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Members of Parliament: Entitlements
SPEECH

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Speaker Abbott, Tony, MP

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Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Minister for Employment Services) (3.37 pm)—After all the nice things I said about you, Mr Deputy Speaker! What we have seen from the Leader of the Opposition over the last two days in this parliament is nothing but a fishing expedition as ill starred and unsuccessful as Robert Hughes's last expedition to the coast near Broome. The most that the opposition has been able to tell us today is that an investigation took place and the Prime Minister was not told of it until it was over. That is the only charge that the opposition has been able to come up with as a result of its last two days of constant questioning. To say it is a terrible scandal that the Prime Minister was not told of this investigation until it was over is really a little bit rich coming from a former Minister for Finance who was responsible for a \$10 billion deterioration in the Commonwealth's financial position and who has expected the Australian people, since 1996, to believe that he was not told about it until after the election.

We have seen today in this MPI a desperate bid by a failed opposition leader to extract the last possible ounce of political juice from a controversy which is now dead. I refer the House to an article by Glenn Milne in a recent edition of the *Australian* in which he states:

The truth of it is the Reith crisis has been an undeserved godsend to Labor. There is a growing dissatisfaction at senior levels with Kim Beazley's seeming inability or unwillingness to develop a public policy alternative to the Coalition.

The frontbench—

that is, the Labor frontbench—

keeps putting into Beazley's office but nothing comes back, leading one senior figure to call it: "The black hole theory of policy development."

We are debating this subject today not because of any fundamental weakness in the system governing the administration of entitlements but because of a fundamental weakness in the character and political personality of the Leader of the Opposition.

Members of parliament entitlements are administered by the Department of Finance and Administration and are subject to audit by the Auditor-General. The Auditor-General has an independent discretion. On the other hand, he can be tasked by the government of the day or by the Public Accounts Committee of the parliament. That is the system that we have. In this case the system did not work perfectly—but no system is perfect—and certainly the Labor Party's cure is far worse than the disease. In the end, every system depends for its success upon having good people in charge. I want to say to the House again that the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business acted with perfect propriety—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr ABBOTT—I have got your problem, Mr Deputy Speaker. He acted with perfect propriety once the initial mistake was made. As soon as he knew, he called for a full investigation of the matter. As soon as that investigation was completed, he went to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister commissioned a police inquiry. The Prime Minister subsequently commissioned a Solicitor-General's inquiry. The upshot of all of these inquiries is that every last cent of the \$50,000 which was improperly spent has been paid back. There is not a single cent lost to the taxpayer because of this matter. What we see now is the Labor Party demanding a hugely more expensive system to chase money which has been paid back under the system that we have. After the initial mistake—and anyone can make a mistake—this system worked well. It worked well because we have an honest minister and we have an honest Prime Minister, and two honest men made the system work.

As I said, all systems depend on the quality of the men and the women in charge to make them work. Let us look at the quality of the men and women on the other side of this House who wish one day to be in charge of a system of entitlements. We have a case where this March Senator Crossin, a Labor senator from the Northern

Territory, lent her car to her son who lent it to his girlfriend and there was subsequently a fatal car crash. This is obviously a tragedy, but in addition to that there has been a technical breach of parliamentary entitlements. If cars provided to members of parliament at taxpayers' expense are to be used for private purposes by others, then members of parliament must authorise that use in writing. The difference between Peter Reith's breach of entitlements and Senator Crossin's breach of entitlements is that Peter Reith has made good his breach: he has paid back the money.

The Leader of the Opposition got extremely upset when he was reminded by the Prime Minister today of the way he handled the breach of entitlements by Senator Colston, as he then was, in the years when he had responsibility for the administration of that system. Listening to the Leader of the Opposition today, you would think that he has learnt quite a lot since his Colston years, that he has learnt quite a lot since he was the minister responsible for these matters in those days. Let us look at exactly what the Leader of the Opposition has done over the Crossin matter. On 31 March this year, the *Northern Territory News* reported that Senator Crossin's government vehicle was involved in a fatal car accident. You would think that an intelligent and well-informed Leader of the Opposition would be conscious of this kind of report in a respectable newspaper like the *Northern Territory News*. On the weekend in the *Australian* Senator Faulkner wrote:

Neither I nor Mr Beazley were aware of the issue of the authorisation of the driver of Senator Crossin's car before last weekend.

That is what they tell us, and I am prepared to believe them because that is the kind of person I am. But the fact is that there was a breach of entitlement. It should not have happened. It did happen. The Leader of the Opposition should have known about it and he should have done something about it. We have had a consistent cover-up on this matter. On 20 October Senator Crossin said, 'I don't want to talk at all about that. Why are you asking this now? I'm not giving you any information about this whatsoever.' This is Senator Crossin talking about her breach of entitlements. On 21 October she said that the authority of the driver in the accident has never been an issue. Then, on 25 October, she said that on the night of the accident the driver of her vehicle was a person who was authorised by her and that she had since confirmed this authorisation in writing to the Department of Finance and Administration. She was asked by a reporter the following day, 'When you crossed those t's and dotted those i's this week, was that the first time that you put Jennifer Byrne's name in writing?' Senator Crossin said that it was not. The reporter asked her whether she was saying it was done some time before. Crossin said that it was. The reporter asked, just to make things absolutely clear, whether she was absolutely confident in that.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)—The member for Hindmarsh will be silent.

Mr ABBOTT—Senator Crossin said that was correct. It is now known that the faxed authorisation for Jennifer Byrne and other family and staff members was sent to the Department of Finance and Administration just the day before Senator Crossin made those statements. How did the ALP justify this cover-up and this misuse of entitlements? Senator Faulkner said that, in the case of the Peter Reith abuse of the telecard issue, there had been a cover-up by government, a whole range of conflicting stories, with different witnesses saying different things. That is exactly what has been happening in the Senator Crossin case. Senator Crossin tried to avoid the issue. She tried to cover it up. She told conflicting stories. And she tried to deny any responsibility. I am not accusing Senator Crossin in this place of anything worse than being a human being under pressure, but I am accusing members opposite, particularly the Leader of the Opposition, of the rankest and most monumental hypocrisy and double standards. When the Leader of the Opposition finally had this serious issue drawn to his attention, what did he say? The *Northern Territory News* of 27 October reported him as saying that he would question Senator Crossin over the authorisation of her Commonwealth car.

Let us suppose for a moment that the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business had lent his car to Paul Reith, who had lent it to someone else, who had had a fatal car crash while that person was under the influence. What do we think the Leader of the Opposition would be saying? The Leader of the Opposition would be standing up here in this place and saying, 'Did the minister for employment know that his son and his son's girlfriend have a substance problem, because if he did he would have blood on his hands?' That is the kind of thing that we would be getting from the Leader of the Opposition in this place in an exactly comparable situation to that of the minister for employment.

Instead, the Leader of the Opposition has made excuse after excuse for someone on his own side. I ask this question: is the Leader of the Opposition likely to come into this parliament and make a statement saying, 'This is what I asked Senator Crossin, this is what Senator Crossin told me, and this is what I think really happened'?

Of course he is not. The Leader of the Opposition will have pursued his interrogation of Senator Crossin with all the intensity and all the fervour with which he pursued the leak hunt for the frontbencher who described the shadow Aboriginal affairs ministry as equivalent to the toilet cleaner in the *Titanic*. If it is done at all, it will not be done well, and that, unfortunately for Australia, is the story of this Leader of the Opposition's political life.

The Leader of the Opposition, in his MPI, is calling for an independent auditing of parliamentarians' entitlements. What he is really saying in all of this is that members of parliament—his colleagues, Labor members of parliament—cannot be trusted. He is saying that Labor members of parliament—and members on this side—cannot be trusted to run their offices, cannot be trusted with the entitlements they have. That is what the Leader of the Opposition is saying. He is smearing every single member of this House; he is saying that all members of this House, on either side of parliament, are expected to be responsible for every last paper clip and every last photocopying machine and its use, right throughout their offices. What he is really doing is smearing every MP in this House in an attempt to attack the Prime Minister and the minister for employment. What is he really trying to do? It is a pathetic attempt by him to show—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)—The member for Watson will try to control himself. I know it is difficult.

Mr ABBOTT—that what he really has is the mongrel in him which Della Bosca so famously said he lacked. It is interesting that there is a need for an independent auditing of parliamentary entitlements. The reason for that is quite clear. He believes that, should he ever occupy the great office of Prime Minister, he would be completely and utterly incapable of policing a system himself. In this demand for an independent auditor to run this, he is confessing that he, if he ever got to be Prime Minister, would lack the guts, the intestinal fortitude, the character, the ticker, to do the job himself. This is a Leader of the Opposition who cannot say no to anyone except the current government.

Members opposite talk about probity. When they clean up the Queensland electoral rorts, they can come and talk to us about probity. Has the Leader of the Opposition called in the member for Lilley, who was state secretary in 1991 and 1993, and said, 'Were you responsible for any dodgy enrolments? How many people did you put on the electoral roll?' When he has answered those questions, he can talk to us about probity. Has he said to former senator Belinda Neal, 'Just what are your dealings with the New South Wales government? Just what is the relationship between Mr Della Bosca, you and companies that have been given contracts by the New South Wales government?' Of course, he has not done any of these things because he has no ticker, and on this issue he has exposed himself as being not only a sanctimonious windbag but a sanctimonious humbug. (*Time expired*)