



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Health and Ageing: Reforms

SPEECH

Wednesday, 24 March 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 24 March 2004
Page 27087
Questioner
Speaker Gillard, Julia, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (3.11 pm)—This matter of public importance debate is about the urgent crisis, which needs to be addressed, in Australia's health system. Unfortunately, the man responsible for it, the Minister for Health and Ageing, when interviewed in the past by Paul Kelly, has said:

We are all promoted to our level of incompetence, so sooner or later mine will be reached.

When the minister replies in this debate, if he is in any way frank he will be admitting that he has been promoted to his level of incompetence already and that the Australian people are wearing the result of the minister having been promoted to a job which is clearly beyond him. We all know that the health minister likes to play the strongman, the man of vision, the man of values. But the truth is he is not any of these things; it is all spin and no substance. When properly revealed, he is a weak man, a man without vision, a man lacking in values and a man who does not have the confidence to lead Australia during this current crisis in its health system.

There can be no greater demonstration of the weakness of the man who holds the job of minister for health than his fawning and pathetic devotion to the Prime Minister. He is a weak man in search of a leader, in search of a father figure. The minister for health has described himself as the political lovechild of the Prime Minister and the member for Mackellar.

Ms GILLARD—The member for Mackellar is now interjecting in defence of the political lovechild of the Prime Minister and the member for Mackellar. If Mary Shelley were still alive, that would be the next episode of *Frankenstein*. I am absolutely sure that that would be the next plotline for it. Imagine that—the Prime Minister and the member for Mackellar. The slavish and sickening devotion of this minister for health to the Prime Minister has led him to say this:

If I could be half the bloke that Howard was, I would probably be twice the bloke I am.

Minister, we agree with you—and that is not a compliment. We agree that if you could be half the bloke that Howard is you would probably be twice the bloke you now are. Imagine having to double your personal capacities to be half of the Prime Minister. What a high-jump bar that is to set for oneself over a lifetime. The sickening and slavish devotion of this minister for health has led him to make statements as absolutely stupid as that one. The minister for health likes to pretend, as he did in question time today, that he is the strong defender of the government. He likes to pretend that he is the hard man, the one they roll out in question time to do the big note performances. Of course, we see that day after day in this House.

But the truth is that this minister is more lap dog than attack dog. He is more corgi than coyote when it comes right down to it. In fact, in the way he goes about his job he reminds me of Nipper. Do we remember Nipper in the painting 'His Master's Voice'—the dog straining to hear the sound of his master's voice over the gramophone to get his next set of instructions? That is really the minister for health with the way he does his job and the way he performs in relation to Australia's health system. When the master says, as the master frequently does, 'Nipper, I know you've been out there doing something but I now want you to backflip and do something else,' the minister for health—more lap dog than attack dog; more corgi than coyote—is always ready to do what he is told to do next by his master's voice.

Probably the best example of that was MPs' superannuation. The minister for health was out there batting up the argument, defending the MPs' superannuation scheme. Then obviously his master's voice came to him down the phone, 'Nipper, I'm backflipping; it's time that you backflipped too.' What is really surprising and worrying about this minister for health is that when he is put in the position of being hung out to dry and abandoned by his Prime Minister, when he is left carrying the can and looking absurd, he actually seems to like it. The fact that he actually seems to like it has been recorded in the press. When he was in that position with MPs' superannuation, after being shamed, embarrassed and hung out to dry by the Prime Minister, he said:

... I have never admired the Prime Minister more than I do now. It takes real guts ... to do the right thing under difficult political circumstances.

That is, it takes real guts to adopt the position that he was decrying as absurd just 24 hours before. But when Nipper hears his master's voice what does he do? Nipper is out there, always willing to do what his master says—the Prime Minister's lap dog.

Interestingly, the former Premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett, entered the health debate this week. The Victorians among us—and I know that a few of us are here—might remember that from time to time Jeff Kennett liked to muse on the topic of dogs and politics; we might remember some of those statements. But Jeff Kennett, when he entered the national debate this week, was not musing about dogs and politics as he was wont to do in the past; he was actually out there on the need for health reform. Jeff Kennett had to enter the national debate to deal with the health reform agenda, because he knows that this minister lacks any capacity to do so—he is not a strong man and he is not a man of vision. When it comes to providing national leadership on health, this minister is all jawbone and no backbone. This minister is Mr Flip and Mr Flop: all jawbone, no backbone and no vision at all.

Everyone engaged in our health system knows that it is riddled with duplication and gaps and with cost shifting and blame shifting. The huge task facing this nation, the huge task facing a competent minister for health, is to get on with the job of reform. But that task is beyond this minister. When faced with such a major reform challenge, what does this minister do? He flips and then he flops and then he flips and then he flops.

On 5 February, so seized was he with the enormity of the challenge of health reform that he raised the concept of the Commonwealth taking over public hospitals by way of a joke. When asked a question during question time at a conference, he thought he would crack a joke and the joke he cracked was, 'What about the Commonwealth taking over public hospitals?' Having finally—no doubt after a lifetime of trying—managed to crack a joke that a few people actually laughed at, he obviously spent the next few days wandering around endlessly repeating it to his colleagues. So he told his colleagues his new joke about the Commonwealth taking over the public hospital system and, by the time they were gathered in the Liberal party room on 9 March, the idea of the Commonwealth taking over the public hospital system was apparently all the rage, with backbenchers jumping up about this new health idea. But what is really interesting about the backbenchers jumping up about this new health idea is not that they were interested in a health policy advance for Australia; what they were interested in was trying to grab from anywhere a big bold idea, because they knew they needed to seize the political agenda. It was not that they were interested in health reform; they wanted something to help them break the media cycle.

It just seems apparent to me that the politics of desperation do not breed good health policy, and they did not on this occasion. Yes, we need health reform, but not done by way of joke and then by way of desperate statement in a party room meeting. Then what happened during the course of that week? The Prime Minister came out and killed off the idea by stating that there were no plans for the Commonwealth to take over public hospitals. Mr Flip had been out there saying, 'The Commonwealth is going to take over public hospitals. I've had this big new idea; it came to me as a joke and now it's a vision,' and then the Prime Minister was out there saying, 'No, Nipper, we're not going to do that.'

The SPEAKER—Order! I have given a good deal of tolerance to the member for Lalor. Her references to the minister could be more appropriately framed.

Ms GILLARD—I will try and apply the standards that the minister adheres to, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER—I hope the member for Lalor will try and apply the standards that the chair expects.

Ms GILLARD—But we know that by the time of his interview with Maxine McHugh the minister was straining hard on the lead. Even though he had been told by the great and the good—the Prime Minister—that this idea had been ruled out, by the time he had lunch with Maxine McKew he was so desperate for a story that it has appeared in today's *Bulletin*. But I will guarantee you this: the idea will be dead again very soon, because this is a minister who lacks the competence to engage in a national health reform process.

So who is filling the gaps? Labor are. We have already outlined a national comprehensive reform process for health. Jeff Kennett is. Jeff Kennett, the most successful conservative Victorian politician of this generation, has backed Labor's plans this week. Of course, there is that very natural starter for dealing with the health reform agenda, David Koch. On Monday, in a forum on channel 7's *Sunrise* program, David Koch managed to broker a Commonwealth-state agreement on getting performance indicators in Australian health care agreements. A

TV journalist managed to broker a new agreement on health, achieving something that the minister for health has never managed to achieve, while the minister sat in a chair. So we now have such a vacuum of leadership in health policy in this country that we have television journalists taking the lead for us, because this minister isn't competent to do it.

Yesterday in this place we saw a demonstration that this minister, who as I have said is not a strong man or a man of vision, is also not a man of values. In this place yesterday we saw one of the lowest attacks I have ever seen in this parliament, and I have to say that from this minister I have seen a few. No doubt desperate to break the media cycle away from the focus on this government's appalling treatment of the Australian Federal Police Commissioner, they sent this minister in to have a rant and a rave about being tough on drugs. I say to you, Minister: no one should be playing politics with drugs policy.

The SPEAKER—The member will address her remarks through the chair.

Ms GILLARD—No one should be doing that. Some 5,000 Australians have died from drug overdoses while the Howard government has been in office, and that is a national tragedy. Every member on this side understands that, and if there was anything any one of us could ever do to stop someone walking down the path of drug addiction and substance abuse we would do it. For the minister to pretend that we would not do it is an absolute, offensive disgrace. How dare the minister play politics with an issue like that? There are 5,000 Australians dead. If there was ever anything that any person who sits over here could do to stop someone walking down the path towards alcoholism, towards heroin abuse, towards smoking tobacco, toward using amphetamines or towards using other forms of illicit drugs, we would do it. We would move heaven and earth to do it. For the minister to suggest anything else is an absolute, offensive disgrace.

Of course, what we know about this minister is that when it comes to dealing with these issues and dealing with them seriously he finds it absolutely impossible to do so. Look at the appointments that he has made to some of the most important boards which deal with these issues in Australia. Believe it or not, many of us would have thought the minister did not have too many mates, but those appointments reek of mateship; they do not reek of competence. So for this minister to stand here with his pious cant and criticise the Australian Labor Party on an issue like that is an absolute disgrace for which he should apologise. Indeed, there are many members over there who ought to be apologising too.

I conclude by saying: the minister is not a man of vision, he is not a man of values and he is not a strong man, but he is a man who has been written about in interesting terms in *The Boy from Boree Creek — The Tim Fischer Story*. This man and his character are recorded as follows:

Fischer's dislike of conflict and confrontation is well known amongst his colleagues. He was for instance bemused to hear of the rugby training ground rivalry between two of his Liberal ministerial colleagues, former Jesuits Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey, during their days at Sydney University. Goaded by Hockey in scrummaging practice one afternoon, Abbott, who won a boxing blue at Oxford, gave his younger rival two black eyes. On hearing this Fischer said, 'I've never decked anyone in my life.'

I think that tells us something about the character of this man. (*Time expired*)