



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency Bill 2013

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 30 May 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP

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Ms LEY (Farrer) (16:17): I am pleased to speak for the coalition on the second reading on the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency Bill 2013. As the mother of an electrician who spends a large part of his days crawling through roofs and therefore encountering asbestos on a daily basis I, like many other Australians, are worried about this issue. I have sought reassurance that the best possible workplace practices are there for my son in his workplace.

We in Australia have the highest reported per capita incidence of asbestos related disease in the world. Mesothelioma and asbestos related cancer will not strike today or tomorrow, but in the 10, 20 or 30 years or even longer after exposure. As the local member in a large rural electorate in western New South Wales, I am aware that there are many communities with old houses and people on low and fixed incomes, people, you would say, who are on the fringes of society. Over the years, I have seen and heard of too many who have passed away because of exposure to asbestos. These are the stories that not only cripple the families and friends but also impact entire communities. While Australia has had a nationwide ban on the production, importation and use of asbestos since 2003, many buildings in Australia still have asbestos or asbestos products within them, which put at risk in particular do-it-yourself home builders and renovators.

So the coalition is very supportive of the Asbestos Management Review and its recommendations. Now that we are fully aware of all of the dangers of asbestos and the effects it has on the people exposed to it, it makes good sense for all sides of politics, and the unions and employers to join together to try to overcome the legacy issues that are clearly out there. These legacy issues will remain with us as a country for another 30 years.

This bill establishes a national agency known as the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, as recommended by the review. Regulation of asbestos issues is a matter for all levels of government in Australia. The prevalence of asbestos in our built and natural environments also means that asbestos regulation spans multiple areas of government, including health, environment, urban planning, and workplace health and safety. The involvement of multiple governments across these diverse areas means that efforts to address asbestos issues have been fragmented and duplicative.

The coalition are strongly supportive of the establishment of this agency and of enacting recommendations to deal with the scourge of asbestos in the community. We have identified a number of issues with this bill, and I recognise that the minister has taken steps to ensure that our concerns are addressed, one being that, despite a clear recommendation from the Asbestos Management Review that all states be involved in the council, the government has restricted membership to include only two representatives from the states and local government. We welcome the minister's decision to expand membership of the council. It is our view that, in order to ensure that the council works well and that all levels of government work together across the country, you do need to have everyone at the table. The one-size-fits-all approach does not always work. We welcome the step in the right direction in the amendments put forward by the minister, but we do believe it would be advantageous to have everyone at the table. Nonetheless, we recognise the government is taking a step in the right direction. We also support the expansion of the powers of the council so that its deliberations can be broad reaching within the confines of asbestos related issues, and not limited by the minister of the day.

I also point out that the coalition is disappointed that the agency's funding seems to have been cut before it has even been established. On 20 March this year, the minister introduced the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency Bill, which pledged in its financial impact statement that the cost to establish the new statutory agency would be \$12.3 million over the forward estimates. But in the latest budget, just weeks later, we find the government has introduced legislation and will invest \$10½ million over four years to establish the agency. In just six weeks, Labor has cut \$1.8 million from its own asbestos regulator, even before it is established. I will invite the minister to explain this cut and detail the services that might not be available as a result. Nonetheless, the coalition strongly supports the bill and the amendments to be moved by the minister.

To conclude, I commend the Australian trade union movement, which has taken a very proactive role in dealing with the issues of the hazards of asbestos. It would be fair to say that, without their active campaigning, things might not have progressed as far as they currently have. I also recognise the minister's willingness to work with the opposition on this bill and the way in which his adviser Simone has worked closely with my colleague in Senator Abetz's office. I commend the bill to the House.