



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS
Australia's Future Workforce Needs
SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Jones, Stephen, MP

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Mr STEPHEN JONES (Throsby) (20:41): Can I start by thanking the member for Blair for bringing this matter before the House. It is, as the member for Hughes has rightly identified, an important debate. It is a debate that goes to the heart of our economic priorities and to the future of our workforce, because nothing could be more important than ensuring that we have skilled, trained workers to meet the needs of the future—and we know that those needs are going to be large indeed. In the future, less than seven per cent of the jobs will be able to be described as unskilled. That means the balance, the 93 per cent, have to be made up of graduates of either the universities, the TAFEs or other vocational education and training colleges in this country. We know that we will need around 1.7 million more workers with a certificate III or higher qualification between now and 2015, so it is a critical area of economic policy.

I have to say that I was absolutely gobsmacked as I sat here and listened to the member for Hughes talk about economic management and economic policy. I do not want to verbal him, but I am quite certain that I heard the member for Hughes say that we cannot afford to be funding our TAFEs adequately. This is coming from a party that says we can afford to give a tax cut to the mining executives of this country, we can afford to give superannuation tax giveaways to some of the wealthiest people in this country, but we cannot afford to fund our schools, our hospitals and our TAFE system. You really have to ask yourself where are the economic priorities of those who sit opposite, and who look longingly across the chamber and want to sit on the Treasury benches of this parliament, when they say it is more important to give a tax cut to the mining companies of this country than it is to educate our kids. You have to ask yourself where their economic priorities lie. We are doing something about the economic priorities.

I am pleased to see the member for Cunningham, the parliamentary secretary, in the chamber, because I know that she, like my father was, is a former TAFE teacher and gave many years of her life providing vocational education and training to people from the Illawarra region, where we have relied for decades on the services of TAFEs to provide not only skilled workers for the businesses of the region but a chance in life for those who may not otherwise have had one.

We are making great headway. In 2011 there were over 200,000 additional students enrolled in vocational education and training courses in this country. There are also record numbers of Australians entering apprenticeships. Last year we topped the scale, with almost half a million Australians starting an apprenticeship. That is a great thing for those kids. But as anyone knows who has ever tried to get an electrician, a plumber or a carpenter out to their house for a repair or out to their business, we have a skills shortage in this country, and it is fast becoming an economic bottleneck.

We could follow the economic precepts of those on the other side of the chamber, represented by the member for Hughes in this debate, and say: 'We can't afford to train our kids. We can't afford to train the next generation of apprentices in this country. We can't afford to give those kids a second chance.' As the member for Cunningham knows—she has taught in TAFE for many years—it is not only a matter of providing kids with traineeships and apprenticeships. There are many people for whom attending TAFE is a second chance at getting a high school certificate—a second chance at ensuring that they do not fall through the cracks. For whatever reason, they may have dropped out of high school, and attending a TAFE college is their second chance to complete their high school education.

These are the sorts of people who are at threat through the atrocious cuts that were announced last week. I could not believe it when I saw that Barry O'Farrell, the Premier of New South Wales, was putting in place cuts to the education budget that would lead to the axing of over 800 TAFE jobs and an increase in TAFE student fees by around 9.5 per cent. I should have believed it, because the Liberals have form on this. The egregious attacks on the TAFE system in Victoria by Premier Baillieu have been followed by those of his mate in Queensland. You cannot trust the Liberals when it comes to education. (*Time expired*)