



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2008-2009**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 2) 2008-2009**

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENTARY  
DEPARTMENTS) BILL (NO. 1) 2008-2009**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 5) 2007-2008**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 6) 2007-2008**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 3 June 2008**

## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Cobb, John, MP

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**Mr JOHN COBB** (Calare) (8.31 pm)—I rise to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2008-2009 and related bills. There are a raft of issues which we as a responsible opposition, and in my case with a very regional electorate to represent, have some serious issues with. Quite obviously, there are many things in the budget the current government has handed down which are necessary and which have to be done, as they are every year, and the majority of budgets generally pass through. But there are some notable issues this time, and if I did not raise them I would be failing in my duty to the people of Calare, the largest electorate in New South Wales and very much a rural and regional electorate, going from Orange, a city of some 38,000 people, to the far west of New South Wales and up to the Queensland border, where things are certainly very different.

One thing that does strike me is that in this budget the luxury car tax deals with the issue of vehicles, be they large family vehicles, four-wheel drives or whatever they might be. Out where I was brought up, west of Condobolin and the Cobar shire, and further west than that—out at Wanaaring, Bourke, Brewarrina or Wilcannia—a four-wheel drive costing \$57,000 or more, I can assure you, is not a luxury. That is a necessity, including for keeping your family safe from kangaroos on an outback road, whether it be in as far as Wyalong, where I currently live, or out at my place in the Cobar shire. Kangaroos, I suppose, are just there trying to get along like the rest of us, but they do make life dangerous for individuals and families travelling a road, particularly early and late in the day, and they have caused the deaths of a lot of people—and not necessarily because the people are driving very fast. If the uninitiated are in a small vehicle and they swerve to miss a kangaroo then that can be it. That is one reason four-wheel drives are so important to those of us who live in those areas.

There is also the fact that you are less likely to have breakdowns. Roads are not good. Obviously, most of the roads in that area belong to the state government or to local government. Roads to Recovery is one of the better things that our government ever did, and we tend to think that the new government has maintained it. It is not 100 per cent obvious, but we do think it is still there. Despite the efforts we have made to help local governments and people in regional Australia with that particular program, roads are not what they could be, and wear and tear on vehicles is particularly high, which is another reason four-wheel drives, as I said, are not a luxury. They are a necessity, and because of that people should not have the taxation or excise they pay lifted to well over 30 per cent.

In the area of health, coming from a regional electorate as I do, we are extraordinarily lucky in the city of Orange to have the wonderful array of doctors and specialists that we do. Also, the state government have finally decided to build a new hospital in Orange, and last year we as the Commonwealth government committed to putting in half the funds for the oncology unit to go with it, which the state government then matched. That is fantastic. But further west it is not so good. There is an incredible shortage of doctors.

I think the increase in the Medicare levy surcharge threshold from \$50,000 to \$100,000 and \$150,000 for families is an incredible backward step for public health, because that system is obviously going to have a lot more to deal with. It is also a backward step for people who live in an isolated situation, in a rural or remote area, who in many cases are more likely to have private health insurance. It is a little hard when you live 100 miles from town. I remember my wife once sat all day waiting to see a doctor and drove home that night without having seen one. That is not great. The reason you go into private health in that situation is that you can go to a larger regional centre like Orange or Dubbo, where there are private hospitals, and actually get in to see a doctor. I think that to provide disincentives to people to be part of the private health system is very unfair to those who need it, the families who warrant it, but it is also very unfair to the public health system, which is quite obviously going to have a lot more to deal with.

One of the things I am most disappointed about in this budget is that it does not seem to be making any more inroads into encouraging people to get into nursing. I think some of those regional incentives for nurses, scholarships and the like, are incredibly necessary. If there is one thing we need in western New South Wales, Northern Australia, north-west Western Australia and South Australia, it is many more young Aboriginal people to get into nursing—doctors would be great, but nursing is incredibly important—to help Aboriginal people with

their health issues, to make them comfortable. Yes, you can have Aboriginal health services, but to actually have Indigenous nurses is something we must encourage everywhere. I would love to have seen more in this budget to encourage Aboriginal people in schools everywhere to think about doing nursing.

I would like to have seen far more in the way of scholarships for the whole community, particularly for rural people. They need scholarships. They need the sort of thing we have done in Dubbo and Orange; we have put universities and clinical schools out there for those doing nursing and provided those in medical school with the experience of practising health in regional areas to realise what a rewarding thing it is—to know where you are really needed. We do need those things, and they do not seem to be in this budget. Everything seems to be right across Australia rather than concentrating on the people who need it most—the Indigenous population in Australia and those in rural and remote Australia.

I would also like to talk about the issue of water. That was obviously quite prominent in the budget, but what was not prominent was a commitment by Senator Wong and her government to where they are actually going to spend or appropriate money over the next year or two in terms of the National Plan for Water Security. While they have appropriated money for their promises, which actually do not do a lot for the irrigation industry or to create water savings, they have not done those other things.

What they have appropriated is money to buy water, well over twice as much as they should be, which will create incredible hardship for the communities where that water is taken from. And it is only going to be sold because people, after six years of drought, may be experiencing mental, physical and financial pressure for whatever reason—but particularly because they have had six years of drought and they are struggling. The only people who are really going to sell them that water are those who do not have much of a choice, which means they are not targeting it and which means they will just have to buy it where they can get it.

I can talk about a couple of places in my electorate where the shadow minister prior to 24 November committed this government to spending on water. One was up to \$400,000 out at Menindee Lakes. I can see over the next two years no sign of where any of that is going to be spent. I can come back a little bit in the figures—\$12 million was to be spent on the Albert Priest Channel to assist the towns of Nyngan and Cobar, including the mining communities and other people in Cobar, to make incredible savings, which can be made. We pinpointed last year where very, very good savings could be made for irrigators, for the towns and for the communities. That \$12 million is not showing up so far in the budget for the next couple of years either. As far as I can see, the only money that the senator has put out for the next couple of years is something like \$600 million to buy water, which I do not think it is possible to spend, because people simply do not sell that much water in the Murray-Darling Basin. The only way she can spend it, I think, is if she is paying ridiculous amounts for that water.

I think the whole issue of water needs to be rethought. Everybody is trying to explain the issue to the senator. I do not blame her for not understanding the issue, as there is no reason in her history why she should understand the intricacies of irrigation, what it does for communities and the fact that water is not a mental exercise. Water is about people, and people are the mainstay of our country. Without them, none of us would be in this room.

I will also briefly touch on drought. It may be news but, going on the press releases and the statements I have seen from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and others just lately, I hope they do realise that this drought is very, very much still a reality now. It is a real issue, particularly in western New South Wales. The one thing I am certainly not proud of is the fact that I have the most drought affected electorate in Australia. I am very proud of the people who deal with it. You have to be pretty tough. You have to have a lot of resilience to deal with what our people have dealt with since 2002. I have the rural lands protection boards of Bourke and Brewarrina in the north-west of my electorate, up on the Queensland border. Their exceptional circumstances assistance comes to an end—if they do not hear anything in the next few days—on 15 June.

We did take areas out of EC in our term in government, but we never took an area out that had been in continual drought. The very first people to go into drought in south-eastern Australia in the current tragedy were in Bourke and Brewarrina in November 2002, some two months after I took the then Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, John Howard and John Anderson, to Cobar to show them just how much it was hurting and cutting there. A month or two later, Bourke and Brewarrina were declared eligible for exceptional circumstances assistance. This has meant an awful lot to the people there and it still does. If you talk to the agents in Bourke and Brewarrina, they will tell you that a lot of the graziers in that area are there and hoping for revival because of the interest rate subsidy. They have to spend in the region of \$50 to \$100 for a ewe or \$500 to \$1,000 for a cow and calf—and these are people whose stock numbers are way down. They might have some grass because

they did have summer rain up in that region this year, but they do not have money and they are not going to have it in the near future. Their stock numbers are probably around 30 per cent. This is tough territory. I hope that this government realises that to cut somebody dead who has been in this situation for six years straight is to condemn a lot of those people and the people who backed them, the communities, to a very, very tragic situation.

One of the things that certainly did feature in the budget—mainly because it was cut dead, and it has certainly been in the news recently—was the Regional Partnerships program. Having one of the more remote of the rural and regional electorates in Australia, I will stand behind Regional Partnerships as one of the best programs that regional Australia has ever had. It was one of the most popular. It did much for remote, isolated or just unfortunate communities—communities that could not raise the wherewithal for community projects. Sometimes it was about aged care, sometimes it was about respite, sometimes it was about youth programs like PCYC and sometimes it was about health projects. To cut that dead in this budget was one of the most ruthless things I have ever seen a government do. You may talk about rorts but I think you have only to listen to some of the things that happened today—a minister who unilaterally funds a school with up to \$14½ million in their own electorate out of their own department when no-one else except that particular school can get any money at all, let alone \$14½ million—to recognise where the rorts and the faults really lie.

I have spoken about water. As I said earlier, water needs to be funded so that in partnership with those who irrigate—those who use that water—we can invest in the industry and save the water. A recent report showed that almost 1,000 gigalitres of water could be saved in the Murray-Darling Basin and that over 600 gigalitres of that could be saved for no more than \$2,000 a megalitre. I think you will find that Senator Wong will end up spending far more than that buying water, and once she buys that water it is gone forever. She is not even intending to have a water holder who can lease that water back to industry in a good year. That water is simply for the environment, nothing else, so it is condemned in terms of production. Governments, after all, have a responsibility to the people on behalf of whom they govern, for defence certainly but also for food security—and this is about food security. It is about the fresh food security of this nation, and it is about Australia's place in the world as one of the great agricultural exporters.

As I said earlier, a lot of things in this budget are fine. I think that for every budget that comes along we are all in agreement on probably half of it, but not when it does not support health in rural Australia or when it picks on people like those in my electorate to whom four-wheel drives are not a luxury. Four-wheel drives are an absolute necessity for them, whether it be for surviving collisions with kangaroos or for surviving the wear and tear on vehicles. Whatever it might be, \$57,000 is not a hell of a lot of money to spend on something that can save your life.