



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Child Care**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 31 October 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 31 October 2011  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Ley, Sussan, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms LEY** (Farrer) (19:56): I am delighted to speak to the motion in my name. By way of background, in the 2010-11 budget, the Labor government removed federal funding for occasional care, and this shifted the entire cost of funding onto the states. Occasional care provides a flexible model of child care, providing places for children who may only need care on an ad hoc basis. In rural communities in particular, this care has proved to be invaluable to, for example, farming families during the harvest or the shearing season. What we have here is a government intent on shirking its responsibility. By contrast, the coalition have committed to restoring the \$12.6 million that was ripped from the occasional care funding budget by the federal Labor government in the 2010 budget, because we accept that this, as with all child care, is a federal responsibility.

In Melbourne on 25 October, a week ago tomorrow, the Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare said:

The Australian government has never had a direct funding relationship with these services ...

In the minister's department, I am sure some staff member is patting themselves on the back and calling that a rather clever piece of wording. But, actually, one might call it mischievous. Let us speak the truth: this is an appalling and self-serving misrepresentation of how funding for child care has historically worked in this country. The website of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, DEEWR, directly states:

The Australian Government provides financial support to approved Occasional Care services.

It just so happens that occasional child care in Victoria is called Take a Break, and it might be called something else in New South Wales, Queensland or WA, but it still amounts to the same thing: occasional care. This joint federal-state cooperative for occasional child care in Victoria has been run successfully, at a moderate cost to government, since 1988-89.

The central announcement in Minister Ellis's comments last week, another self-serving piece of tripe, was the supposed creation of more than 1½ thousand new occasional and in-home care places for Australian families. I would make two points. The minister says that the government does not fund these programs—it does not have 'a direct funding relationship'—then, in the same breath, she announces new funding for them. Notwithstanding that peculiar and embarrassing slip-up, of those, only 250 occasional care places and 140 in-home care places may go to Victoria, and I am advised that there is next to no chance of their going to regional Victoria, where Labor's abandonment of occasional care will be felt the most. There was another bewildering truism from the minister on 22 July this year, when she said:

Child care funding is a shared responsibility between the Australian, state and territory governments. Nothing has changed on that front.

I am sorry, Minister; it has. Two years ago, federal Labor decided it no longer wanted to share the responsibility of occasional care. The minister has continually noted since then that, while Victoria can no longer do so from next month, other states intend to cover the federal shortfall. One of these reasons is quite simple: it is that in Victoria there is the greatest percentage of children who access occasional care—at the last count, in 220 neighbourhood houses and community centres across the state. They are so concerned that even the minister's own side of politics cannot quite believe what they have done. When questioned in the Victorian parliament in June, Labor's shadow minister assisting the leader on children and young adults admitted that she believed the federal government should fund the program, when she said that she had actually lobbied her federal counterparts to reinstate their funding for Take a Break.

This week we have lodged a petition containing some 3,000 signatures calling for the government to immediately reinstate this \$12 million in occasional care funding removed from the previous two federal budgets. This is a

call to reinstate funding not just for Victoria, but for every state and territory in Australia. This is because the coalition knows, the Greens know—

*A division having been called in the House of Representatives—*

**Sitting suspended from 20 : 01 to 20 : 14**

**Ms LEY:** This week we have lodged a petition containing some 3,000 signatures calling for the government to immediately reinstate the \$12 million in occasional care funding that was removed from the previous two federal budgets. This is not just a call to reinstate funding for Victoria but for every state and territory in Australia. This is because the coalition knows, the Greens know, parents know, DEEWR knows and, indeed, it seems that everyone knows apart from the childcare minister and the Labor government that the Australian government provides financial support to approved occasional care services.

These are parents who signed the petition: Sally is parent to four boys and is from Greensborough in Melbourne; Jarrod is a single dad, working odd jobs to make ends meet; and Jessica Burrows is a mum from Warrnambool. The list goes on and the names go on. There is the Rosanna Fire Station Community House, the Sale Neighbourhood House, Grovedale Community Centre in the city of Geelong and the Orwil Street Community House at Frankston—only this morning I heard news that this centre will now close next month.

There are others that have or who will be forced to shut their doors: two centres at Chelsea Heights in Melbourne, and another at Mallacoota in East Gippsland. I received a note from an early childhood specialist, Jane Duffy, who was so concerned about the likely closure of the nearby Uniting Church occasional care that she felt compelled to write:

The threat of closure could likely lead to increased circumstances of family breakdown as parents find themselves unable to access an affordable short-term, respite, support service that gives them a break from the demands of early years parenting.

There was another from a group of parents at Baranduda, neighbouring my own electorate. Leah Bowles writes:

We are deeply concerned at the threat of losing what has become a valuable and vital community program. It is the **ONLY** childcare offered in our community. Losing this service will be devastating to our community, our families and most importantly our children.

Last week the childcare minister—and I quoted from her remarks earlier where she did not seem to be quite sure whether this was or was not a responsibility of the federal government—did allocate a few occasional childcare places to a few areas of the country. They are way too little, too late and this is not working in the really brilliant way that occasional care does work. I will use the Victorian example, where you have a little bit of state money and a little bit of federal money—maybe only \$7,000 per service. I have seen services in rural Victoria with \$7,000 of federal and state money and a whole lot of community fundraising with lamingtons and cakes and drives for goodness knows what—parents working really hard but coming together as a committed family-parent community in the process. Maybe the council will chip in with the rent of a building for nothing and a few facilities and then you have a wonderful community asset. That is the strength and the secret of occasional child care.

What this minister has done is to pull one card out of the pack and the whole lot has come crashing down. The example of \$7,000 is a good one because it is the same for many areas, and by taking just that little amount out the rest is just too much for all of the other funders to provide.

We in the coalition restate our commitment that as a government we will put back the occasional care funding that has been taken out by this minister. With a sleight of hand she tried last week to find additional places. They are funded through child care benefit, so they are not funded in the original way that Take A Break was funded for in Victoria. They are taken from a group of childcare places, which I think were sitting there as unused in-home care places because, coincidentally, we seem to be talking about exactly the same number. I was made aware of 1,500 in-home care places that were not being used and which were sitting on the books in the department. That is quite a different form of care; it is for disadvantaged children—children whose parents might be very ill or children who really require short-term, intensive live-in child care.

It looks to me as if the minister has raided that child care, has scratched up a few more places from somewhere else, allocated this paltry number—300, I think, in Victoria—and said that she has fixed the problem. She does need to make up her mind whether this is a federal responsibility and, if it is, to put back the fantastic system we had before which the coalition has committed to, which the state government in Victoria has committed to, which works really well and which provides a vital service for parents and families.