



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 3) 2004-2005**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 4) 2004-2005**

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENTARY  
DEPARTMENTS) BILL (NO. 2) 2004-2005**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 7 March 2005**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Billson, Bruce, MP

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**Mr BILLSON** (Dunkley—Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs and Trade)) (7.33 pm)—I take great pleasure in speaking in support of Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2004-2005. I particularly want to draw the attention of the House and the audience listening to an item within that appropriation bill—that is, the \$65.8 million being assigned to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and to Austrade to enhance the security of Australian diplomatic missions. It is important to put on the record my undying admiration for the work of our foreign affairs officials. They do a remarkable job. I am particularly privileged to be able to work with our consular staff. They are the people who are there when Australians need help overseas. They treat everybody as if they were members of their own family and do an absolutely remarkable job. No praise can be too high for the work the team did during the recent tsunami disaster. Many thousands of Australians were assisted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade officials. Congratulations to all that team.

Through that work, I was fortunate enough to represent the department and the minister at, and to lead our Australian delegation to, a recent conference to set up an early warning tsunami system. That conference was held in Phuket in Thailand. I encourage anybody who is listening to think about re-engaging with Thailand. It was quite moving to see some of the images from the tsunami disaster—they are images I will never forget. At the particular complex where that conference was held, I think the impact of the disaster was one dirty swimming pool, yet occupancy rates were around seven or eight per cent. As we look at how we can support affected countries and help them get back on their feet, we should acknowledge that supporting them to re-establish their livelihoods should be a part of that. So I encourage anybody thinking of travelling to those regions around the Indian Ocean to have a look at the [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au) web site. You will find some helpful advice there about destinations in those affected countries that would be absolutely delighted to receive Australian visitors. I encourage anybody considering travelling overseas to remember that there is one ‘must see’ destination, and that is the [www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au) web site.

The link between Thailand and my next subject tonight is that I am speaking in favour—as I often find myself doing—of species that have no voice of their own. Often I speak in favour of people in communities who feel their needs are not being addressed. In this case I want to speak in favour of some elephants. You might be aware, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker Baldwin, that there is currently a proposition before the Commonwealth government through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to approve the introduction of a number of elephants to a consortium of zoos. These elephants are from Thailand, and frankly they are captive-born elephants that have no productive use in the tourist industry where they were raised. The aspect that I am particularly interested in is the proposal for the Melbourne Zoo to supplement its world-class elephant exhibit with three captive-born female domestic elephants to create a natural social group for Bong Su and Mek Kapah, the two elephants at Melbourne Zoo. Many people are fond of these two elephants. They have been a key feature of the zoo.

Let me say at the outset that I see no conservation value in not granting this approval. What we are talking about here, in the case of Melbourne Zoo and the partnering zoos it is involved with, are world-class zoos. Melbourne Zoo has demonstrated a capacity to educate and inspire, introducing a million visitors a year to the delights of wildlife. A very big part of that has been the Trail of the Elephants, an award winning initiative at the zoo. The idea here is to take from work camps in Thailand three captive-born female Asian elephants and, in a consortium with Taronga and Auckland zoos, to bring them to a satisfactory environment where an understanding of elephant behaviour can be advanced, furthering the wonderful engagement people can have with these species in environments that are world class and, in the case of the Melbourne Zoo, building on a very constructive mutually supportive relationship not only amongst the zoological community but also amongst those who have the responsibility of caring for domestic and wild elephants in communities such as Thailand.

A number of other nations that have wild elephant populations are learning about elephant behaviour and about supporting and more or less ensuring the gene pool. In this case, they are able to engage with captive-born elephants that are no longer required in industry and to explore this trail of elephants, which has a whole range of habitat styles and topography that the elephants will find delightful. I think this is a terrific idea, and I am

encouraged by the work that the zoo has put into making sure that its plans are understood, that the community is engaged and that the statutory authority that oversees the zoo is open and transparent. Through world-class leading edge management of elephants in captivity, the zoo is looking towards the interests of elephants that are part of the zoological population, but it is also demonstrating a preparedness to support conservation generally by sharing the insights that are gained by building up the constituency, if I could say so, for elephants more generally. Recently during a visit to southern Africa I saw elephants in the wild, which was magnificent, but not all elephants are in the wild. Some are in captivity, and some are in managed environments that are far from wild. If we can gain more insights into how to properly care for these magnificent creatures, I think that will be a step in the right direction.

So I urge the Minister for the Environment and Heritage to grant this conditional approval. I think it would be entirely appropriate to continue the transparent arrangement for the management of the elephants, the external public scrutiny and the shared goals of not only carrying forward best practice in zoological care and management of elephants but also the transfer of knowledge and know-how to those with that difficult and, frankly, internationally significant task of making sure the elephant population in the wild is sustained and properly managed. It is probably a bit of a stretch from travels to Thailand but it does highlight the fact that important work is going on between our two nations, not only at a trade and diplomatic level but also in a very practical sense.

Moving on, the House would be aware that 'Our Dunkley Destiny' is something that I work towards during each electoral term. In 'Our Dunkley Destiny', we set out a community plan for the things we hope to pursue in partnership with the local community. I would just like to touch on a few of the initiatives in that today.

Some have heard me talk about the Solar Cities initiative and how absolutely tickled pink I am that the Howard government has had the vision to put in place a \$75 million plan to develop solar city trials in typical urban, commercial and industrial settings. I think that is important because so much of the new technology needs to be demonstrated so that others have the confidence to embrace it and apply it in their own environments. In the early stages Adelaide and Sydney were identified as potential locations for such trials, and that makes some sense if you look at both the huge summer peaks in energy demand and their climates, which I would characterise as solar friendly. But I think one leg of the stool is missing, and that is a need to road test photovoltaic cell solar technology in more temperate conditions. We need a southern solar city—and you would be surprised to learn that I am advocating the greater Frankston-Mornington Peninsula area. With its long-held commitment to a more sustainable way of living, of production and of community engagement, I think it provides an ideal setting for a southern solar city.

Our energy profiles in Victoria, particularly around Greater Melbourne, are starting to look not very dissimilar from those you see in Adelaide and Sydney, where in the peak of summer and in the height of the heat during the day, the demands created by airconditioning and climate control systems add to the commercial and industrial demands on the network—and also the demands of residential properties. In our environment there is a range of residential and commercial opportunities—new and established in both cases. We have a whole range of housing prospects, we have heavy industry, and we have public and community service uses that I think provide an appropriate setting for a showcase of photovoltaic energy production in a more temperate climate.

I was delighted that the federal environment minister was able to meet with me and a number of local government representatives to canvass interest in this idea. There are stakeholders that are ready to engage in such a proposal, and energy retailers have indicated an interest as well. If the purpose—as it is—of the Solar Cities program is to road test the photovoltaic technology, it would be wise to road test it in a range of climates. Let us road test it in a more temperate environment like Melbourne, where there is an appetite for sustainability and where the Mornington Peninsula-greater Frankston area, through Cities for Climate Protection, has shown that when these things are on, our community turns up.

So, again, I would encourage the minister for the environment to consider that. I have spoken with him about it. I know the discussion paper is in its latter stages of consultation and refinement, and I would strongly urge him to embrace the case for a southern solar city pilot. I can assure you that he could do little better than engage the communities of the city of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula in road testing that technology in a temperate environment. There is a delicious environment and a world of possibilities down in the Mornington Peninsula-greater Frankston area.

It is nice to see that the Howard government's ongoing commitment to enhancing health services is already starting to pay dividends. There are some encouraging signs coming through in the most recent published report

on bulk-billing statistics, but there is also an acknowledgment that we need to do more to attract doctors to outer metropolitan areas, where there are growing demands, the case loads and workloads that doctors and local hospitals need to service are increasingly complex and there is a need to make sure that tools are available.

You might recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I was almost evangelical about the need for an MRI machine to service our community, which has a large veteran population. Many people forget that the Mornington Peninsula is mighty long if you are down in the south and need to head up to the Monash Medical Centre or Dandenong, which were previously the only locations for a Medicare funded MRI machine. That was very difficult for some people in our community, and I am delighted, absolutely chuffed and, frankly, relieved that we have finally managed, after years of work, to have MRI service providers sharpen their pencils and respond to the opportunity made possible by the Howard government through a further extension of Medicare Benefits Schedule funded MRI units. The government increased them from 18 to 77 initially, and now there is a further group of 21 Medicare funded MRI units, including one co-located at the Frankston community hospital.

Frankston Hospital has had an MRI unit for some time. It has been readily available for in-patient analysis, and the work it has done has included scans of soft tissue, particularly for brain issues and spinal and musculoskeletal conditions. While it has been readily available for in-patient customers, outpatient customers have had to pay. They got world-class service, but for some the access to that diagnostic technology was just not affordable. Now, thankfully, as a result of the Howard government and years of advocacy by many of us in our community, there is a Medicare funded MRI service—an affordable, accessible, world-class health diagnostic technology—at the Frankston Hospital, which is a further sign that the Howard government is engaged with the needs of outer metropolitan communities.

That leads to an issue we have often talked about, Mr Deputy Speaker—that is, aged care in our communities. Our communities act as magnets. They draw people to them, not only because new families wish to start their lives in our communities and then ageing parents are drawn to those families, but also because of the quality of life our communities offer. On top of catching up from the shortfall in places left to us by the former Labor government, we have had to expand service availability. I am pleased to inform the House that not only have some of the EACH packages—enhanced aged care in the home packages—been announced for the Dunkley community and our region generally but, thankfully, through the recent aged care approval rounds the Baptist Village Baxter now has the beds to reopen a previously closed facility.

That facility was closed whilst that forward-looking organisation built a brand new facility that met the higher standards that ensure there is dignity and proper care for residents. So there was no loss of beds there, just a new facility constructed to meet those higher standards and a vacant older facility, albeit one needing further renovation. Thankfully there has been a bed allocation to support the reutilisation of that facility, as well as further services in the Mount Eliza area, an area that has quite a significant ageing population but does not have ready access to federally subsidised aged care. So that is positive news. A further encouraging step was the support for the relocation of the Regis Sheraton, an aged care facility landlocked in Frankston. That is moving to the former Karingal High School site. Supporting the redevelopment of that important facility, there is a further allocation of beds through the most recent aged care round, so that is all encouraging stuff.

You may recall that on a number of occasions in the House I have raised the issue of substance abuse, particularly the range of initiatives that are part of the Dunkley drugs plan. We have seen an expansion in available services. We have seen street trialling of retractable syringes, and it is interesting to track how that is proceeding. We have had mixed accounts of whether the technology is up to the task, but it is still an important initiative. We have had expanded treatment services to tackle drug harm through PenDAP, and some of the community health services have been involved. We have also seen work done with young people, trying to identify better options for their future, showing them that there are some other prospects for a better life and that illicit drug or substance abuse is not the way to live, work or play. So that has been going on.

Something that sat behind that was a need to do a stocktake of the services and facilities available in our community. There is, in particular, a crying need for a readily accessible, residential detoxification, rehabilitation and healing facility. It should not be like winning lotto to get that help. We know that a substance abuser needs to be ready to try new pathways and to engage in the difficult task of making better life choices but, if they make such a choice, whether or not support is available should not be a raffle. I have long argued the need for such a facility to service our region. There are far more beds available in your home state of New South Wales, Mr Deputy Speaker, than there are in Victoria, and I am not sure why that is the case. I am certainly not happy for it to stay that way.

I persuaded the former health minister to allocate some funds to do such an analysis of the services available in the Mornington Peninsula-greater Frankston region, and I am delighted to advise the House that just last week I launched the Dunkley needs analysis final report by the Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre. They did an absolutely first-class job of analysing the range of services available to our community, engaging substance users and abusers to find out their perspectives. They gave a big tick to current service providers for their empathetic and helpful approach, but they identified a big, glaring gap. That gap is the one that we intuitively knew would be there: that is, the lack of a residential facility. We know that once they are in a program we have a sense within the first six to eight weeks of whether someone is likely to choose better life pathways than the pathways of substance abuse. My proposition is that we should partner with established organisations like Odyssey to put in place a short-term program that targets that six- to eight-week window. We know at that point whether an outcome is likely—whether the person is committed and whether the environment is supportive of better life choices for illicit drug users and substance abusers.

As a community, we need to make sure that those services are available when they are needed and that support is available for those that care or despair for substance abusers and illicit drug users—so that the users can identify for themselves positive and lasting life pathways and the families that hope for a better tomorrow can support them in getting their lives back on track. This report makes the recommendation that what we intuitively knew to be true now needs to be followed up by action. I commend the agencies in the greater Frankston-Mornington Peninsula area for their care and their interest. We have now a well-researched pathway to chase further resources to make sure that those people able to make a transition into better life choices can find a new, positive and constructive path in life and that the help is there to support them.

In the few minutes I have to close, I want to pay tribute to the people who are doing work in another area of innovation in our community. Frankston City Council has done a remarkable job trying to pull together the best available research and community attitudes on gambling. You will recall that the Prime Minister, quite rightly, back in 1999 said:

The challenge ... is to find a response which balances the undoubted right of individual Australians to gamble if they wish with the ongoing responsibility of governments for overall community welfare.

I commend this work to the House. ( *Time expired* )

Debate interrupted.