



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Hearing Health Services

SPEECH

Monday, 20 October 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Elliot, Justine, MP

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Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond) (11:11): I too rise today in support of this motion. I commend the member for Wakefield for moving this motion. It is a vital service that Australian Hearing provides and one of great importance to the people in my electorate of Richmond. This motion really does recognise the outstanding work of Australian Hearing—and note it has been delivering these services since 1947.

I too have many concerns about the Abbott government's Commission of Audit recommendation that Australian Hearing be privatised. If this were to happen, it would be another cruel cut by this government to a vitally essential service. Privatising Australian Hearing will continue the attack on those who are the most vulnerable in our community. The fact is Australian Hearing is a government organisation that has been changing the lives of people affected by hearing disorders for decades. And it has been doing that by providing accessible affordable hearing care services.

Australian Hearing has a very long and proud record of providing these services and in making a massive difference in the lives of so many. It is a record it should be very proud of in changing those lives. It is a record of helping children hear their parents voices for the first time and a record of people helping elderly people enjoy a better quality of life. I hear that firsthand from people in my electorate. There is a very large proportion of elderly Australians who live in my electorate and they tell me how important Australian Hearing and the services it provides are. Australian Hearing's record is also about helping young adults to fully participate in the community and improve their job prospects because they are able to hear clearly. These are really important issues.

Australian Hearing and the National Acoustics Laboratories play a significant and important role in providing world-class hearing services at a low cost to hundreds of thousands of Australians every year. And Australian Hearing has an internationally recognised reputation as a best practice government provider and research organisation. This record of achievement is now under threat because of the Liberal National parties' cruel budgetary cuts. But the fact is the government has absolutely no case for privatisation and has ignored the widely expressed concerns about risks to the quality and access of these services.

The Commission of Audit review has led to this government allocating funds for a scoping study to investigate privatisation. This misguided and short-sighted decision has already seen more than \$400,000 being spent on legal and business advisory services to privatise Australian Hearing. It really is an absolute disgrace that the government is spending this money to find a way to provide inferior services to Australians with hearing impairments.

The government must reject the Commission of Audit recommendations to privatise Australian Hearing outright and instead guarantee that Australian Hearing, including its research division and the national acoustics laboratory, is to be maintained or, in fact, improved so that people can still access those services. Because moving to privatisation puts at risk the high-quality low-cost hearing health services provided to more than 450,000 people every year. Australian Hearing has 468 service centres and visiting sites, and many of those are in regional areas. On the New South Wales North Coast Australian Hearing service centres are located at Ballina, Tweed Heads, Grafton and Lismore. They are absolutely critical in providing hearing services.

It is those services in regional areas that make such a huge difference. People in these areas, particularly in mine, just would not be able to afford to access a hearing service if Australian Hearing were privatised. In addition to these service centres, in my electorate and throughout the New South Wales North Coast they also have a network of 10 smaller visiting centres scattered across—so that further extends their coverage to those who need the service their local community and to those who often are not actually able to travel to a major service centre. That is the issue when you are in a regional and rural area; it is often very difficult to access services. When you look at their website and see where they do go in the New South Wales North Coast, it is quite extensive.

Australian Hearing provides an extensive array of services to young adults under 26 years of age, Indigenous Australians, former military personnel and elderly Australians with complex hearing needs. These are people who simply cannot afford the full commercial services for hearing tests, fitting hearing devices and some rehabilitation programs as well. Privatising the services will be devastating for all of those particular groups. If this does happen, it would just be another example of this government's cruel and unfair budget and also of their broken promises. We have seen it in so many areas, whether it is the aged pension, education, childcare assistance, the petrol tax or the proposed introduction of the \$7 doctor tax. These are cruel and very harsh cuts. The privatisation of Australian Hearing on top of this would just be another broken promise and it would be devastating for those with hearing impairments. I condemn this government's plans to privatise— (*Time expired*)