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Speaker King, Catherine, MP

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Ms KING (Ballarat) (15:20): Firstly, I congratulate all the new members of parliament who have been able to give their maiden speeches and some of the new members who are about to do that later this afternoon.

To the people of Ballarat, I particularly again want to say thank you for re-electing me as your representative and for placing your faith in me once again. It has been a privilege and an honour to serve the community over the past 12 years, and it is with much humility that I continue to represent the people of Ballarat in this House.

To my campaign staff and the countless hundreds of volunteers who fought the campaign for, in essence, three years but certainly over the last 12 months, who turned out in the early morning at train stations, who doorknocked in the hail and rain and sometimes snow, who gave up their time to stand on supermarket stalls and who handed out how-to-vote cards at prepoll centres and on election day, you have my eternal gratitude and my thanks.

It was a very hard fought campaign, but the effort of our Australian Labor Party supporters and volunteers was tremendous and often went well beyond the call. I also want to again thank my fantastic husband, Mark, whose support is always appreciated, and my lovely son, Ryan, for the work that they do for me as well. Ryan is still a little young to understand exactly what is happening in elections, but he was certainly much more aware of his mum's photo around the place this time than he was in the last election, when he was only two.

I joined the Labor Party because I believe firmly in the possibility of politics; not just the possibility of politics but what political office can do to improve the lives of people and the capacity of the country to grow and develop. I believe very firmly that every child should have the opportunity to have a good education—and that starts, literally, from birth; that their parents should have decent work and decent pay and decent conditions under which to work under; that the grandparents should be able to retire with a little more in the pockets; and that we can leave behind a fairer and more prosperous Australia for future generations. It is what I have strived to do representing the great people of Ballarat as their local member.

I am extremely proud of what we have achieved in government. I was honoured to serve first as Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing then as Minister for Road Safety, Minister for Regional Services, Local Communities and Territories, and, more latterly, Minister for Regional Australia, Local Government and Territories. Regional Australia is something I am very, very passionate about.

I am particularly proud of the investments that we have made in my own electorate of Ballarat. There have been investments in education of over \$115 million for classrooms, libraries and other facilities across our region. We have been able to see schools that had absolutely limited resources—no libraries, operating out of antiquated, draughty classrooms—being able to have state-of-the-art facilities. Seeing what that has meant and the lift that it has given for those schools and then for the educational outcomes of those students as well as the community use has been something that will leave a long and lasting legacy for this country.

There was funding for university infrastructure, including a science and engineering precinct, the Manufacturing Technology Training Centre at the University of Ballarat, as well as other investments. Investments in health infrastructure included the funding of the Ballarat Regional Integrated Cancer Centre, delivering the nation's first GP superclinic in Ballan, and funding for the Bacchus Marsh and Melton Regional Hospital. Funding in primary care included a new primary care facility for the Ballarat Community Health Centre at Lucas currently being constructed and an upgrade of Ballarat District Nursing and Healthcare—again, almost completed. There was the expansion of the Springs Medical Centre in Daylesford and the upgrading of the Creswick Medical Centre and the Elms Family Medical Centre in Bacchus Marsh—all really important projects in our community.

Our investment in infrastructure has extended to other regional projects, including the Clunes Museum—again, something that is just about to be opened; Doug Lindsay Recreational Reserve in Creswick; the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, which is providing a terrific platform for debate about democracy and education in democracy in this country; the funding of the Western Highway, Ballarat to Stawell duplication, and funding

for the Anthony's Cutting bypass; and delivering funding for new and improved halls, parks, streetscapes and playgrounds right the way across the electorate.

Yet, unfortunately, what we have seen in just the short time that the government has been in office is that much of this and much of the future economic development and growth and investment in infrastructure in Ballarat appears to be under threat by the new government. Last week marked some 50 days of the Abbott government's cuts to my electorate. From Bacchus Marsh to Creswick, from Trenton to Daylesford, critical projects and funding have been ripped away. These were projects that were budgeted for and announced in many instances prior to the government going into caretaker mode—contract negotiations being undertaken with the proponents literally now stopped in their tracks.

The new government has taken the axe to regional development funds that have poured critical money into infrastructure, including funding for an indoor swimming pool in Bacchus Marsh, a multipurpose centre in Victoria Park in Daylesford, funding to Hepburn Shire Council to improve Springhill Tylden Road, and key upgrades and redevelopment for sporting facilities across the Moorabool shire. These were not billion-dollar projects; they were projects of a small scale that benefited the entire community: a new swimming pool, a new playground and upgrades to a tennis court. They threatened nobody in terms of what the projects were going to do. They were not pork-barrelling; they were projects that were occurring in seats right across the country.

I am particularly disappointed that the funding going to the City of Ballarat for the all-abilities play space has also been cut. Libby's Play Space is an organisation that has been working with government, state and federal, and with local councils desperately trying to make sure we set up all-abilities play spaces across the country that provide examples for how you integrate and have a much more socially inclusive play space within communities. In particular, Libby's play spaces are spaces where you really cannot distinguish between the type of play that is available for children with disabilities and children who do not necessarily have those disabilities.

Libby's Play Space had been working with the City of Ballarat and with the local government area in New England. They had a commitment—in fact, much more than that; detailed designs and work done for the Regional Development Australia Fund round 5 that was going to all local councils—that both of those local councils would in fact be developing Libby's all-abilities play spaces.

That funding has now been cut and there are many devastated parents of children with disabilities in the community of Ballarat who feel absolutely that, after having such a long flight, having done all the work with council, having had the council commit that the money coming from the federal government would go to this play space, they are now absolutely being ignored. I am quite sure that members of the New England community who were expecting that they would have an all-abilities play space will also be in a very similar position. I think it is an incredibly important project and I certainly urge the government to reconsider. It is perfectly entitled to do whatever it wants to do when it comes into government, but I urge the government to really consider, particularly in an area of disabilities and all-abilities play spaces, whatever perhaps these two projects were something that should have been given a little bit more thought.

The other areas of cuts that we have unfortunately started to see impact on my electorate is the schoolkids bonus, which is going to affect about 9,500 families across Ballarat, meaning that families will miss out on \$410 a year for each child in primary school and \$820 a year for each child in secondary school. All of that money was spent to help families with textbooks, uniforms and school expenses. Again, I have had representations from local constituents—who may or may not have voted for Labor in the last election—who have been pretty shocked to discover that the schoolkids bonus is gone, literally overnight; parents who are on disability support pensions, who find it incredibly difficult to make ends meet. These are people for whom that extra money coming in at the start of the school year really made a difference between whether their family could budget throughout the course of the year or not. So again I urge the government to think very carefully about what it is doing and the impact it is having on families. It has incorrectly linked the scrapping of the schoolkids bonus to the minerals resource rent tax; it was never part of that. I find it extraordinary that the government would seek to try and politicise and hide its own cuts by combining it in that way.

The other issue that I am extremely concerned about is the scrapping of the low-income superannuation contribution, increasing a tax on the retirement investments of some 23,800 of the lowest paid workers in my electorate. We are not a wealthy community by any means; there are very few people who earn substantial amounts of money in my community. So when you do something like scrap the low-income superannuation

contribution you are adversely affecting those communities where incomes may not be as high as in some of our major metropolitan capitals; and, certainly, having a significant impact on regional communities like my own.

Not satisfied with their attack on critical infrastructure, parents and low-income workers, the government have also implemented a policy that further entrenches the digital divide between cities and the regions. The Prime Minister and the communications minister have pulled the plug on some 2,400 households and businesses in my electorate—for example, in Golden Point, Mount Pleasant, Canadian and Bakery Hill—preventing them from receiving fibre-to-the-home broadband services. Some 3,500 premises in Daylesford, Hepburn, Hepburn Springs, Musk, Clunes and Trentham, along with 1,200 premises in Ballan and Myrning will also now no longer receive fibre-to-the-home broadband services. That has been a devastating blow to that community; many small businesses have been established in those communities in anticipation of the National Broadband Network fibre-to-the-home. It is incredibly disappointing to think about what that is going to mean for those communities. These areas are now faced with the prospect of broadband operating on old copper cable or paying potentially up to \$5,000 to have fibre connected.

Right across my electorate, thousands of homes and businesses have been cut off by this digital divide. This was infrastructure that was especially important for Australia's regional communities. I am becoming increasingly concerned that one of the things that the government is doing in its attempt to slow down, to cut, to freeze, grants programs right the way across every portfolio area is stall the economy. In fact they are also stalling regional economies. It actually matters to regional economies whether they have \$100,000 coming in for a local sporting facility to be upgraded. That keeps builders, carpenters, electricians and other tradespeople employed in regional communities when those projects are being built. Invariably, in regional communities, it is locals who are employed in those projects.

When you scrap, literally overnight, millions of dollars of funding across regional communities, that has an impact. When you are not going to replace any regional funding until 2015—there is a hiatus of a year—those economies will invariably slow as a result of that lack of investment. All of the projects committed to, budgeted for, by Labor would have been starting had we been in office.

I again call on the government to think very carefully about the impact of the decision it has made to cut substantial funding out of regional communities. Many communities like my own are suffering because of what is happening in manufacturing. We need to be growing new jobs. We need to be making sure we continue to keep people employed in manufacturing. I will talk in a moment a little bit about the componentry in particular and what the government's cuts mean to that in my community. Other jobs are important as well; jobs in the services sector, for example. You cannot get people moving into areas if you do not have good services. You have to keep investments in health. You have to keep investments in education. You have to keep investments in community infrastructure.

Unfortunately we saw that experience in Victoria. When the current Liberal government came to power in Victoria, they literally were frozen for a year; they made no decisions for a year. Victoria has suffered on the jobs front as a result of that. I make a plea to this new government to get on with the job, to actually make investments, and to make sure you make investments in regional Australia. There is a whole list of projects that are there, ready, willing and waiting, that were ready for contracting and that this government really need to get on with.

The Prime Minister has said he will govern for all people, but all we are seeing, in regional Victoria in particular, is the stripping away of funding critical to the economic development of the area. For example, another important project in my community is the \$9.1 million of funding for the Ballarat intermodal freight hub, a critical component of the Ballarat West employment zone. This project is now in jeopardy because those opposite are threatening the economic empowerment and growth of the region. The project was announced in the May budget and was very much lobbied for and wanted by the city of Ballarat, the Committee for Ballarat and the local community. It is the linchpin for ensuring jobs growth in that new Ballarat West employment zone. Without it, those jobs will not happen.

What we have also seen from the government is the decision to cut millions and millions of dollars out of assistance for the car industry. There is an internal dispute happening within the Liberal Party about that at the moment. Unfortunately, it appears that the new Minister for Industry is going to have very little influence over what happens in that space.

Many people employed in my electorate are employed in car componentry—brake components, seatbelts, small components—that go into Toyota, Holden and Ford. We are absolutely devastated, and there is huge uncertainty in the manufacturing sector in my community about what the government's intentions are towards the car industry, and, therefore, what will happen in the future to all of those jobs. Significant investment has been made in making sure that that car componentry sector is as productive as possible. There are people who have worked in that industry for 20 or 30 years, very proudly increasing their exports, increasing their technology, increasing their skill base—yet they are potentially being left on the scrapheap by this government.

The decisions that the Prime Minister and cabinet are making are critical to the way in which our regional economies are operating and absolutely critical to making sure we have future jobs growth. I again urge them to think very cautiously about the impact that not supporting the car industry will have not just on those immediate direct jobs but on all those downstream jobs—on car componentry jobs and then on all of those services that help agencies and manufacturers in regional communities such as my own. There is a significant amount of those in places like Wendouree and Delacombe. The government has not thought through what those cuts are going to mean on the jobs growth in my region.

Finally, I want to just touch on my portfolio area of health as I head into the conclusion of this contribution. I am very privileged to have been appointed as shadow minister for health as part of the opposition team. I am absolutely determined to keep this government to account to ensure that the improvements and significant reforms through the health and hospitals reform process that were initiated by former Minister Roxon and continued by former Minister Plibersek are not undermined by this government. I am particularly concerned about hospital funding and what will happen in the future under this government to the agreements with states and territories. The initial signs unfortunately are incredibly concerning. The main focus of the minister, when he talks about his policy, is very much on shrinking health, on keeping it off the front pages of the newspaper and on talking about where cuts might be made or where savings might be made rather than talking about the huge possibilities and opportunities that are presented through government investment in health to actually improve the lives of Australians.

The government has given no indication that it will even honour its own election commitments, such as not closing any Medicare Locals, let alone given an indication of how it will fund the projected increase in the cost to the health budget as new treatments are recommended for listing on the pharmaceutical benefits scheme, as a new pharmacy agreement is negotiated, or what focus there will be on preventative health. We have seen what the conservatives did in Queensland and there is every indication so far that this government will follow exactly the same script in health.

I am concerned about the Grow Up Smiling dental program, which the government is now calling the child dental scheme, which is due to start on the first of January. It is an incredibly important scheme to reduce the incidence of dental caries amongst young people and to really set young people up for good oral health for their entire lives. I am also concerned about the government's intentions towards those who work in the health system. As a former parliamentary secretary for health, I have great respect for the Department of Health officials and for the regulators I had responsibility for. They play a critical role in protecting the rights of health consumers, making sure our medicines are safe, ensuring that consumers are protected when medical devices fail or food is unsafe, developing policies that will reduce the incidence of chronic disease and in responding to national and international health incidents such as a pandemic. So far, the government has only talked about how savings can be made in these areas, not about how important these responsibilities are or how preserving them will be a priority. I will certainly be keeping a very close eye on the government, not only on its cuts to the health services but also on its cuts to our very good public servants in health.