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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

**Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2014-2015,
Appropriation Bill (No. 2) 2014-2015,
Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments)
Bill (No. 1) 2014-2015, Appropriation Bill (No. 5)
2013-2014, Appropriation Bill (No. 6) 2013-2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 27 May 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Rowland, Michelle, MP

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Ms ROWLAND (Greenway) (18:47): I want to start speaking on these appropriation bills by reading from part of an email I received from a constituent just this afternoon. As the member for Richmond would know, when you start receiving large amounts of email expressing very similar sentiment and your mobile offices and other interactions with your community start saying the same thing, you know that, broadly, this is the opinion of the people whom you were elected to represent. I will just read from part of this. This is from a lady named Fay who lives in Lalor Park. It says: 'Thank you for your efforts on behalf of those in your electorate, most of whom will be adversely affected by this cruel and unnecessary budget. Please keep pushing the government on this and other aspects of the budget, especially all cuts to health and education and also welfare changes. I truly feel that this budget, if it gets through, will create a very divided society in Australia, with a much larger gap between the rich and the struggling. They appear to be keen to squash the poor and push the middle class downwards as well, while shaking hands with the rich and making life sweeter for them.' That is the view of a real constituent whom I represent and, as I said, many of my constituents feel very similarly, and so they should.

I firmly believe that, when you examine all the evidence and all the impacts of this budget—and I am not the only one to come to this conclusion—this is an anti-Western-Sydney budget. I want to focus on the cuts and the impact of those on the people whom I represent, including Fay, and also to touch on the areas of citizenship and multiculturalism and the communications space. I have been out and about in the electorate of Greenway, from one end to the other. It is a very diverse electorate with lots of new housing estates and lots of established areas. It is one of the youngest electorates in Australia. The message is very clear that constituents feel betrayed by a government which has made it clear that nothing and no-one is off limits when it comes to the most vulnerable in our community.

It is a budget which punishes low- and middle-income earners, as Fay has said, and I want to highlight that you do not have to take this from me. I am looking at an item that appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* which ranked electorates hit by measures in the budget. It looked, for example, at the number of bulk-billed services, the amount of family tax benefit and youth unemployment rates. Right up there throughout, when you look through the list, are the electorates of Western Sydney: McMahon, Blaxland, Macarthur, Chifley, Watson, Fowler, Parramatta, Werriwa and Greenway. On all of those criteria, these are the electorates that will be hit particularly hard, and Greenway being on that list is something that my constituents are acutely aware of, as am I.

I want to point out that before the election the now Prime Minister was very keen to talk up a big gain in Western Sydney. In just one of many examples, as reported in the *Daily Telegraph* on 28 August, when he went out for a leaders' debate in Western Sydney, he said:

I look forward to the debate and talking about our positive plans for the people of western Sydney...

Well, he did not mention the cuts. He did not mention the impact of a Medicare co-payment. He did not mention the impact of increased fuel prices. He did not mention all of these things. So it is no wonder that a key word which comes up when I go out in my electorate is 'deception'. These are people, constituents, who heard these promises, including promises he even made the night before the election—standing in Western Sydney—no cuts to health, no cuts to education and all the rest of the promises that are gradually being broken one by one.

Turning to some of the specific examples, one of the ones that is really irking people more than anything is the attack on Medicare. Despite promising no new taxes and no cuts to health, this government is slugging local families with a GP tax. It stands to hit Western Sydney families harder than anywhere else, costing families nearly \$100 million every year. I think it is up to the Prime Minister to explain why he thinks families in the western suburbs of Sydney should bear this. When you look at the bulk-billing rates, for example, of the electorates Australia-wide that will be hardest hit by this new GP tax, Greenway is again right up there with one of the highest bulk-billing rates in all of Australia at 97.53 per cent. So we are going to be particularly hard hit by

this new tax, and it will hit everyone. For the first time we are going to have people, such as pensioners and concessional patients, charged for services that they would have previously received without a co-payment.

On top of that, this government has broken its promise to steer clear of cuts to Medicare Locals. We have no certainty for the Medicare Local system. WentWest, the Western Sydney Medicare Local, has done some extraordinary work under Labor in addressing issues such as chronic disease—diabetes, cardiopulmonary disease and many other chronic conditions—which end up costing so much more when prevention is not put first. What we are talking about here are front-line health workers providing services in crucial areas of primary health care and, as I said, the management of chronic and lifestyle diseases. If it is the case that Medicare Locals, such as WentWest, are eliminated, it will be in addition to this new GP tax which is going to be hitting the people of Western Sydney.

I want to also highlight one of the issues—and I know it probably does not make the front page too much—that is really raising the ire of the people I represent. It is the issue of young people being left to wither. They are not being supported when they find themselves in tough times and in a cycle of unemployment.

Western Sydney again is listed in most statistics as having a very high youth unemployment rate. I only have to look at some of the partnership brokers in the area who have been particularly hard hit. I would really appreciate an answer to some of these questions, and I hope to get them through the budget estimates process. With youth unemployment at unacceptably high levels, especially in Western Sydney, what evidence base was used to inform the government that axing all youth transition funding in the budget would actually be a saving into the future? There is no long-sightedness here when it comes to young people—when it comes to assisting youth to transition through school to employment, and, in turn, reducing the demand on social welfare, health and juvenile justice, as well as returning a dividend to the government in the long term by way of the taxes they will pay when they are actually employed. They see nothing, and I see nothing, in this budget which this government is doing to assist young people to gain practical, pre-employment work skills, experience and work placement so that they are ready for work when they leave school.

These are fundamental areas for assisting young people, especially young people who are at risk. I know that the member for Richmond represents many of these people. It is only through these programs that we can actually address these issues and, in the long term, assist young people to be involved in society and to have the meaningful experience that comes through work. The changes that are being brought through in this budget have not gone unnoticed by people who are concerned about young people. There is a whole generation of young people at risk of being lost as a result of this budget.

I want to also touch on the National Crime Prevention Fund. Speaking of Western Sydney, I noticed, as reported in *The Guardian* just recently, on Friday, 23 May, that the Prime Minister was in Western Sydney. Just to give you some quotes from that article:

Tony Abbott has attempted to draw a line under two weeks of budget controversy by declaring that the "watershed" economic plan included funding for a crime crackdown.

... ..

Making a law-and-order pitch, Abbott visited Campbelltown to highlight the allocation of \$20m over the next 12 months to install new CCTV cameras and fund other safety projects around Australia.

He said the program—funded by seized proceeds of crime—was "an important element in our budget".

It is a sad fact that organisations which had been awarded funds from the National Crime Prevention Fund under the previous government in Blacktown were actually cut. One of them, COM4unity, was to be given a \$270,662 grant to enhance a contemporary music program and expand the capacity of its SWITCH program; that was cut. Blacktown City Council had been going to receive nearly \$200,000 to fund the installation of CCTV cameras in a hotspot area of Blacktown, the Patrick Street precinct between that Westpoint shopping centre and Blacktown railway station—that is gone too. I just find it incredible that this Prime Minister went to Western Sydney and spruiked what he termed the benefits of this budget, and crime prevention as being an essential element of it. Did something happen overnight to suddenly mean that Blacktown was no longer an area in need?

I would use COM4unity as an example of the positive things that can happen when the government and non-government sectors and members of the community and businesses get together to make a positive difference. This is a program supported by local businesses, the police, the council and, supposedly, the federal government. This program was making real inroads into turning young people's lives around. I will tell you this story to show why it drives me and my ethos in terms of policy initiatives in the multiculturalism space. After seeing some of the outcomes of COM4unity, I asked one of the young blokes who was involved in it a couple of years ago: 'How has this changed your life?' He had just finished a dance performance in front of a lot of people—one of the first times he had done that. I asked him, 'How has this program changed you?' And he said, 'Lady, if this was a year ago I would've been out the back stealing your car.' This is the kind of thing that turns young people's lives around. But it is not important enough, apparently, for this government to fund it. We can laud all of these crime-prevention grants that go to other areas, but Blacktown has been robbed of them—absolutely robbed.

I want to briefly turn to the area of communications. I especially want to talk about cuts to the SBS and also to the ABC. We know that, before the election, as I said, this Prime Minister said there would be: 'No cuts to education, no cuts to health, no change to pensions, no change to the GST and no cuts to the ABC or SBS.' In Senate estimates earlier in the year, the managing director of the SBS could not guarantee that Abbott government cuts to the SBS would not affect SBS language services. He said:

... I would find it very difficult to imagine being able to absorb any material cuts without a change in services.

The SBS provides vital services to migrant communities, and these cuts in the budget will hurt these communities. Many migrant communities rely on ethnic-specific news and important language services, many of which are only provided by the SBS. As well, \$33 million has been cut from multiculturalism in the budget. There is no detail given as to what programs will have their funding cut, what will be abolished completely and what programs, if any, will be safe and will continue to be funded. A lot of the multicultural programs funded by the government, and the many organisations that rely on these grants, are now bracing themselves because these cuts that we have already seen in this budget have created huge uncertainty in the multicultural services sector. They are already putting many critical programs and services at risk. Many organisations that rely on government funding work hard to build a cohesive Australia, often on very modest budgets, and the best way, as I said, that governments can help build harmonious and inclusive communities is by supporting initiatives like the Building Multicultural Communities Program, which unfortunately was axed by this government in December, or the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program. Cutting \$33 million from important programs like these will have adverse effects on communities around Australia.

The Settlement Grants Program is not mentioned as an individual line item in the budget, so the budget does not say how it will be affected, but it is a fact that people rely on this program and the people who rely on it have been left in the dark by this government. Their future is uncertain as they await detail on whether the Settlement Grants Program will continue or if it will be abolished or if it will be changed. This government has not to date answered any questions on the status of the Settlement Grants Program. If this program has been scrapped, then traditional migrant resource centres will struggle to fund services to support new migrants in their transition to life in Australia, and ethnic community organisations will have a very similar fate. Humanitarian settlement services are also without specific line item mention but, again, newly arrived migrants rely heavily on this program to assist them in adjusting to their new life in Australia.

Making all these cuts that I have mentioned is not an efficient way to run a government—it is not an efficient way to ensure social cohesion in our community and to cater for young people. This is not the budget that Western Sydney needs. Western Sydney, as one of the fastest growing areas in Australia, needs support. This government needs to recognise that the big cost of living issues that they spruiked before the election are being betrayed in this budget.