



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2000-2001**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2000-2001**

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENTARY  
DEPARTMENTS) BILL (NO. 2) 2000-2001**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 28 February 2001**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Billson, Bruce, MP	<b>Question No.</b>

**Mr BILLSON** (Dunkley) (10.30 am)—It is my pleasure to speak in support of the Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2000-2001. It was interesting listening to the previous speaker deriding some of the very forward looking and thoughtful initiatives that the Howard government has introduced because of its solid economic management credentials. It is easy to forget, and it seems those opposite are all too ready to forget, that you cannot make sound, forward looking investments in the capacity of our country if you cannot pay for them. The days of living off the Visa card, a practice turned into an art form by the previous Labor government, are, thankfully, behind us, because most people recognise the link between living within your means and the affordability of interest rates, opportunities for investment, job creation and their standard of living.

It is interesting to hear those from the Labor Party criticising the Howard government for some very forward looking initiatives involving substantial amounts of funds that have been made possible because there has been sound economic management and a very thoughtful look towards our future financial position as a nation so that our kids—my kids, your kids, the kids of Australians—are not paying into the future for reckless decisions made today. I would have thought that that was an account of a positive, forward looking government but, as I mentioned, I was surprised to hear those opposite complaining and, in fact, ridiculing some of those forward looking measures.

Today I want to talk about the plight of the outer metropolitan communities. My electorate of Dunkley is on the outskirts of that great city, Melbourne, that you, Mr Deputy Speaker Jenkins, would know well. In fact, let me use our two electorates as an example. I think it is about an hour and three quarters drive from my electorate in the outer south and south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne to your electorate in the northern suburbs of Melbourne—a great, large, substantial cosmopolitan city. What so often gets missed is that people talk about our nation and describe it as comprising city folk and rural folk but, as simple as that may be for the purposes of analysis, the communities that we represent do not fit into either one of those categories.

The outer metropolitan communities, those interface communities between the city centre and the rural communities, where the vast majority of Australians live, have some characteristics that are neatly described as neither city nor as rural. I think that area of our community is where we are facing some of the greatest challenges and where the forward looking policies of the Howard government, like the ones derided by the previous Labor speaker, are going to make the biggest difference into the future. The outer metropolitan communities are characterised by people trying to establish themselves. They are trying to accumulate assets, improve their standard of living and set themselves up for the future. These often are people who have mortgages so interest rates are a big deal to them, and they are part of a community that appreciates the government's efforts to keep the costs of mortgages down so that home affordability is as good as it has been in previous generations. They are people with young families looking to get into the work force in the near future. Employment growth matters to the communities that we both represent, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is not often that you hear them spoken about. I often refer to it as a suburban toil.

When you live an hour or an hour and a half away from where you work, the price of fuel matters because it is a substantial cost when you are eking out your living. That is why I have been quite supportive of what the Prime Minister announced yesterday during question time. The government is looking at what it can do to provide some fuel price relief to our motorists. In our outer suburban areas, cars are so crucial to our way of life. There are many households with two and sometimes three cars. Many people have to drive their kids to school. Many people have to drive to get to their recreational pursuits, to see their friends and, as I used in my opening example, many of them have to commute substantial distances to get to work.

With all of those examples of motor vehicle use, and the fuel that is consumed, you are not able to get access to the assistance that is being provided by the government in terms of fuel. You are not driving a heavy transport vehicle so you cannot get the 24c a litre reduction in diesel that is available for the heavy transport community—although, you may get some derivative benefit on the cost of delivering that fuel to your local service stations. You are not able to claim that sort of travel as an input to your business so you cannot get the GST input credit

back and we are not far enough out of town to qualify for the half billion dollars that the government makes available to subsidise the freight of petrol to communities outside of the metropolitan population centres.

Those three very positive initiatives are designed to relieve pressure on fuel prices for the rural and regional communities but outer metropolitan communities, highly dependent on their cars, cannot get a piece of the action. That is why I am very encouraged by what the Prime Minister said; again I emphasise the point that we need to do what is affordable. Again, picking up on the criticisms from the previous Labor Party speaker, being able to do something is only made possible because of sound economic management. Providing relief on the price of petrol cannot be at the cost of increases in interest rates because, in the household budgets that I am talking about, if you are going to save \$10 or \$15 a week on your fuel bill, you do not want to pay \$10 or \$15 more a week or a month on your mortgage, because you end up with a zero gain. That is why fuel matters and that is why I am encouraged by what the Prime Minister said, and I am very enthusiastic about his heartfelt understanding of the concerns that motorists face.

It also goes some way to explain why I have been an almost evangelical advocate of the Scoresby transport corridor. Our community is a great community, a vibrant community with a lot of highly skilled people, but we are a long way from areas of economic activity, excluding our own city. Our city I will come to in a minute. So the Scoresby transport corridor is crucial, and that is why that \$1 billion investment is something I have been working for since I was elected. There is a capacity to connect the south-eastern and eastern suburbs into a freeway network that is already in place servicing constituencies like yours, Mr Deputy Speaker Jenkins, and the western suburbs. We have seen the economic dividends and improved quality of life that communities in the western and northern suburbs enjoy from half the ring road that goes around Melbourne. You can see why we need to finish the job. Our community is a residence of choice area. You have heard stories about Tom and Nicole before their split coming down our way to buy a home. That is a testament to the lifestyle opportunities that are there but it also reflects the fact that we are very much a dormitory community. People choose to spend their time there when their time is their own, but we also know that a lot of our citizens need to travel elsewhere to participate in the more vibrant economy and healthy labour market that the Howard government has been able to produce. So the Scoresby transport corridor matters. Three-quarters of all the industrial and commercial land in the Frankston city area is undeveloped. Why? Because the transport infrastructure is not there. Three-quarters of those people from Melbourne who come down and enjoy the delicious delights of the Mornington Peninsula come out of the catchment of the Scoresby transport corridor. You have got urban regional centres supporting the Melbourne CBD at Ringwood, Knox, Dandenong and Frankston—key areas of economic activity that need to interact but which at the moment go through choking transport corridors to do so.

This is a crucial project and I have been very happy to be in the lead, with my colleagues the member for Deakin and the member for Aston, highlighting the importance of this project to our community. We have had to put up with the bunkum from Minister Batchelor, the Victorian transport minister, saying, 'Well, the Victorian government is open for business.' Despite campaigning in the state election against the project, they have had this road to Damascus conversion and have fallen off the donkey and hit their head on the asphalt that is servicing the western suburbs and thought, 'Gee, this would be okay in the eastern suburbs too.' So they have now said they are interested in the project. But what we have had to put up with for more than a year and a half is Minister Batchelor and the Victorian government saying they have done all they can and they have let the Commonwealth government know about this project. They have done next to nothing. They have forwarded to the Commonwealth government, the Deputy Prime Minister in particular, transport minister John Anderson, a copy of an environment effects study report and said, 'There you go, that is what we want to do.' But that report actually raised some questions that needed to be answered by a government that wanted to actually implement the project. They have not talked about timing, they have not talked about how they are going to stage the project, they have not come up with resolutions to issues the environment effects study highlighted and they certainly have not put one zack on the table.

My federal Liberal colleagues Phillip Barresi and Peter Nugent and I, who have been agitating for this project for nearly four years now, have had to work with nothing from the Victorian government. That was revealed when the Victorian transport minister met with the federal transport minister in Sydney early in the new year. Do you know what the outcome of that meeting was? To form a working group to actually develop a proposal. The Victorian government have so failed motorists in our great city that they had not got out of first gear—they had not even got out of neutral—on this project while they were making all these statements in the media that they are open for business and pushing this project. Minister Batchelor has been revealed as the bunkum merchant of the Scoresby transport corridor. We will make sure that motorists do not forget why this project has not commenced yet, and that is because Minister Batchelor and the Bracks Victorian government have not

got the project on the table. Things are starting to happen now, and I am optimistic we can rescue the situation created by the inactivity of Minister Batchelor and get on with this project, because it matters to me and the community I represent. It is a very important infrastructure project and an example of how outer metropolitan communities need the investment that is more often referred to out in rural and regional Australia.

The other issue that relates to that is that, rather than actually get on with the project, Minister Batchelor chose to throw around the most fictitious press releases criticising me, Phillip Barresi and Peter Nugent on a totally bunkum story, so that even the Public Transport Users Association, not known to be big defenders of people advocating freeways, actually came out through their spokesman, Mr Mees, and defended us, saying, 'Minister Batchelor has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous here.' It is an example of what we are having to work with to get this crucial project done. It is part of our future.

The southern section of the community of Dunkley is in the Mornington Peninsula shire area. To the Mornington Peninsula shire's great credit, they are looking forward to the destiny of that part of the Mornington Peninsula, that terrific area of Mount Eliza and Mornington South down to Portsea and around the Westernport side—a fantastic part of the world. They are thinking about sustainability. Why? Because that matters to that community and it separates it from other areas around the country. That is why people go there: to enjoy that. The Mornington Peninsula shire is thinking about supporting a biosphere for the area, recognising that the balance of human existence, economic activity and the environment is crucial to the long-term viability of that area. That is to be encouraged, and I support that work and am available to assist in any way I can there.

Contrast this vividly with the dilemma we are facing in Frankston city. Frankston city has been thrashing around for a while since it got a Labor dominated council which seems more preoccupied with personal career aspirations than the wellbeing of our city. Where is the vision? Where is the need to diversify the central business district? It is a vibrant retail area now, but surely we have got an opportunity to reinforce Frankston as a regional centre where people from the south-east of Melbourne know that, if they are looking for services, looking for government agencies, looking to consult with financial advisers or anything, they can come to our city and get support. Where are the ideas that I keep pushing, like setting up Frankston as the renewal destination for 3½ million Melburnians? We work pretty hard in our city and there are a lot of people working too hard. When the weekend comes, they need to recharge their batteries. Why isn't Frankston the place they go to to recharge their batteries? We have got accommodation, we have got terrific infrastructure in terms of entertainment, cultural activities, restaurants and those sorts of things and we are on the doorstep of the terrific Mornington Peninsula. There is an idea. There is a vision for our city. There is an opportunity for the council to do something constructive. Instead, they thrash around and make sensational headlines over things that really are not that significant in the eyes of many people, while the city's destiny is left to wallow. It is about time the council in Frankston city started looking after the city's interests and did not spend so much time contemplating their own navels.

An example is in small business, an area of crucial significance to our city. Yet we have the Bracks government implementing employment laws which are spooking small employers, we have WorkCover increases in some cases up to 300 per cent, to implement an election policy, and people wonder why small business is doing it tough. While that is going on, this government and the minister at the table, the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, are rightfully pursuing opportunities for small business to be exempt from the unfair dismissal laws so that businesses which are not big enough to have a human resource management department, if they are wavering on whether or not to put on an extra person and are not certain about the success of that pathway, can move forward with confidence. Those half opportunities for employment growth in our country will become better than half opportunities; they will become a reality for our city. That is why the unfair dismissal laws matter.

I have proposed an idea to try to get this measure through the Senate. There is an argument that some people in small business may not be the nicest employers around—there is good and bad in every section of our community. I understand that point. There is concern that some ruthless small businesses might abuse the measure that the government is rightly pursuing. My solution is: let us recognise the national interest in securing those extra employment opportunities but let us understand that some individuals may feel they have not been treated well under that measure and would like some comfort. Why not accelerate access to income support for those people who are eligible who are displaced because of that unfair dismissal exemption for small business? Why not say to them, 'Yes, we are trying to open up employment opportunities but, on the off-chance that it does not work out, this initiative is so important to employment growth and the vitality in our small business community that the government will be there for people who become unemployed under that measure to have accelerated access to income support so that they know they are not going to be left out in the cold'? That would be a

useful and constructive way forward: balancing the national interest of employment growth, opportunities for unemployed people to gain employment, at the same time recognising that some of our small business community are brilliantly gifted at what they do but perhaps are not the ant's pants when it comes to human resource management. I think that is a balanced proposal, and I am hopeful that the government will look at it carefully.

In our city, there are often discussions about intravenous drug use. Occasionally, there are some unfortunate and unwelcome episodes surrounding that issue. In some cases, syringes are discarded quite recklessly, presenting a risk to the public. Needle supply programs are sensible because they reduce the risk to the intravenous drug user, but reducing the risk should extend to the general public. The public should not have to be terrified about visiting a park or a beach and getting pricked by a needle. Thankfully, nobody in our country has yet contracted HIV or AIDS via a needle-stick prick of that kind. Let us recognise this genuine concern and let us not allow the benefits of needle supply programs to be undermined by the community being anxious about the reckless disposal of needles. I have spoken before about retractable syringe technology which is now available so that, once the substance has been injected, automatically the needle is sucked back into the cylinder. So, even if the syringe is recklessly discarded, the general public is not at risk. We have managed to get support in Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia for this technology. Why can we not get something happening? It cannot be that hard.

**Mrs Crosio**—It needs federal direction.

**Mr BILLSON**—I accept that interjection that federal direction will help. That is why I am flapping my gums about it right now. This matters and we can do something constructive about it. I call on all governments around the country to have a serious look at least at a trial of retractable syringes to make sure that the benefits of the needle supply program are not undermined by the public's concern about needle-stick injury from recklessly discarded syringes. The flip side is that people say, 'What about all the supplies of needles which we already have?' Give them to diabetics, please. In Queensland and New South Wales, with the assistance of federal funding for these types of community health programs, we have managed to make syringes freely available for diabetics, but not in Victoria. People keep saying that it is too hard. How is it too hard south of the Murray, yet north of it we can manage it? It is time the Bracks government invested some of that biblically huge surplus which they inherited from the Kennett government and follow the lead of Queensland and New South Wales, making syringes freely available for diabetics. There can be no concern that shifting to retractable syringes would see some lost use of conventional syringe technology. The Commonwealth already subsidises the availability of syringes for diabetics and in Queensland and New South Wales the state governments have tipped in a little extra cash and syringes are free. Let us do that in Victoria. I will continue my remarks at another time. *(Time expired)*