



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIME MINISTER

Motion of Censure

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 October 2000

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Thursday, 12 October 2000
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Questioner
Speaker Abbott, Tony, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Minister for Employment Services) (4.01 pm)—We have just witnessed a strangely passionless performance from the member for Melbourne because, unlike his leader, he certainly understands that the absolute worst you can say about this matter is that it is a stuff-up, not a conspiracy. The opposition have seized this issue because, as they have demonstrated time and time again over the last few days, they are so much better at smearing their political opponents than at developing any policy for the future of this nation.

Unlike the Prime Minister, who has grown in his job over the last five years, the Leader of the Opposition has shrunk in his, and what we are seeing is the sad decline of a decent man who is unable to cope with the burdens of leadership. The Leader of the Opposition comes into this House and tries to pretend that everything this government says is a lie while every claim he makes is the gospel truth. The best thing that the Leader of the Opposition has going for him is the perception out there in the public that, after all, he spent enough time with Moral Rearmament all those years ago to not be a bad bloke. But he comes into this House with his posturing like a frill-necked lizard, like John Candy without the sense of humour, and he is in fact destroying himself, because a decent man does not try to crucify another decent man because that man wanted his son to call home.

I am delighted to stand here and defend the honour, the decency, the integrity and the behaviour of the Prime Minister. I am delighted to stand here and defend the honour, the decency, the integrity and the behaviour of my friend and senior colleague the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. This is not about upholding standards of behaviour. This is not about trying to maintain parliamentary standards; this opposition attack is about the attempted political assassination of the best industrial relations minister since Federation. This is not about the phone calls that the minister for workplace relations might have made; this is really about his ministerial record as an outstanding advocate for the sort of reforms that Australia needs. Thanks to this outstanding minister, we have freedom in the workplace: we have workers and managers who are able to run their own lives. We have fewer strikes. We have higher pay. In fact, under the minister's stewardship, the pay of the worst-off workers of this country has gone up by nine per cent, after declining five per cent during the tenure of members opposite. And, most of all, thanks to this great minister, there are 800,000 more jobs for the decent, working, battling Australians that members opposite claim to support.

While this great minister is getting on with the job of reforming the workplace and providing a better economy, members opposite are living in a political and economic Jurassic Park. The only other significant thing the opposition has done this week, apart from come in here and make a whole lot of smears and accusations against a great minister, is come in here and have this House divide so that members opposite could defend the fact that union picnic days in the year 2000 should be a compulsory part of every award. We have the situation in Victoria at the moment where non-union member apprentices can only get paid if they pay the fee to attend the union picnic. What we have from members opposite is, in effect, a constant campaign to defend what amount to extortion rackets in the guise of an industrial system. That is why members opposite hate this great minister: because he has done such a magnificent job to restore freedom to the workplaces of Australia.

Let us consider the facts of the telecard affair. In 1994, as has been admitted from the beginning, the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business gave his telecard and its PIN to his son. He had the quite reasonable thought that, if his son could ring home reverse charges, why shouldn't his son be able to ring dad when dad was not at home? Yes, it turns out to have been against the guidelines. The minister accepts that and the minister has repaid the money that arose from his mistake. Of course it should not have happened, but it is the sort of thing that any concerned parent would do: encourage his son to contact home. That is precisely the minister's crime. These people want to crucify him because he loved his son and wanted his son to call him.

It is quite interesting getting these accusations from members opposite. Let's face it: members opposite believe that you can give your wife a job, if you are the secretary of the New South Wales Labor Party. They think you can give your son a job, if you are a member of one of the Labor Party's ruling class dynasties—you can give your son a job for life in the parliament or in one of the unions—but you cannot give your son a phone card.

Heaven help you if you ever give your son a phone card! You can give him a seat in parliament for life, but heaven help us if we ever give our son a phone card for a few moments.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SPEAKER—Chief Opposition Whip, the member for Corio and the member for Braddon! Chief Opposition Whip, defiance of the chair is the one thing that produces instant reaction here. The Chief Opposition Whip will exercise more restraint.

Mr ABBOTT—It is clear that the details of this card fell into the wrong hands. But is there any evidence that the minister was careless? No. Is there any evidence that the minister's office was careless? No, there is not. Let us remember just how these phone cards work. Members opposite might remember using them. I can remember using them. When you are using these cards, you ring 1898 and the operator says, if it is the wrong sort of phone, 'Could you give me your card number?' You say what the card number is. The operator then says, 'What is your PIN?' You say, 'My PIN number is ...' If you are sitting in an airport lounge, making phone calls, saying this kind of thing, it would be the easiest thing in the world for someone overhearing this conversation on the phone to write down the phone card details and the PIN. There are any number of explanations as to how this can have happened. The fact is that the details were stolen. That is what happened. The details were stolen. That is the obvious explanation for what has happened.

What is the next fact? The next fact is that this was not found out until August last year. Was that the minister's fault? Of course not—because details of spending on these cards are not communicated to MPs. If that, in turn, is anyone's fault, it is the fault of members opposite who brought about this change when they were in government. What happened when the minister discovered what had happened? He asked for a full investigation. That is entirely proper. When the results of that investigation were communicated to him, he spoke to the Prime Minister. That is entirely proper. In consultation with the Prime Minister, he said that there should be a police investigation. That is entirely proper. The outcomes of that investigation have been made available to the general public. The Prime Minister, in his integrity and in his determination to ensure that justice was not only done but seen to be done, has asked for a Solicitor-General investigation, and the minister has made absolutely clear that he will abide by the advice that the Solicitor-General gives.

The minister has acted with complete, utter and unimpeachable integrity in everything that has happened here. By contrast, what do we have from members opposite? Here we have those who claim to be the guardians of parliamentary standards, who claim to be the defenders of integrity in our system—and what do we have today? We have the Leader of the Opposition saying, 'Of course he is responsible, whatever the Solicitor-General might say.' So members opposite are not interested in due process. All they are interested in is a political assassination. All they are interested in is a conviction without a trial.

If I gave my secretary my Visa card number and somehow that number got into the wrong hands, would I be responsible for that? If someone steals my car and that car knocks someone down and I once lent my car to someone who should not have got it, am I responsible? Of course not. What we have from members opposite is exactly the same as Al Capone complaining about jaywalking. That is what we have from members opposite—Al Capone complaining about jaywalking. We have all this talk of double standards from members opposite. Last week members opposite were waxing indignant about a police investigation that involved interviewing the staffer of an MP. This week they want a government minister exposed to a Gestapo investigation for the heinous crime of giving his telecard to his son.

Mr Leo McLeay—For stealing \$50,000!

Mr ABBOTT—They talk about double standards! Well, we will come to the \$50,000. They do not have a policy on anything. They talk about the money but they are world champion wasters of money. The Leader of the Opposition has the gold medal in wasting money, the gold medal in slackness in administration. The Leader of the Opposition is the relevant minister who failed to pursue Senator Colston when he had ripped off travel allowance—and Senator Colston had done something wrong. The minister, the subject of this censure motion, has done nothing wrong.

I ask the Leader of the Opposition: has he ever had a chat to Senator Nick Sherry about repaying any of the travel allowance that Senator Sherry claimed? The Leader of the Opposition is the gold medal waster of public money. He was the Minister for Defence who was responsible for the Collins class subs. He was the minister for communications who was responsible for the \$4 billion cable roll-out duplication. He was the minister for

employment who added hundreds of thousands of dollars to the social security queue when unemployment hit 11.2 per cent. He was the Minister for Finance who presided over a \$25 billion blow-out in the deficit in just two years. Let us take that \$25 billion that the Leader of the Opposition is responsible for and compare it with the \$50,000 that he is now so exercised about. What we are talking about is 1/500,000th of the amount that they are so exercised about now. As Leader of the Opposition, he was responsible for a \$500 million repair bill for the Collins class submarines. That is 10,000 times more than that which he is so exercised about now.

The fact is that the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business has been one of the outstanding successes of an outstanding government. He has been one of the outstanding successes of an outstanding government, and I am proud to call him a friend. I am proud to call him a mentor. He has done nothing morally culpable, he has done nothing dishonourable and he has done nothing ignoble. He has had a hard week—there is no doubt about that—and let me pay tribute to a colleague at the end of a hard week. The minister is the perfect colleague: he is always courteous, he is always available, he is always frank. There is nothing thin-skinned about the minister. There is never the slightest hint of turf protection about the minister. He never pulls rank. This minister is a pleasure to work with, he is an adornment to the Australian parliament, he is a great minister—and he does not deserve the vilification that he has received in this parliament for what is nothing more than an honest mistake.

Question put:

That the motion (**Mr Beazley's**) be agreed to.