



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 Andrews, Karen, MP

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Mrs ANDREWS (McPherson) (11:16): I rise today to speak to the motion by the member for Wakefield. In doing so, I want to acknowledge the important work done by Australian Hearing throughout our nation and the crucial service provided to children, young adults, Indigenous Australians and seniors.

Hearing loss affects one in six Australians and the numbers are growing. Detection and treatment can enormously improve the quality of life of those who suffer from hearing loss. In 2005, it was estimated that hearing loss cost our economy \$11.75 billion dollars. This was mostly in lost productivity as people with a hearing impairment found it difficult to secure employment. You will get no argument from the government on the importance of hearing services and I will certainly not attempt to in any way diminish the value of the work being done by Australian Hearing. It is vital work. There are three Australian Hearing offices in my own electorate on the southern Gold Coast at Robina, Burleigh West and Palm Beach. I fully acknowledge the important work done at these offices and I thank the professionals who work for there for the assistance that they provide and the difference they make in the lives of those affected by hearing loss.

To the member for Wakefield, I say I can wholeheartedly agree to certain sections of this motion about the importance of the service that is delivered by Australian Hearing. What I do find disappointing is the scaremongering that he and so many members on the other side of the House are engaging in. I want to make the point very clearly that the government has not agreed to the privatisation of Australian Hearing. What we have funded is a scoping study to determine exactly how effectively services are being delivered and whether there may be other models that could improve service delivery. It would be foolish to reject outright the recommendation of the National Commission of Audit, which was the first large-scale audit in 20 years of Commonwealth government activity. It is important to remind ourselves in the context of this debate of the commission's terms of reference which include to:

ensure taxpayers are receiving value-for-money from each dollar spent;

eliminate wasteful spending;

identify areas of unnecessary duplication between the activities of the Commonwealth and other levels of government;

identify areas or programs where Commonwealth involvement is inappropriate, no longer needed, or blurs lines of accountability; and

improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness with which government services and policy advice are delivered.

Now I know that many members opposite have a very irrational, emotional response to the suggestion that some government services could be delivered more effectively and efficiently. But on this side of the House, we take very seriously our responsibility to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely and that we get the best possible community outcomes for our investment.

The idea that a large bureaucracy and more money will result in better outcomes for the community is, quite simply, nonsense, but it drove so many of the policy decisions of the previous Labor government. As a result, government spending grew at unsustainable levels but problems were not solved. The classic example was the massive \$17 billion wasted on school halls without literacy and numeracy levels improving at all. So it is a very poor intellectual argument when Labor members whip up a scare about particular services being cut and use emotive examples of people who have been helped to say, 'Look, these people would not have the help they need if there was any change in service delivery.' I can assure those listening to the debate that the government have no desire to cut services, and we are particularly mindful of the community service obligations we have to those who live in regional and remote areas. In fact, one of the objectives of the scoping study is to:

... maintain service and quality levels for customers including in regional and rural Australia;

So I say to the member for Wakefield: instead of whipping up a scare, let's wait to read the findings of the scoping study and let's rationally analyse the findings of the government's response. The assumption in this motion—that the privatisation of Australian Hearing will result in an interruption to service delivery and impact the quality of services and access to services—has no factual basis. Let's keep in mind that many health and community services are actually provided by the private sector, with the government investing in the provision of those services to those who need it most, and especially those in regional areas. I have no doubt that, should a sale be agreed by the government down the track, we would go to great lengths to ensure an appropriate funding model is created in order to continue the availability of high-quality hearing services for all eligible Australians.