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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

**Social Security Amendment (Supporting
More Australians into Work) Bill 2013**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 6 June 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Broadbent, Russell, MP

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Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (13:18): Like many members of this parliament, from 16 years of age until my ripe old age of 62 years of age I have been able to feed myself and my family quite well. I have not been a single parent, a single male with children to look after and put through school. I have lived well and been on what you would call a relatively high income from an early age. I had the talent, the ability, to do whatever I wanted to do and I did it. I am not of the group of people that we are talking about here, and it is most difficult for politicians, wherever they come from, to identify with single parents across this nation. I choose to speak on the Social Security Amendment (Supporting More Australians into Work) Bill because, unlike your electorate, Mr Deputy Speaker McClelland, my electorate is diverse in its regionality and we do not have the infrastructure and support that goes with a city electorate.

The legislation that came before the House, which the opposition did not oppose—the member for Melbourne was right—because of the budget emergency that was put to us, was crafted around the ability of people to get to another job or to be in work. It was suggested in the legislation that, when the children of single parents turn eight, those single parents can just go straight to a job; we have just got to push them. If this nation were in a crisis today like the one we experienced in 1999—when the member for Banks and also the member for Fairfax were here with me; the three of us in this room came to this place in 1990—when the unemployment rate for young people was around 30 per cent and for male adults in my electorate it was around 19 per cent, and we needed to crush people to push them like mad to go out and get a job at any price, we could; but we do not have that crisis today. We have unemployment at 5.1 to 5.4; it could perhaps go to 5.7 or even rise to six per cent. In my time as a member of parliament and as a business person in the community, can I say that that is relatively low compared to what I have experienced in my lifetime. When it is compared to what is happening overseas at the moment, it is a relatively low figure. Look at Greece at 45 per cent unemployment. So why have we attacked the most vulnerable?

As the shadow minister said, this legislation is designed to show some empathy for the plight of these single parents and to address that. But it only helps those who are already in work; it does not help any of the single parents who are not in work at this time. There is no advantage in this legislation for them. In our case, the Howard government made similar changes prior to the change of government. After the change of government, I had to go to Brendan O'Connor, the then minister, and say: 'Look, this is what is happening in my electorate. People are being breached, and the moment they are breached and have no income they go straight around the back to the Salvation Army and say, 'We haven't got any money.' Then the Salvation Army come to me and say, 'Can you help us with this? We can't have these people being breached all the time.' People were told: 'If you're in a regional area—move.' Well, if you move, you have to move away from your family structure, your family support. If you are a single parent, the last thing you need to move away from is the sort of support that you get from family and friends and all the other things that make a difference to how you are living, especially in a regional area. So I went to Brendan O'Connor, and he was actually very, very kind to me, an opposition member. He said: 'Let's have a meeting. I can't go, but I'll send all my people down.' We had a meeting at Currumburra. We sat around a table and said: 'What can we do about this?' He made changes through the department so that these people would not be breached. So what would possess the government or the cabinet of today to come along and make these same changes? Here I am today in the exact same position, asking, 'How can we fix up some of these problems for people who have children and who happen to be single?'

There 80,000 of these people across this country. What were the Labor Party thinking when they attacked who they thought were their own voters? Maybe it was: 'We can do what we like with them. It will not make any difference. They'll vote for us anyway because we are a Labor government.' I tell you: they will not. They get hurt just like anybody else and they are in everybody's electorate. If you want to look at this from a political point of view, these people are in every electorate and some of them have lost between \$80 and \$110 a week. For a single household, even if the parent is working part-time, what does that 140 bucks a week pay for? It pays for food. It pays for the things that you put in the supermarket trolley. This is not the time in our history to be attacking 80,000 vulnerable families.

I just do not get it. Is it a budget emergency? We can spend some \$50 million on advertising. I am not saying that previous governments did not do it. I am not going to say that future governments will not do it. But for heaven's sake, you have a measure here that is going to affect the most vulnerable at a time when we are lauding each other over the NDIS. We are saying, 'This is a historic change for disability.' In 1996, I was taking on the Howard government on disability when they tried to make a change. I did not mind overturning the executive then on behalf of people with disabilities and I have not minded overturning the executive on a few other occasions since, which not many backbenchers do.

What did somebody say—'People should pull their heads in'? That is not what I meant. It is time to take a step back and ask what are our values, what are our goals, what are we on about here? Woe betide members of parliament and governments who bring in laws that hurt the most vulnerable in our community while giving tax breaks to the wealthiest. I feel ashamed that now we are coming to a point where, for 80,000 single parent families, we have said, 'It's all right. You can take 110 bucks off them because then they'll have to get a job; they'll have no alternative.' You heard the member for Melbourne say, 'But they already had a job.' If I do not plead on their behalf, coming from a Liberal-National coalition, who will tell the story for them? All of this legislation should be repealed. We should recognise that there are people out there who perhaps do not have the skills and abilities or who through no fault of their own married the wrong bloke or the wrong woman.

Mr Melham: I'm a bachelor.

Mr BROADBENT: I know you are a bachelor. Through no fault of their own, these people find themselves alone. Through no fault of their own through accidents, they find themselves alone—not only alone but with children. It is hard to bring up children—I say Bronwyn brought up our kids because I was an absent, disappearing father. I worked day and night. That was hard enough. I cannot imagine what it would have been like to have had that responsibility without my wife. That would have weighed enormously heavily on anybody—to be a single parent with a family. You do not just triple the problems; you complicate them by a factor of 10.

We are not opposing this legislation, because it suggests that it is going to right some wrongs, but I put to the House that in a wealthy nation, which one day will be wealthy again, we should take pride in and be world renowned for the way in which we look after the most vulnerable in our community.