



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE**  
**Economic Competitiveness**  
**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 30 May 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Owens, Julie, MP

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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms OWENS** (Parramatta) (16:24): It is another extraordinary day in the parliament of Australia when the Australian community has been assessed as No. 1 in terms of the wellbeing index and is in the top 20 of the global competitiveness index, as it has been for many years, and it is also a day so dire that we have to have a matter of public importance to address the appalling situation of being in the top 20 countries in terms of global competitiveness and No. 1 in terms of the happiness and wellbeing index. But that does not mean that we should ever relax about improving the circumstances that Australia finds itself in. In fact, we should not; nor should we pretend that labour market reform alone is the answer.

Yesterday, a friend of mine came to visit. He was wearing a brand-new pair of jeans that he had bought at Target for \$8. Someone grew the cotton, picked it, shipped it, wove it, took it to a factory, made the jeans, exported them, brought them to Australia and sold them in Target, and all the people along the way, all the middlemen, made their profit, including Target, and the jeans cost \$8. It is absurd to think we could compete with that.

We could completely throw out any labour market regulation. We could halve our wages. We could wipe out all of the overtime and all the penalty rates. We could reintroduce 12-hour days six days a week and we still could not compete on the basis of labour price with those countries that can produce a pair of jeans from scratch and sell them into Australia with Australian wages at this end for transport, packaging and accounting. We simply cannot compete on that. We can only compete in this country on the power of our minds.

We have more power in our minds, more assets in our brains, in this country than we have under the ground, by the way, far more. For the people on the other side of this parliament to walk into this chamber and talk about global competitiveness is the height of hypocrisy. They were in government for 12 years and did not make any serious moves to improve the level of the capacity of our minds. They did not make any serious moves to improve the quality of education from primary school right through to tertiary education—in fact, under them it went backwards.

I want to firstly talk about university education. In the whole of Western Sydney, the proportion of people from low-socioeconomic status who went to university went backwards during the time of last coalition government. In the biggest boom we have ever had, the biggest boom the world has seen when there were rivers of gold flowing from the growth in China and from around the world, they did not make one move to improve the capacity of the poorer people in this country to get a tertiary education. When they lost government in 2007, three per cent of people in Western Sydney went to university and 5.2 per cent Sydney-wide went to university. In Western Sydney, we were just over half the rate of enrolment and that number got worse over the 12 years of the Howard government.

It took this government to come along in the middle of a global financial crisis and decide that education was actually the future of this country and that if you want to be globally competitive you need to do something about it. So don't you dare come in here and talk about competitiveness after you spent 12 years wasting people in this community by not providing them with an opportunity. You did nothing in your 12 years to improve the competitiveness of this country in terms of education—nothing. We have started to turn it around.

The funding for the University of Western Sydney has grown by nearly 68 per cent in the five years that we have been in government and it will continue to grow. Real funding per student across all universities has grown by 10 per cent since we came to government in 2007. Under this system, the number of supported students at the University of Western Sydney has increased from 25,800 to 32,000 in the first four years of this Labor government and the number of people from low-socioeconomic status areas has grown by 31 per cent over those four years. What we saw from the opposition during the biggest boom we have ever had in terms of Australia's global competitiveness was nothing. They pushed us backwards on tertiary education. We saw the same with primary and secondary education.

A person could have enrolled in school in the first year of school, and graduated, in the 12 years that the Howard government was in power. Twelve years of schooling under the Howard government and what did we see? When Bob Hawke became Prime Minister in 1983 the high school retention rate was 30 per cent. When Labor lost government it was 80 per cent. One in five people was not finishing high school when the Howard government came to power in 1996. What was the figure 12 years later? Eighty per cent. In 12 years a child could have started school and finished school and still no difference.

Debate interrupted.