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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Howard Government
SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Ciobo, Steven, MP	Question No.

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (4.03 pm)—This is a most curious matter of public importance that the Labor Party has put forward to the House. To listen to the new Leader of the Opposition and to listen to the new Deputy Leader of the Opposition one could be instantly taken by the *prima facie* proposition that they put. They say that the Labor Party under the new Leader of the Opposition is about a new style of leadership. We heard the Leader of the Opposition say that the Labor Party under him will be about a new set of policies. In the debate today we have heard from the Australian Labor Party, to reinforce this point, two key arguments.

The first argument the Australian Labor Party puts forward is with regard to industrial relations and in particular this government's record on Work Choices. The second argument that is put forward by the Australian Labor Party deals with the issue of Australia's health system. We heard in remarks just made by the deputy leader that the Labor Party, for the next 10 years and for 10 years beyond that, would be committed and focused on improving Australia's health system.

I would like to turn to some of the central arguments that Labor have put forward. The Leader of the Opposition made one key comment that really stuck with me. He said that the Australian people were starting to see through the government's line. He said that the Australian people could see through the politics and the blame game. We heard the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition trying to demonstrate, through approximately 25 minutes of rhetoric, that the Australian people were not as well off today as they were when the Labor Party was in power. This is a key point because Labor Party policies have been trialled on the Australian people previously. Labor Party policies at a state level are currently being implemented by the Labor Party in the various state governments. What have been the outcomes of Australian Labor Party policies?

We hear the Leader of the Opposition say that the Australian people need to reflect on the performance of the Prime Minister and his government. In particular, the argument was made that the Prime Minister is happy to accept credit for good results but is not prepared to take the blame and that any attempt by government to highlight inaction or resistance which has led to adverse outcomes is an attempt to engage in the 'blame game'—they were the words that they used. Given that the new Leader of the Opposition, as the *Daily Telegraph* said, seems to be a man that is all about style but not particularly about substance, what do other people say?

Do not take my word for it; do not take the word of the Leader of the House, the member for Warringah; do not even take the Prime Minister's word, if the Labor Party would like. Let us see whose word we will listen to and who has spoken about federalism and cooperative federalism. Let us see what others have said about the way in which the federal government and the state governments are working, because the entire thrust from the Leader of the Opposition and from the deputy leader is that this government is just engaged in a blame game and that the consequences for the Australian people are poor. This is what Steve Bracks, the Labor Premier of Victoria, had to say:

I think people are sick and tired of the blame game.

That resonates, doesn't it, Mr Deputy Speaker? We have heard that somewhere this afternoon. He continued:

I think people are sick and tired of the blame game. They want us to get on with the job. They want us to have real reform which is going to sustain our economy and our population for a long time to come, and they want us to look not at just the short term but the long term ...

But there is not a full stop there. The quote continues:

... that is what's been achieved as part of the COAG agenda.

So the very lines we have heard the Leader of the Opposition using, the very lines we have heard the Deputy Leader of the Opposition using, have been entirely rebutted, purely and simply, by the Labor Premier of Victoria, just recently re-elected, who said that we are getting on past the blame game, we are delivering real reform,

sustaining the economy and the population for a long time to come and ‘that’s what has been achieved as part of the COAG agenda’. He continued:

For those who are knocking the Federation, knocking the States and Territories and knocking the relationship between the States and Territories and the Commonwealth, today is evidence, further evidence, that we are doing what the public expect, and that is not to continually snipe at each other, but get on with the job of delivering real services to our public, to the public in Victoria and the public in Australia more broadly.

So with respect to the Leader of the Opposition, who clearly is a man that has style but not substance, I would say to the Australian people: never trust the style; look for the substance. He might be presenting as new, but can I say that if there is one message to drive home to the Australian people it is this: that tribe might have a new chief but they still dance to the same beat. And the people that play that beat in the Australian Labor Party are the trade union movement. We have had Labor Party policies before; we have had union policies before; and the results were very bad for the Australian people.

This whole argument can be encapsulated in this one brief comment. The thrust from the Leader of the Opposition and the deputy leader was that this is ‘new Labor’—a new style of leadership, new policies. The key argument they used to illustrate how this government was being unfair was to talk about Work Choices. So my question is this: why then, if Work Choices is such a problem for the Australian Labor Party and this is the new Labor Party with the new leader, the new style, the new policies, is your policy on Work Choices exactly the same as it was under Kim Beazley? Why is it that an hour-and-a-half before the new Leader of the Opposition came out and addressed the Australian people, Labor’s policy on industrial relations was announced by Sharan Burrow, the head of the ACTU? I repeat: it might be a new chief but the drumbeat is the same, and that drumbeat is played by the ACTU and the various trade union movements around Australia.

Let us turn to substance. We heard 25 minutes of rhetoric from the Australian Labor Party but let us look at what this government has delivered for the Australian people. Let us move beyond the general comments that we had from the Leader of the Opposition, the general comments we had from the deputy leader, and actually deal with some facts, because I do not think I heard too many from the Leader of the Opposition—and especially not from the deputy leader, who started by talking about cricket teams, tracksuits, which Commonwealth Games finals the Prime Minister went to and so on. Let us put all of that to one side. That will never wash with the Australian people. They can see through that. What the Australian people want to hear from the opposition are your policies and the results. And in this respect I am proud of this government’s achievements. I am proud of a couple of key things. I am proud that under the Prime Minister and under the policies of this government we have reduced Labor’s \$96 billion of public debt to zero—one of the key accomplishments. In terms of interest savings for this government, as a result of paying off this debt, we have seen now that the Australian people have an additional \$8 billion to spend on schools, hospitals, roads and tax relief. So this government has \$8 billion of additional money that it can spend to help the Australian people because we have paid off Labor’s \$96 billion of debt.

What about employment? This apparently is a key issue for the Australian Labor Party. Let me say to the Australian Labor Party: if you are so concerned about fairness, explain why you had one million Australians in unemployment queues. If the Labor Party wants people to have a festive Christmas, believe you me, the Australian people would rather have a job than no job at all. And thanks to this government and thanks to Work Choices, we have now seen an increase of some two million Australians that have jobs. Since the introduction of Work Choices by this government, we have seen the creation of over 200,000 jobs. This has brought unemployment in this country down to 30-year record lows. I repeat: the Australian Labor Party should move beyond the spin and rhetoric and talk about facts. That is what the Australian people want to hear. Stop listening to the same tired old drumbeat that you march to by the ACTU and come up with some new policies. If you need some inspiration, look to the government side. (*Time expired*)

The SPEAKER—Order! The discussion is now concluded.