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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Autism Spectrum Disorders

SPEECH

Monday, 28 May 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP

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Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (20:03): I rise in support of the member for Kingston's motion. I seek to point out a slight inaccuracy in it, though. The government's Helping Children with Autism package is a constructive initiative and one that should be supported. But it is not actually the first one. It is the second one. The first one was announced by the Howard government in 2007. That was a \$190.7 million package to support children with autism spectrum disorder, their parents and their carers. I know that my friend and colleague the member for Gilmore and I and a number of other colleagues were extensively involved in that initiative. This represents a continuity of some good work in this space.

It is important to recognise that there is a collaborative effort going on in this area. It is the sort of collaborative enterprise that is really needed to get the NDIS off the table. It is not an area that should be subject to politicking and point-scoring. It is an area in which there should be a great shared purpose right across this parliament, as it will take a number of terms of parliament and I suspect a number of governments of different hues to bring about the kinds of outcomes that people working with those with disabilities—their families and their carers and the professionals who dedicate so much of their life to supporting this important group within our community—want. Collaborative enterprise—probably the biggest one we have needed for at least a decade—is what is needed, not trying to suggest one side of politics has a monopoly over it.

The Howard government package was a good package. It did provide direct support for 15,000 families, including their carers and children, with funding assistance for early intervention services—something that has been recognised by all speakers, as well as autism advisers operating across the continent—to help steer people in the direction of the support that is needed. So often, as my friend and colleague Craig Kelly and his wife Vicki have found, knowing where to turn and who can provide support can be one of the great mysteries. When you find someone who can help you find the path to the support that you need, that can be a great gift. That was a part of the package of the former Howard government, along with support for playgroups and assistance with the postdiagnosis phase and other children's services. So that was some good work that the government has built on.

In 2008 I actually praised the government for moving beyond its original proposal of just six early intervention centres. This was never going to meet the task, because they would be located a long distance from a vast number of people needing to access that support service. I praised the government for picking up the bones of the Howard government program and going beyond its alternative commitment of just six early childhood centres. That was never going to go far enough. I think it was wise of the government to move beyond that original proposal.

There are a couple of things worth looking at. The changes in the budget for the out-of-pocket medical expenses may not have been thought through quite to the degree that is needed. If we are going to support families with children with autism spectrum disorder, we need to recognise that a lot of their care is extraordinarily expensive, something that is touched on in this resolution. But that seems to have been missed in the changes to the out-of-pocket rebate arrangements. Originally \$2,000 needed to be spent for a 20 per cent rebate. That is now under the government's budget a \$5,000 outlay for only a 10 per cent return. When you look at the kind of care that is needed for a person with autism spectrum disorder and the arrangements that are in place for the support through the Medicare benefits schedule and the out-of-pocket expenses, this is going to create an enormous new additional expense for families. I am already receiving emails from my electorate saying, 'Have people not thought through the financial consequences of those needing quite a number of therapeutic sessions and assessment sessions, who are eligible to be supported by this out-of-pocket expense measure, which has now been wound back quite considerably?'

In the minute that is left, I also want to point to the measure of Abacus at Monash Peninsula. I declare a pecuniary interest as the campus advisory council chairman. We have been working for years to bring together the expertise in the teaching area, the occupational therapy area, and the health and early intervention space to make sure the next generation of teaching professionals have with them the competencies to contend with special needs kids and kids that have successfully gone through an early intervention phase where they can be placed into

mainstream schools. We have looked at a number of ways to pursue that. I will not go into all the details, only to say that the vacated childcare centre on the Monash campus has been leased to Windermere. This will provide specialist childcare support and a placement opportunity for the next generation of professionals to get direct research insight and hands-on experience and to improve our practice in relation to this crucial area of learning we need to continue to work on.