



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Australia Post

SPEECH

Monday, 18 November 2013

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Questioner
Speaker Broadbent, Russell, MP

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Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (18:33): Congratulations to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your high position. The member for Moreton is a survivor. He has battled it out in a marginal seat and he is in their caucus room now to keep fighting the fight on behalf of the goodies of this world.

Tonight I am speaking to every country person from Geraldton to Byron Bay and from Hobart to Cooktown on examples of the political class facing the possible alienation of our country constituencies. Australia Post is jeopardising the viability of rural communities by handing delivery contracts to city based supercontractors and other changes to their business model without concern or reference to rural communities.

In my electorate of McMillan jobs have already been lost. In Toora—a tiny, but vibrant community—the post office is staring down the barrel of extinction as Australia Post continues its search for the cheapest possible option for delivery services. In fact, while the cost of doing business has continued to go up, what Australia Post is offering mail contractors is steadily going down. How many other post offices like Toora's are out there? How many local post offices that support themselves with delivery contracts have been stripped of them and now face oblivion across regional Australia?

The result has been the intrusion of large megabusineses at the expense of smaller established rural ones. In other towns like Leongatha parcel and mail delivery contracts have also gone to big operators who do business at an amazingly cheap rate. One man who spoke to Leongatha's local paper, the *Star*, reported being paid \$8 an hour and being asked to use his own vehicle for part of his first and last day on the job. Despite the alarm bells this would raise in many quarters, Australia Post told the paper it was satisfied the contractor was honouring its commitment to customer service and the payment of award wages.

As in Leongatha, Toora's mail deliveries have been gifted to people with little or no experience. To keep the contract, post office licensees Greg and Maree Stewart were asked to work hundreds of hours more for thousands of dollars less. Similar stories abound in my electorate—and I suspect across the country—as a company that was once an iconic Aussie success story turns its back on the people and the regions of this great south land and the citizens of Australia who guaranteed its status. The Stewarts' mail delivery contract eventually went to a large Melbourne based contractor, Auslanka Express, who threatened a local reporter at the Leongatha *Star*—not to mention his editor and the paper itself—with a lawsuit if he exposed the company's link to a Sri Lankan based 'educational consultant', Aus-Lanka Education. Maree Stewart said she was also threatened with a lawsuit by Auslanka Express if she continued to mention them in the media. An online ad featuring the two Auslankas inviting overseas students to 'study in Australia', as well as offers of 'visa processing facilities', airport pickup, part-time work and guidance in becoming permanent residents was hastily removed. The same man was the listed contact for both Auslankas. The question must be asked whether Australia Post know that this is the way Auslanka conducts one of its contracts and conducts its PR with threats of bullying and rough-house confrontation.

In rural areas like McMillan, post offices are hubs for the community, more than just places where letters are sent and received. In Toora, a town that has a population in the hundreds, the loss of local jobs and the fear that the post office, which has served the area since colonial days, could close has sent seismic shocks through the community.

Australia Post's business model has become all about short-term profit over long-term sustainability. I know Australia is changing and I know Australia Post has to change with it, but never mind who gets hurt along the way. And the Stewarts are not the only post office licensees who believe they are at risk of going out of business. I recently met with eight Gippsland licensees who share the same concerns. As I speak they are preparing a petition which will implore this House to offer licensees transparency and security in the face of this onslaught on their futures. Dozens more licensees from across the country met with Senator Ron Boswell and Independent Senator Nick Xenophon in Adelaide with similar complaints. Toora's story, it seems, is one among many. As if the loss of people's livelihood is not enough, Australia Post is demanding that contractors—some of whom have

given decades of faithful service to the company and their communities—train the very people replacing them. They are asking them to pass on their expertise and knowledge of the local community.

I want Australia Post to prosper. I want this nation to prosper. But I want to do it have regard to people's feelings, having regard to the investment people have put into their businesses. If someone came to me and said, 'Here is the work you've been doing. We really like the work you've been doing for us. Your delivery service is fantastic, you tick every box. We have not got a complaint. Great. But we want you to take a five per cent cut or a 10 per cent cut or a 15 per cent cut because we can get a contractor to do it for that price. Or we will give you some pointers so that you have got more advantage in the contracting process. So you can put your price up a little bit and you can still get it.' Great. So one person put their price up and what do you reckon happened, Madam Deputy Speaker? They did not get the job. The reason: they were too dear. They were pipped at the post after the people who asked them to apply to renew their contract told them they were able to put their prices up a bit.

I do not pretend to have the answers but I know that there is no government in this country that has governed this country without the backing of rural Australia. You may laugh at that. You may think it is all about the outer suburbs of our major cities. But if you have a look at the last election and at all the governments—this is the 44th Parliament of this nation—not one has governed without the support of the regions, the country areas outside of Darwin, outside of Melbourne, outside of Sydney and outside of Brisbane. This is where people are probably facing some of the hardest—for example, in South Australia, where the car makers are now under pressure. These are the people who make this nation great.

I want Australia Post to do well but, in the process, I want all those small businesses to do well—people who sometimes have invested their superannuation and life savings in these businesses. The Australia Post changes are making it harder and harder. They are reinvesting. You probably think I am just talking about rural, small country towns. No. Some larger centres that run local post offices in their communities are under enormous pressure as well. It seems that we politicians think this is all right.

I am putting to the minister tonight that there needs to be consideration for regional Australia and these bigger towns where they operate. There should be a Senate inquiry into Australia Post and how it delivers its services. There should be a productivity inquiry into where Australia Post is headed. It is always going to be a difficult issue, but let us be honest with the Australian community. If Australia Post is going to end its relationship with regional Australia, if Australia Post is going to end its relationship with local post offices, if Australia Post is going to say, 'We are not going to be what we were in the past' why does it not come clean and tell the Australian people that?

I apologise to Minister Turnbull, the Minister for Communications, because I was not able to get to his briefing today and I may be right out of order. But I am not out of order when someone threatens or bullies my community, I am not out of order when people have done a great job over a long period of time and lose a contract for a measly few-hundred dollars, I am not out of order when I am defending country people and none of us are out of order when we are defending our constituents and bringing their message to this House. After all, that is our job.

I know it is hard to govern; I have been in government before. I have been in opposition. It is easy in opposition to have a go. But I would just put to you, the government will be predicated on how well it delivers the services to the Australian community and on this tyranny of distance that we face in support of our country communities. They are as important as anybody living in the city.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Griggs): The time for the grievance debate has expired. The debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 192B. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.