



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**BILLS**

**Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2012-2013**

**Consideration in Detail**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 30 May 2012**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Wednesday, 30 May 2012  
**Page** 6443  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Burke, Tony, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr BURKE** (Watson—Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities) (18:36): I am tempted to thank a senator for the questions, in the sense that I feel I am reliving Senate estimates in this chamber in the nature of these questions.

**Mr Hunt:** No, they are all mine.

**Mr BURKE:** Please do not presume that I am saying someone else wrote them. I have absolutely no doubt that the member for Flinders put them together. This specific style of question would normally be answered almost immediately when we have all the officials present in Senate estimates. That means I will have to work my way through a whole lot of them subsequent to this and communicate with you.

There are a few overarching points that I think would be helpful. I am going through the heritage questions, which are the only ones I have been given in writing.

**Mr Hunt:** All of the heritage questions have been provided in writing but not the Antarctic ones.

**Mr BURKE:** The Antarctic CRC, as the honourable member would appreciate, is a part of the CRC program itself, which is not run out of this portfolio. Notwithstanding that, there are substantial items in the budget which reflect our ongoing commitment to Antarctica and Australia's presence in Antarctica. It would be remiss of me if I did not refer to that and take a moment to do so. On the specifics of the CRC: CRCs by definition and by entire program design are meant to be temporary organisations. That is how the model has functioned under governments of both sides. No-one should see an expiration date for a CRC as being a reflection on the seriousness of the work that the organisation is doing. Rather, expiry dates are in the nature of the model. That has been the case ever since CRCs were first established, which I think goes back to Barry Jones.

In the budget, the government has committed \$41.1 million to sustain our level of engagement in the Antarctic program itself. This includes \$11.2 million for continued funding for Australia's Antarctic program, \$6.7 million for shipping support for the program and \$23.1 million to continue operation of the Australia-Antarctic Airlink. There is ongoing pressure on our Antarctic operations. Let us not underestimate the significance of Antarctica to our nation. We are the biggest claimant in the area with the Australian Antarctic Territory. We have also played a very significant role—in particular there was the role played by then Prime Minister Hawke in his work with then Prime Minister Rocard—in making sure that we had an area preserved and dedicated to science rather than one that became a new area for minerals exploration. I think that work has been continued very effectively under governments from both sides of politics. The problem that we have—and this is a very real challenge—is that the air transport link we have into Antarctica simply has not provided the functionality which it was meant to. When it was opened by the member for Wentworth when he held this portfolio it was welcomed by all as being great technology and effectively establishing an ice runway in Antarctica. What happens repeatedly now with access to Antarctica is that there is a limited number of months when you can get in there. Those are obviously the months when there is light. After that it is not just that it is dark but also that the weather conditions become quite torrid and quite difficult to get into. Each summer now that runway melts for a significant period, and while it was presumed at the time it was built that that would not be the case, historically it has been. So we have ended up with a situation that, while for a number of months of the year the runway is still able to be used and is used, the level of access to our facilities there that we thought would be provided simply has not been. That has been repeated each year. Last year was not as bad as the one before; in the one before there was a significant period where we simply could not get planes in and out. We have had a situation where, frequently, we have had to use United States facilities and other facilities and then come over land into our own territory.

So in terms of future pressures on our engagement with Antarctica, if we are going to provide the leading role that Australia has, the issue of how we get people, supplies and equipment there is probably the biggest issue facing us. I have all the different budgetary measures for what is in front of us now, but I think it is important

to advise the Federation Chamber of the very real pressures that are there in the years to come in order to make sure that we have ongoing access and can provide the leading role which would be expected. I am getting some information on the subprogram lines, as they are within the Caring for our Country budget, and I suspect during the period that we are here I will be able to provide more information on them.

Needless to say, for the area that has just been added to the forward estimates, some of those subprogram decisions—in fact, many of them—have not yet been made. We have them for the previous five years and we now have the appropriation going into the extension of the program, and that means that there are a number of decisions on program and design lie in front of us. *(Time expired)*