a strategy to improve the performance of identified ESAs, with time frames and funding commitments. Why don’t those opposite, including the shadow minister and the opposition leader, mention that the 39 recommendations of the Estens inquiry have been positively responded to by the government?

Recommendation 4.1 deals with dial-up Internet speeds. The RT inquiry noted that the Internet Assistance Program is achieving its objectives of helping users achieve faster and better Internet browsing capabilities and email services but, of course, recommended that a licence condition be imposed on Telstra to ensure that the benefits provided under the program will be guaranteed into the future—and this MPI is about the future. What has the government done? The government has responded very positively. It has said, ‘Yes, we will support this recommendation. Recommendation 4.1, which is about benefits to rural and regional Australia, will be guaranteed.’ The government will impose a licence condition on Telstra to provide a minimum dial-up network speed for all Australians over its fixed line network.

All this nonsense and hypocrisy that we hear from the opposition is just part of their policy ineptitude and incompetence. The Liberals and the Nationals stand very united on this. We are very strongly in support of privatisation, because it is in the national interest. I wonder if the handful of Labor members opposite who hold shares in Telstra—Graham Edwards, Sid Sidebottom’s spouse, I believe, and Warren Snowdon, the member for Lingiari—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—The member will refer to members by their electorates.

Mr JOHNSON—I just wonder if those members will actually support the government’s position. They hold shares in Telstra and they benefit from Telstra, so I encourage them to support the government’s position, because it is in the national interest.

It is a shame we are allowed only 10 minutes to speak on this, because more time could be used to point out to the Australian people the real and complete issues. The other important thing the shadow minister always fails to bring up is that it was the opposition, when they were in government, that put Telstra under the jurisdiction of the Corporations Act.

Mr Tanner—It’s us again!

Mr JOHNSON—I do not recall the shadow minister or any of his colleagues, including the Leader of the Opposition, ever saying to the Australian people, ‘Actually, it was us when we were in government. We ensured that the Corporations Act would govern Telstra.’ That is a very important point that needs to be added to the story where we are concerned.

In the remaining seconds I have, I want to turn to what the then Treasurer of the previous Labor government said in his second reading speech in relation to the sale of the Commonwealth Bank. He said:

... in the budget deliberations we considered the clear budgetary advantages of selling the government’s remaining 50.4 per cent stake. The sale will make a major contribution to the reduction of
outstanding government debt, to the benefit of all Australians.

So is there a difference between, on the one hand, the proceeds from the sale of the Commonwealth Bank going to pay off debt and, on the other hand, the proceeds from the sale of Telstra being allocated to pay off the massive Labor debt that the Howard government inherited when it came to office in 1996? (Time expired)

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (4.05 p.m.)—I am pleased to speak on this MPI. Unlike some of the others, I welcome the new Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and wish him well. Given his legal background, I hope that he will understand quite fully the uncertainty that a lot of country people feel in relation to this legislation and the great concern they have that one government, under our Constitution, cannot bind future governments to decisions that are made now—no doubt he would be fully aware of that. I refer him to statements made by Senator Nick Minchin, the Minister for Finance and Administration, after the sale of Kingsford Smith airport. Those fears I spoke of were vindicated by him only two days after the sale. Two days before the sale, he was saying, ‘Government can guarantee certain service levels through regulation and legislation. It will be provided into the future—don’t worry about it.’ Two days after the sale they started to talk about possible changes. A 747 had a brake problem and all of a sudden they were talking about possible changes within the term of the parliament—not to mention outside the term of the parliament, where it would be unconstitutional.

I am very disappointed that the National Party are not here today. The Leader of the National Party, John Anderson, at their recent conference, made the point that he was very happy, and would like, to have a full-blown debate on the future of Telstra—but he is not here. He did not speak when he voted for the sale of Telstra—he was not interested in a full-blown debate then—and there are no National Party people speaking today. It is an absolute disgrace, in my view. Here is an opportunity for the Leader of the National Party to come in and use the forum of parliament to have that full-blown debate that he is quite willing to have—because there has apparently been all this mischievous information about the sale spread by the Labor Party, scurrilous Independents and others in rural Australia—and where is he? He is not here. It is very disappointing.

At their recent conference, the National Party did change their name. They are now called the Nationals. They are the very party that say to Independents and others in rural Australia, ‘You’ve got to belong to a party to achieve anything. To achieve anything in the parliamentary system, you must belong to a party,’ and they have suddenly removed ‘party’ from their name. No wonder people are terribly confused about the direction that these people are going in and the contradictory messages that they are sending.

The National Party are the party that say they will listen to country people. They are always saying that they are going to listen. They introduced a new logo and said, ‘We’re going out there to listen; we’re looking for local champions; we are going to listen; and we will be spending much more on infrastructure.’ They even suggested that they may use some of the proceeds of Telstra. Some hard bargaining was done behind the scenes, and the figure of $5 billion that was going to be spent on country infrastructure came down and suddenly became nothing. I believe the member for Cowper—the custodian of small business in this so-called party that is not a party—was the one who negotiated the figure down from $5 billion to nothing. So the resolution that came from the conference was that nothing would be spent
from the sale of Telstra. There are absolutely no guarantees, but they are there to listen and they are going to spend more money on infrastructure.

But listening becomes a real problem when the people they are supposed to represent say that they do not want Telstra sold. They do not listen to those people. ‘Those people are idiots; they are wizened up idiots and they do not really know—but we know,’ is what they say. They say they want to listen, but they do not want to hear. That has always been a great problem. John Anderson, the leader of the party, said at the national conference that he wanted a full-blown debate, and where is he today? I challenge him to come in today and tell the people out there who are going to vote for this new party that are not a party that he is listening to them and he is voicing their concerns. As I said, this is the party that do not want to be called a party. They stated at their conference that they want to be represented and they have to go out into the marketplace and be represented—

Mr Hartsuyker interjecting—

Mr WINDSOR—Here he is: the member for Cowper. I am delighted to see him here: the champion of the $5 billion drop-out. The National Party stated at their conference that they are a party who want to be represented by local people and that the way forward is to go and get local champions who are concerned about local issues. If that is not an endorsement of Independents in country areas, I do not know what is! The National Party are the party that say Telstra legislation guarantees a country presence for Telstra into the future and then admit to the Senate inquiry that a regional presence is at the discretion of the minister of the day and that, in theory, a regional presence for Telstra could mean as little as one regional shop in Gundagai and one technician in Kalgoorlie.

I would suggest that the new minister is serious about putting in place things that he believes are fair for country people—and I congratulate him for that and wish him well—but he cannot guarantee those things into the future. He made certain comments in relation to concerns about what the Labor Party may do in the future—well, a lot of people are. The way to overcome that, Minister, is to leave the ownership of Telstra in the hands of the people of Australia. As I mentioned earlier, no government can bind a future government—our Constitution does not allow that to happen. Governments can change their minds; they can change the rules.

A number of polls have been mentioned from time to time in the parliament. When the National Party say that they are out there listening to people, why aren’t they listening to the polls? Polls have been done by a number of members. The poll done by the member for Hume showed that over 90 per cent of his people suggested that they do not want Telstra sold. The result of the poll in the electorate of Calare was 90 per cent. The result of the poll in New England, my seat, was over 90 per cent. The result of the poll in Kennedy was over 90 per cent. The result of the poll in McMillan, a Labor seat in Victoria, was over 80 per cent. Even in the electorate of the member for Dawson—and I congratulate the National Party member for Dawson for attempting to listen to her constituency—the poll showed that 81 per cent of her electorate do not want Telstra sold. Talk about the $5 billion drop; we got the big dollar pass there: to take her out of the game they have promoted her for not listening to her constituency. That is an absolutely appalling indictment of what has happened.

But I think there are some local champions on the horizon. I note with interest that, in today’s The Land, Mark Vaile is quoted as saying after the conference that branding and
logos were meaningless without the ‘heart and soul’ —

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barressi)—The member will refer to other members by their correct titles.

Mr WINDSOR—The Minister for Trade, a National Party member—or a member of the Nationals, the party that are not a party anymore—said that branding and logos were meaningless without the ‘heart and soul’ provided by its greatest asset, the people. The party that are not a party are not going to listen to these people, and the Minister for Trade recognises that. He is quoted as saying:

Without the heart and soul, the words and pictures are comforting but meaningless.

The article in The Land goes on to say:

... he argued that it was people with passion and commitment in the local communities who would make the difference for the party.

I think that says it all. I also noticed an editorial in the Daily Examiner—which the member for Page and the member for Cowper would be fully aware of. Part of the editorial says:

Ian Causley, Luke Hartsuyker and Doug’s son Larry—

that is, Larry Anthony—amongst others, are quite shameless despite the utter contempt with which they have treated their Page, Cowper and Richmond constituents on this issue—

the issue of the sale of Telstra. The editorial continues:

They belong to a political party—

this is when they were a party; this was a few weeks ago—

which clearly has lost any real identity and the backbone to stand up for bush interests.

That editorial, coming from the area where these people say they represent the constituents, indicates the real feeling of country people out there. It is about time that country people in this parliament followed the Alby Schultzes of this world—the member for Hume—and the other country members who have identified and listened to their constituents, and started to translate those messages into legislation. This is nothing but a massive cop-out that will affect country people. I congratulate the new minister for being in the House. I hope that he will take the lead on this, because it is quite obvious that the Nationals and many country Liberals within his government are not prepared to do so.

Mr CAUSLEY (Page) (4.15 p.m.)—I am pleased to make a contribution to the debate on the matter of public importance regarding Telstra after the non-contribution from the member for New England. I have listened to him for 10 minutes to get some insight into what his thinking is on Telstra, but he has none at all. I have also listened to the member for Melbourne state the fact that he does not want the sale of Telstra to go ahead, but he puts forward no alternative. He now walks from the chamber because he knows he does not want to listen to this. He has no intellectual rigour in this debate. He simply says, ‘We don’t want to sell Telstra.’ I put it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it was the Labor Party—in fact, I think it was the former member for Dobell—that deregulated telecommunications. From the day telecommunications were deregulated, those non-profitable services in rural and regional Australia were at risk. They were at risk for a simple reason: no company that is out there to make a profit can carry those unprofitable services.

I never heard anything from the member for New England as to what he proposes. He is just a populist. He is irrelevant; for 10 years he was irrelevant in the state parliament and now he is irrelevant in the federal parliament. He came in here on some populist ruse. I challenge him to go back to the
Northern Daily Leader in his electorate and ask its readers if they want to go back to 1988 when they were paying full price for services. I bet you they do not, because they now get their services at probably 25 per cent less. The editorial that he read out was written a while ago and when I approached the editor about that and asked him if he wanted to go back, he replied, ‘No, I do want to go back.’

Even these people are not thinking this issue through. If Telstra is not sold, then who is going to prop up those unserviceable areas out in the bush—the ones that are not paying at the present time? The only argument the member for New England puts up is that we cannot bind a future government. You do not have to be Einstein to know that. I challenge the member for New England and I challenge the Labor Party to guarantee that they will give those same guarantees to the people. They should say upfront—before the election, in fact—if they are not prepared to give those guarantees to regional and rural Australia. If they are not, then they should tell the people of Australia that they intend to change them.

Telstra is a great Australian company. It has the potential and technology to deliver services overseas and earn export dollars. It cannot go forward if we do not let it go free, because no private company can exist when it is hobbled by government. That is what Telstra is at the present time: it is hobbled by government.

I think the member for Bonython said that the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts cannot guarantee that broadband will be rolled out. He did not read the government’s reply to the Estens report, did he? The government guaranteed $143 million in upgrading the broadband in the areas of concern in that report. It is fairly clear that a smokescreen is being put up here.

It is a disgrace, actually. The Labor Party and the Independents are trying to scare country New South Wales into believing that the sale of Telstra is a threat to them. It does not matter who owns Telstra. The real issue is who is going to give the guarantees on service to these areas into the future. At this stage, the only guarantee that I have heard is coming from this side of politics; it is coming from the Liberal Party and the Nationals. We are not hearing those guarantees coming from anyone else. And as Telstra, if it is not privatised, goes down—as it loses its market share, as it slowly but surely goes broke—who is going to tell regional and rural Australia that it was the Labor Party and the Independents that condemned it by their opposition? I will be one that will be out there telling the community fairly quickly.

The member for New England also said that at the Nationals’ conference on the weekend we removed any mention of $5 billion. That was for good reason: we do not want to limit ourselves to $5 billion, I can assure you. We want unlimited dollars for some of the works that we want done in the bush. We want money for roads; we want money for the infrastructure of irrigation; and we want money for health services and education services. But do not forget the states— they have got to put their share in as well. I can tell the member for New England that we will be fighting very hard for those services. We do have a plan and we know that, unless we do it this way, country services will be worse off.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—Order! The discussion is now concluded.
Mr SLIPPER (Fisher—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration) (4.21 p.m.)—I move:

That, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Works Committee Act 1969, it is expedient to carry out the following proposed work which was referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works and on which the committee has duly reported to Parliament: RAAF Base Richmond Reinvestment Project, Richmond, NSW.

The Department of Defence proposes to undertake a reinvestment project at the Royal Australian Air Force Base Richmond near Richmond, New South Wales. RAAF Base Richmond is a major operational base that supports the delivery of airlift capability for the Australian Defence Force. It is currently the home of the airlift group, incorporating three operational squadrons and one training squadron of Hercules and Boeing 707 aircraft. Army units that are integrally linked with the airlift capability are also based at or at times supported from RAAF Base Richmond. The base contains one of the major airfields of Defence and is manned by about 2,500 service and civilian personnel.

This project is not a base redevelopment but rather a limited capital reinvestment to protect Commonwealth assets and maintain existing operational capabilities until such time as a government decision is made about the longer term future of the base. The aim of the project is to ensure that RAAF Base Richmond can continue to deliver operational capability to meet government objectives. This project seeks to improve, as far as practicable, safety and amenity deficiencies to maintain existing capabilities for the medium term. The proposed works focus on certain deficiencies in facilities and infrastructure that support capability. The project seeks to address the critical aspects of the engineering services and working and training accommodation. The proposed facilities are necessary to enable RAAF Base Richmond to perform its role in an efficient and cost effective manner.

Over the envisaged construction period of three years, an average of about 50 personnel will be directly employed on construction activities. In addition, it is anticipated that construction will generate further job opportunities off site in the prefabrication of components and the manufacture and distribution of materials. In its report, the Public Works Committee has recommended that this project proceed. The estimated out-turn cost of the proposed works is $35 million. Subject to parliamentary approval, the construction will start mid-2004 and be completed by December 2006. On behalf of the government, I would like to thank the committee for its report, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr BARTLETT (Macquarie) (4.24 p.m.)—I am very pleased to hear that the Public Works Committee has recommended the expenditure of $35 million for the reinvestment project at RAAF Base Richmond. I want to thank members of the committee and the chair for their visit to my electorate to look at Richmond RAAF Base and this proposal, and I appreciate their support for the work that is going on at RAAF Richmond.

This expenditure is well overdue. We have seen about $20 million spent on RAAF Base Richmond on a number of projects in recent years, but this much more substantial redevelopment is vital. RAAF Base Richmond is the home of the airlift group, and the men and women of RAAF Richmond do a fantastic job for this country. In recent years they have been involved in East Timor, Kyrgyzstan, Bali, Iraq and the Solomons, and they do an outstanding job.
This $35 million to be spent on much needed infrastructure maintenance and improvements will maximise their operational efficiency. Some aspects of current arrangements do hinder efficiency in some areas. This expenditure will also ensure that they work and live in satisfactory conditions, necessary to keep up the morale of these men and women. This schedule of works will greatly help in this regard.

However, this expenditure and the ongoing maintenance issues on the base do raise questions about the long-term future of RAAF Richmond. For some 20 to 30 years there have been rumours regarding the closure of RAAF Base Richmond. In 1991, under the former government, the force structure review flagged the relocation of the C130s, the prime platform of the airlift group, to Amberley. As a result of that, there has been reduced maintenance spending on Richmond for a number of years, and this has led to a deterioration in some of the facilities. This $35 million will address that deterioration and provide for much needed maintenance.

The Prime Minister’s commitment back in 1998, I think, to RAAF Base Richmond being there until at least 2010 warrants this expenditure for the wellbeing of the RAAF personnel for at least the next seven years. But the question of the long-term future of Richmond does need to be addressed. I do not have time to address it in detail, but I will make a few comments. Firstly, the changing defence paradigm since the 1991 review means there are changing strategic and operational imperatives. These imperatives make it, in my view, absolutely necessary to keep the airlift group at Richmond. Many factors relate to this, including the recent decision to locate a second tactical assault group and an incident response regiment at Holsworthy in addition to the 3RAR and 4RAR that are there. There has also been a recent decision to put the central Defence warehousing at Moorebank. Many other industrial, military and personnel suppliers—the airlift group’s key customers for transportation—are located in Sydney. It is therefore just a matter of commonsense that the chief transport base for those customers would also be based near Sydney.

The second point, briefly, is that economic arguments put in the past in favour of relocation simply do not hold water. They have fundamental flaws. Many of the assumptions on which the JLW study was done in 1997 are fundamentally flawed. They indicated perhaps only a four per cent saving at the most. That may well evaporate, and in fact a lot of evidence indicates that there may be a cost increase for any relocation to Amberley. So on strategic and economic grounds there is no justification at all for relocation from Richmond.

The third point I want to make, briefly, is that RAAF Richmond is critical to the Hawkesbury economy. It puts some $106 million a year into the Hawkesbury economy. I am pleased that this $35 million will be spent. It will inject money and jobs into our local economy. I welcome the expenditure—the government’s commitment of $35 million—and I want to see more in years to come.

Question agreed to.

**Treaties Committee Report**

Mr WILKIE (Swan) (4.29 p.m.)—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, I present the committee’s report entitled: Report 55: Treaties tabled on 9 September 2003—Two Agreements on Taxation—United Kingdom and Mexico; Trade in Wine—European Union; Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands; ILO Convention No. 155—Occupational Safety and Health; Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic
Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr WILKIE—I seek leave to make a short statement in connection with the report.

Leave granted.

Debate interrupted; adjournment proposed and negatived.

Mr WILKIE—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, I present the committee’s report entitled Report 55: Treaties tabled on 9 September 2003, together with the minutes and the Hansard transcript of proceedings. Report 55 contains the findings of the inquiry conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties into eight treaty actions tabled in the parliament in September 2003, relating to the matters identified in the title of the report.

The double taxation agreements with the United Kingdom and Mexico are the first treaties examined in the report. The agreements are similar in terms and approach to several other agreements of their kind: they are designed to facilitate trade and investment, combat fiscal evasion, protect Australian tax revenues, and maintain Australia’s position in the international tax community. In the case of Mexico a new agreement has been signed, but in the case of the UK a treaty has been in place since 1967. The committee has accepted the view of the Department of the Treasury that, despite modification in 1980, the treaty was still out of date with today’s taxation language and requirements and was in need of replacement.

Over time the committee has developed broad awareness and knowledge of the existence and importance of Australia’s network of taxation treaties but in this report notes that, despite every effort, officials from the Department of the Treasury are unable to clearly state or quantify benefits to Australia as a result of these treaties. More importantly, the committee has commented on previous occasions on the tendency of departments to introduce legislative measures which will give effect to the terms of the treaty prior to the conclusion of the committee’s review. Therefore the committee has recommended that more attention be given to the timing of treaties in their negotiation stages and their procedures for entry into force such that the parliament has had the opportunity to complete its review before the next steps are taken by government to bring the treaty into force.

Having made those observations, the committee recognises the importance of Australia’s contribution to the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands and acknowledges the urgent need for the agreement concerning the operations and status of the police and armed forces and other personnel deployed to the Solomon Islands to assist in the restoration of law and order and security to have entered into force on or before 24 July 2003 when the Regional Assistance Mission was deployed. The agreement provides part of the necessary framework in international law for Australia and other assisting countries to deliver assistance to the Solomon Islands.

The International Labour Organisation Convention No. 155: Occupational Safety and Health 1981 is designed to ensure that ratifying states formulate, implement and periodically review a coherent national policy on occupational safety and health in the work environment. Despite the time taken to coordinate, all states and territories’ advise that the terms of the convention are able to be met. The committee understands that the convention is supported by the Commonwealth as well as all state and territory gov-
ernments and representative organisations of employers and workers.

The Stockholm and Rotterdam conventions form two of three conventions developed under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Program, forming an international framework to manage hazardous chemicals through their life cycles. Persistent organic pollutants, dealt with in the Stockholm Convention, are chemicals that are toxic, persist in the environment and animals, bioaccumulate through the food chain, and pose a risk of causing adverse effects to human health and the environment, even at low concentrations.

The Rotterdam Convention concerns a notification procedure among parties in the international trade of certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides in order to protect human health and the environment. The committee recognises the importance of these two treaties considered in this report, together with the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, in maintaining a strong international approach to the management of dangerous chemicals.

In terms of the more routine treaty actions examined in the report, the amendments to the agreement between Australia and the European Community on trade in wine, and the amendments to the schedule of the international whaling convention, the committee notes that these are straightforward actions to extend the terms of treaties that have been in place for some years and has made recommendations accordingly.

In conclusion, it is the view of the committee that it is in the interest of Australia for all the treaties considered in report 55 to be ratified where action has not occurred prior to the committee’s review, and the committee has made its recommendations accordingly. I commend the report to the House and thank the secretariat for their ongoing commitment and effort. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Mr WILKIE—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

Publications Committee Report

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (4.34 p.m.)—I present the report from the Publications Committee sitting in conference with the Publications Committee of the Senate. Copies of the report are being placed on the table.


ADJOURNMENT

FRAN BAILEY (McEwen—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence) (4.35 p.m.)—I move:

That the House do now adjourn.

Franklin Electorate: Eureka Clubhouse

Mr QUICK (Franklin) (4.35 p.m.)—Last week was Mental Health Week and today I rise to pay tribute to the members, workers and staff at the Eureka Clubhouse in Hobart, Tasmania. The dedicated staff are the director, Michelle Fay, David Scott, and part-time support workers, Jo-Anne Littleford, Conchita Navarro, Bunty Target-Seamour and Linda Seamour. These are a fine group of people who work magnificently with those that need help and assistance in a world that is fast paced and unforgiving.

Eureka Clubhouse is a psychosocial rehabilitation service for clients with mental health problems. The clients volunteer their time to run the organisation with the support of staff. The program empowers members to achieve goals by building on their strengths, helping with their self-esteem and assisting
to break down the isolation that many people with mental illnesses experience. Eureka Clubhouse currently works with 280 members, and 25 to 40 members are involved from two to eight hours daily. Eureka Clubhouse has embarked on a truly innovative and world-class program by setting up commercial businesses that employ its members.

We all know how hard it is for able-bodied Australians to find work. It is much harder for people with disabilities. With TQM, a cleaning service, Eureka Clubhouse achieves commercial goals and has generated the funds with which they were able to purchase the Court Cafe in the Northgate Shopping Centre. TQM has gardening and cleaning contracts with Tasmania Police, Housing Tasmania, private hospitals, the women’s health centre and Centrelink. These agencies are to be commended for their support of the Eureka Clubhouse members and their staff, while of course expecting quality work and value for their money.

The Monday before last, I was delighted to officially open Eureka’s latest venture, Court Cafe. Court Cafe is in the food court at the Northgate Shopping Centre, Glenorchy—a suburb of Hobart. The cafe is right in the public eye and provides a diverse range of work for the Eureka Clubhouse clients. Court Cafe is a fantastic opportunity for members to gain experience, which hopefully will lead to long-term mainstream employment. Patrons expect and receive the best in friendly and efficient service while having a cuppa or a wonderful snack at the cafe. Court Cafe is also involved in outside catering on a regular basis.

Eureka Clubhouse is a specialised open employment service for people who have a mental illness. It helps with resumes, job hunting and interview techniques to assist its members. Twenty members now receive award wages, with 90 per cent of the people who are seeking employment in the program achieving some employment goals. Eureka’s community input is to educate other organisations through the year by holding information sessions at their workplaces, having stalls at expos and taking part in Mental Health Week activities. Eureka Clubhouse is a valued service to the people of Hobart and of great benefit to the people with mental health problems. Tonight I would like to congratulate them all on their progress, achievements and outcomes for the people who really do need that extra assistance. Well done to everyone at the Eureka Clubhouse.

The SPEAKER—Before I recognise the member for Dobell, I point out to the member for Hindmarsh that it would not be proper for the chair to recognise a member of the executive in the adjournment—it has never happened—unless no other person rises.

Environment: Tuggerah Lakes

Mr TICEHURST (Dobell) (4.39 p.m.)—I rise today to thank the federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage, David Kemp, for the commitment he made yesterday to the Wyong Shire Council, to our local environment and to the people of the Central Coast. Yesterday, I held a meeting in Canberra with Minister Kemp and Wyong council representatives to discuss controversial plans by the council and the New South Wales government to dredge around 15,000 cubic metres of sludge from the polluted Tumbi Creek and dump it into Tuggerah Lakes. Minister Kemp expressed concern and agreed to come to the Central Coast in two weeks to inspect the site. This is the first time in more than a decade that any federal environment minister has taken the time to examine the health of the lakes system first-hand.

Until Minister Kemp has inspected this important environmental site, the future of
the jewel of the Central Coast—Tuggerah Lakes—remains in limbo. Despite an outpouring of anger by members of the local community, Wyong Shire Council and the New South Wales Carr Labor government remain committed to dredging truck loads of sludge from the Tumbi Creek and dumping it into what is already a shallow estuarine lake. Tuggerah Lake is also a key prawn breeding area and a significant New South Wales tourist attraction. I and the people of the Central Coast want other options to be explored and commonsense to prevail. All levels of government need to work together to protect this vital ecosystem. This is not about the federal government coming in as a heavyweight and taking over. I want to help. I want to fight for federal funds to get the job done properly, and I need a commitment from all three levels of government. As federal member for Dobell, I have a responsibility to run a ruler over projects in my electorate that affect residents of the Central Coast, our tourism industry and future generations.

While the management of the lake and its environs is a matter for the constitutional land manager—in this case, the New South Wales government—an environmentally unsound and cheapjack option for this lake is just not on. What is most disappointing is the New South Wales government’s lack of support on the issue. The New South Wales government is not only the land manager but also the title holder and the largest absorber of revenue from the lake. Sadly, only a small proportion of this money is coming back into the community. The Howard government strongly supports local initiatives to protect the environment and sustain regional communities like the Central Coast. Recently, the Howard government announced over $1 million in Natural Heritage Trust funding over the next three years for Central Coast environmental projects.

In conclusion, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people of Dobell for taking the time to make their concerns known to me. Concerns of local residents have skyrocketed in recent weeks amid speculation that Wyong council will soon commence the dredging works. Wyong council and the state government must reassess their decision. Half-measures are not what are needed to address the pollution of Tumbi Creek. What I and the people of Dobell want for the jewel of the Central Coast is a viable, long-term solution that will improve Tumbi Creek without creating problems elsewhere in the lakes system. It will be most disappointing if Wyong Shire Council and the New South Wales government proceed with the dredging and the dumping of silt into the lake before all alternative options and funding opportunities have been explored. I urge Wyong council to hold off on the proposed dredging until Minister Kemp has assessed the site himself. It is vital for the future of the Central Coast to do a proper job of this.

Children

Mr SAWFORD (Port Adelaide) (4.42 p.m.)—In a country like Australia, which prides itself on being civilised, it is hard to accept the endemic indifference to the needs of children that has developed over the last 30 years. Take child care as an example. The rationale for the introduction of child care in Australia had nothing whatsoever to do with the care of children. It had to do with parent respite and participation in the work force. Intrinsically, there is nothing wrong with that. It makes perfect economic sense. But, like everything else in this world, it comes at a cost—largely to children—and denial of those costs while advancing the benefits is simply delusional. Take schooling as a second example. Billions of dollars of taxpayers’ funds are being shifted from the education of children in need to those children not
in need. It is an absolute disgrace. As yet the federal government has not been fully held accountable, but as certain as night follows day that time is fast approaching.

One of the most clear-headed studies of children I have encountered in the last 30 years was published in the *Times Educational Supplement* in April 1986. It was commissioned by the Inner London Education Authority. It was an extensive, four-year, longitudinal study to research the most powerful determinants of children’s future success or failure, and its conclusion is worth noting. Quite categorically, it stated that the effect of schooling on children between the ages of seven and 11 can make a substantial difference to a child’s future progress and development and that, more importantly, schooling is more significant than a child’s race, sex, religion or socioeconomic background. In other words, schooling for children aged seven to 11 is the most significant determinant of future success, regardless of race, gender, culture or socioeconomic background.

Most Australians reject discrimination based on race or culture—and rightly so. In its inquiry into the education of boys, the policies of gender equity were, rightly, identified by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training as being totally wrong-headed for not only boys but also a significant group of girls. Socio-economic status, the only neutral attribute, is an important factor. This is the factor to which affirmative action ought to be strongly applied, irrespective of race, culture, religion or gender.

But there are other factors which must be significantly inhibiting the potential of many Australian children. In the last three decades dramatic statistical variations have been noted in Australian families. They are either positive or negative, but neutral they are not. Children need dedicated mothers and fathers, but it is not always the case that they have them. The percentage of children born outside of marriage in 1977, according to the ABS, was 9.8 per cent; the latest available figure, from 2001, is 30.7 per cent. That is an increase of 319 per cent in 24 years, and overall it is not a good statistic for children. There were 24,088 teenage mothers in 1975—10.4 per cent of all mothers. In 2001 there were only 995 teenage mothers—less than 0.4 per cent of all mothers. That is probably a very good statistic for children as well as for female teenagers.

Census statistics in 1971 and 1976 about sole-parent families are not available, and that omission is interesting in itself. In August 2003 the ABS reported that 15.3 per cent of all families were sole-parent families. Further analysis of that 15.3 per cent and their incomes presents a bleak picture for many children. Sole parent families in receipt of welfare benefits as their main income totalled 26,300 in June 1974. In June 2002—on the latest available figures—the total is 427,800. That is an increase of 1,626 per cent. For couples with children, 7.4 per cent are earning less than $25,000. For sole parents, 45.1 per cent are earning less than $25,000. Those kids are doing it tough, and so are their parents.

Many influential social commentators have no difficulty in declaring that the days of the nuclear family unit are gone. The propaganda says: ‘As long as love, discipline and sound nurturing are provided, everything else will be okay.’ But is it okay? What about propaganda that invalidates relationships between men and women and between men and children, and deconstructs them? Is that a progressive public policy for children? Would it be better to have a progressive public policy which allows all citizens to make the choices that not only suit them but at least take into account the impact those
choices have on children? Surely children are more important than an ideological stance—or are they? Whether it be policy, process or outcomes, the current picture concerning the state in which our children find themselves is pretty grim, is unacceptable and is not in this nation’s future interest.

**National Radioactive Waste Repository**

Mr JOHN COBB (Parkes) (4.48 p.m.)—Over the last few years this government has conducted a great deal of scientific research on how to safely and sensibly dispose of radioactive waste in Australia. This is not a new idea. The Keating Labor government began the search for a national repository in 1992, which all states and territories supported. This is not part of a coalition agenda but a long-term vision for the safe and environmentally responsible disposal of radioactive waste.

Recently, members of the Labor Party, the Democrats and, in particular, the Greens have been on a scaremongering mission about the transportation and storage of radioactive waste. Nobody wants a repository in their state and nobody wants trucks bearing the materials travelling through their towns or cities. But let me ask this: do people want hospitals, do they want life-saving cancer treatment and equipment, do they want industry, do they want safety devices, such as smoke alarms? If they answer yes to all of those questions, let me then ask this: what do they propose to do with the radioactive materials that are generated as a result of having these luxuries? Is there a price to pay for our present way of life? What do they propose to do with the waste that we generate as a society?

If they are so concerned for the safety and wellbeing of communities and the environment, logically why would they oppose a plan which aims to dispose of radioactive waste in the most safe, sensible and responsible manner possible? Low-level and intermediate-level short-lived radioactive waste going to the national repository, such as laboratory waste—including paper and plastics, industrial gauges and density gauges—will be appropriately packaged and safe for transport, according to international guidelines that have been adopted by this country. I must stress how much medical waste is involved. I wonder whether those who have such a problem with it want to close down our hospitals. This is not—and I repeat ‘not’—nuclear waste. Australia does not produce nuclear waste. ‘Nuclear waste’ is the term commonly used for waste generated from nuclear power reactors.

Radioactive materials are routinely transported on our roads. In fact, in Australia over 30,000 packages of medical radioisotopes are transported annually—about 2,500 per month—from the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation alone; and in New South Wales a further 2,200 additional movements of radioactive material used for medical and industrial purposes take place each month. It is a fact that over the past 40 years there have been no—repeat ‘no’—accidents during transport of such material where there has been any significant radiological release harmful to the environment and public health.

On 7 March this year the Minister for Science, Peter McGauran, wrote to every shire in the state, offering to take them on a tour of Lucas Heights to show them exactly the types of radioactive materials that we are talking about. He did not get one single response. Those councils who complain about secrecy, about not being in the loop, should check their correspondence, because they had that opportunity. And they still have that opportunity. I repeat here and now: we are very willing to take any council to Lucas Heights in Sydney and show them exactly what is involved. I am puzzled that they con-
continue to claim that the government has been secretive about radioactive waste. The proof is in the correspondence.

I have said in the past that my door is open to anyone wanting information on the storage and/or transportation of radioactive waste, and I repeat that offer. The fact is that there is a price to pay for the benefits we enjoy with our lifestyle in this day and age. To have totally safe solid waste in concrete drums being transported through its territory so that we can all continue to enjoy that lifestyle is a very small responsibility for any community to take.

Iraq

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (4.52 p.m.)—After seeing the television and print media this week, many of us were touched by the story of Ali Abbas, a 12-year-old Iraqi boy who was orphaned and who lost both arms in a US missile attack on Baghdad earlier this year. We were touched by the courage of Ali, who can now face life with the help of artificial arms—thanks to the work of Queen Mary’s Hospital in London. This miracle of surgery and engineering will allow Ali to perform many tasks which will assist him to resume a normal life.

Ali Abbas can now look forward to returning to Iraq and hugging his surviving sisters. But, for many thousands of Iraqi children and adults who were severely injured in the attacks on their country, the future is not as bright. As we have learned from reports, Iraqi hospitals and medical facilities were unable to provide even basic care for civilian bombing victims. Today, many of those civilian casualties carry injuries sustained in the bombings and do not have access to modern, Western medical treatment. While I am informed that Australia and its allies, through direct and indirect assistance, have provided treatment in some cases, the standard of treatment falls well short of the miracle of new arms which were provided to Ali Abbas.

While the Australian newspaper this week described little Ali as a symbol of the West’s compassion, this token treatment of one Iraqi child is definitely not typical of the compassion of the ‘coalition of the willing’. The Australian article said:

Ali was expected to die in an inadequate Baghdad hospital, until a Perth reader asked if he could help, after seeing a photograph by John Feder in The Australian. With translator Stewart Innes, The Australian eventually organised his evacuation by the US military to Kuwait and he was later sent to London for specialist treatment.

It certainly helps to have Rupert Murdoch on your side, but what of the fate of thousands of other Iraqi children and adults—victims of this war of liberation? Their fate has been of concern to the large Iraqi-Australian community in my electorate of Fowler.

In July this year, I was approached by Councillor Anwar Khoshaba of the Assyrian-Iraqi community, who requested my assistance in obtaining treatment in Australia for a 17-year-old Iraqi civilian, Romy Mekha. Romy was wounded in a bombing attack on Baghdad and suffers from injuries which may permanently cripple him if he does not receive advanced medical treatment. The Assyrian-Iraqi community indicated its willingness to pay for Romy’s travel to Australia and to provide accommodation for him during his recovery. I wrote to the then Minister for Health and Ageing, Senator Kay Patterson, asking if the Australian government could assist by providing medical treatment for Romy Mekha. I also placed a series of questions on the Notice Paper to the then Minister for Ageing, representing the Minister for Health and Ageing. I asked if the Australian government has offered medical treatment in Australia for Iraqi civilians injured during the war. The answer to that question was a flat ‘no’. In response to my
letter, I was informed that the Australian government has no medical programs extending to the treatment of war victims because they are not covered by Medicare.

I have since informed the Iraqi-Australian community of my disappointment with the government’s response. I thought that Australia would have taken greater responsibility for the treatment of civilian victims of the war. But, as this case shows, while the Prime Minister was prepared to make Australia part of the ‘coalition of the killing’, our government will not accept any responsibility for the injuries inflicted on innocent Iraqi civilians. As our recent Bali experience has shown, Australia is a world leader in treating burns and other trauma injuries. But our compassion is limited to one token 12-year-old who was lucky enough to have had his picture printed in the Australian. If our involvement in the war in Iraq was not enough to bring shame on our nation, our failure to assist the civilian victims of our bombing surely is.

Health: Breast Cancer

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (4.57 p.m.)—October is recognised internationally as Breast Cancer Month. It is a time when breast cancer organisations throughout the international community work together to raise awareness and funds for research into the disease. Throughout this month, there will be a focus on progress with research, what we know about breast cancer and what we hope to find out about it in the years ahead, priorities in research funding and making the best use of scarce resources, and information for women with breast cancer as part of a broader educational program. The fourth Monday of October is dedicated to raising funds for breast cancer research. Australia’s Breast Cancer Day—Pink Ribbon Day—is the key focus for raising funds for breast cancer research.

On Monday, 13 October, I had the great pleasure of hosting a very special and committed Australian who serves as patron of the National Breast Cancer Foundation—Ms Sarah O’Hare. I had the opportunity of hosting her here at Parliament House, together with the CEO of the National Breast Cancer Foundation, Ms Sue Murray, who very kindly helped to put that event together. The Minister for Health and Ageing also said a few words to the gathering of colleagues from both the government and the opposition sides. I want to take this opportunity of thanking all those who came along to support this gathering. The idea of the gathering was not only to bring about as much publicity as we could, to those who work in this building and who serve our communities as representatives of the people, but also to gain as much of a national profile as we could. There was no doubt that that would happen, with the patron of the National Breast Cancer Foundation, Ms O’Hare, being someone who is widely known throughout this country.

I want to take the opportunity of thanking the various newspapers throughout the country who very generously reported on the event and quoted Ms O’Hare in her capacity as patron of the National Breast Cancer Foundation. It is very important that those who represent communities in this country are able to do their bit to educate our fellow Australians. One way of doing that is through having Australians come to this parliament to meet those members of the government who themselves have a high profile and are able to draw the public’s attention to very serious and important issues. Ms O’Hare, in her presentation to a gathering of 20-odd members and senators of the parliament including government ministers and shadow ministers, said:

We rely on the community and there isn’t enough funding. I find living in the United States that there is a lot more of a philanthropic culture there
and I would like to see more of that here, especially with larger corporations getting behind us. I want to give that message to those corporate leaders in our country who are able to make a contribution to charities and not-for-profit organisations and to encourage them to be very generous where they can be in supporting organisations such as the National Breast Cancer Foundation. The good work that they do is all about helping our fellow Australians.

It might be asked why a member of parliament such as me would raise this issue. I personally do not know anyone who has been a victim of breast cancer; however, my wife has a close friend who has. Breast cancer awareness is a very important issue which crosses party lines and is something that all of us in this parliament can promote.

I want to take the opportunity to again thank Ms O’Hare for coming to the national parliament and doing her bit in her capacity as patron to raise this important issue. The National Breast Cancer Foundation has been operating for nearly a decade and has raised almost $10 million. As the health minister said, it is important and incumbent upon all of us to do as much as we humanly can to rid our society of this scourge, this terrible disease of cancer, and this specific form of cancer.

I conclude by thanking in particular the national newspapers—the Australian, the Courier Mail, the Adelaide Advertiser, the Hobart Mercury, the Canberra Times and the Melbourne Age—for running with the story. This is part of their capacity to make a contribution in a very positive and constructive manner to our fellow Australians. (Time expired)

House adjourned at 5.02 p.m.

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mr King to move:
That this House give consideration to a new program of infrastructure development in Australia called “Build the Nation” in cooperation with state and local governments and private enterprise and having regard to:
(1) the primary obligation of States for the maintenance of public infrastructure; and
(2) a reasonable allocation of available resources between city and country areas.

Mr Price to move:
That standing orders 142 and 151 be amended as follows:

Questions to Ministers
142 Questions may be put to a Minister relating to public affairs with which the Minister is officially connected, to proceedings pending in the House, or to any matter of administration for which the Minister is responsible.

(a) Questions may be in writing and placed on the Notice Paper for written reply.

(b) Questions may be asked orally without notice for immediate reply and 10 questions may be asked by non-Government Members and 10 by Government Members.

Questions without notice—Supplementary questions
151 Supplementary questions may be asked to elucidate and answer.

(a) One or more supplementary questions may be asked for each question except that;

(b) No more than 4 supplementary questions in total may be asked by Government Members and no more than 4 supplementary questions in total may be asked by non-Government Members at question time.
The following answers to questions were circulated:

**Employment: Intensive Assistance**

(Question No. 2236)

**Mr Albanese** asked the Minister for Employment Services, upon notice, on 12 August 2003:

When formulating the budget for ESC3, what average amount did the Department assume would be spent by providers from Jobseeker Account funds on each unemployed person who undertakes customised assistance.

**Mr Brough**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

When formulating the budget for ESC3, the Department established an average credit amount for each job seeker commencing in Intensive Support Customised Assistance. These credit amounts are detailed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Seeker Account Credits</th>
<th>Non-Highly Disadvantaged Job Seeker Account (GST included)</th>
<th>Highly Disadvantaged Job Seeker Account (GST included)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intensive Support – Customised Assistance (first period)</td>
<td>$900</td>
<td>$1,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional ‘Locationally Disadvantaged’ Supplement</td>
<td>$225</td>
<td>$225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive Support – Customised Assistance (second period)</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>$750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional ‘Locationally Disadvantaged’ Supplement</td>
<td>$125</td>
<td>$125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This Supplement is credited where jobseekers reside in geographically remote locations – generally defined by Centrelink as more than 90 minutes travelling time from the nearest Job Network site.

(Question No. 2238)

**Mr Albanese** asked the Minister for Employment Services, upon notice, on 12 August 2003:

(1) What proportion of jobseekers are going through Intensive Assistance for (a) the first, (b) the second and (c) the third time.

(2) For each of those categories, what proportion of jobseekers obtained an employment outcome.

**Mr Brough**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) The employment service ‘Intensive Assistance’ ceased as of 30 June 2003 with the introduction of An Active Participation Model. No job seekers were receiving Intensive Assistance on 12 August 2003.

(2) Not applicable.

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Mr Albanese asked the Minister for Employment Services, upon notice, on 15 September 2003:

(1) Would he provide details of the money paid to Job Network providers to cover the cost of “transitional” jobseekers referred to in Mr Bob Correll’s letter dated 9 September 2003 to Job Network CEOs.

(2) How were these amounts calculated.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) The total cost to cover payments for the initial interviews for transition job seekers that do not coincide with a payment point on the Active Participation Model continuum is around $2 million.

(2) The methodology used in calculating the payment is as follows:

Total number of initial interviews conducted, or to be conducted in the future, that were not funded plus an estimation of attempted contacts for these interviews that were not successful x $35 x provider national business share.

Mr McClelland asked the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, upon notice on, Wednesday, 17 September 2003:

(1) Further to the answer to question No. 2150 (Hansard, 10 September 2003, page 19201), is he aware that a lead lawyer in the American Bar Association’s project to draft labour legislation for Afghanistan was supplied by the American law firm, Dechert.

(2) Is he aware that Dechert states on its website: “we help employers maintain a union-free environment”.

(3) Is he able to say whether the International Labour Organisation’s offer to review the final draft labour legislation has been accepted.

Mr Andrews—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) No

(2) No

(3) Yes. The International Labour Organisation’s offer has been accepted.