



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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

Monday, 26 May 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 26 May 2014
Page 4293
Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (19:47): Cuts, cuts, cuts! That is all you see when you read through these appropriation bills. In fact, I tallied the number of cuts in these appropriation bills that we are debating tonight, Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2014-15 and cognate bills—126 government programs receive funding cuts from this government. It is a series of broken election commitments. The Prime Minister said a couple of days before the election that there would be, no cuts to health or education, no changes to pensions, no cuts to the ABC or SBS. Here we have it in the first budget of the Abbott government, completely breaking that promise that was made to the Australian public—a complete breach of faith and trust with the Australian community on one of the most important objects of government, the delivery of a budget. These bills absolutely decimate and destroy all those commitments, a complete breach of trust with the Australian people. More importantly, they make life tougher, harder for families, pensioners, single mums and students living in my community.

Labor will not vote against these bills. Unlike those opposite, we respect the conventions of the Australian Constitution, in particular, that oppositions should not block supply. It is not the fault of public servants throughout Australia, who have mortgages and families to feed, that this lousy budget is presented to the parliament. They should not suffer by an opposition blocking supply and refusing payments for the ordinary appropriations of government, most notably ensuring that public servants get paid. But we will point out the gross inequalities, the deficiencies and the unfairness of this budget when it comes to pensioners, families, students and single mums.

In education, \$60 million in federal grants will be cut by these appropriation bills, part of \$236 million worth of cuts overall—programs such as the Digital Education Revolution, providing laptops and computer access for kids in schools; and More Support for Students with Disabilities, a program that very importantly provides that much-needed in-classroom assistance for kids with disabilities. Two weeks ago, I met a young family in my community that had two kids with disabilities—two kids in primary school with disabilities. They were in a very small public school that has a 60 per cent Indigenous population. I just keep thinking to myself—and it keeps me up at night to think—what that poor family is going to have to go through because of this government's cuts to the education portfolio.

We all know, and we have all seen the studies, about how important early intervention is in ensuring that students with disabilities get the best start on an education and the best start at the ability to participate in society. To cut funding for a particular program, the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, which is a \$100 million cut, and not replace it with the Gonski loadings for kids with disabilities is almost criminal. It is an absolute disgrace.

David Gonski made a very important point in a very important speech last week criticising the government for the approach that they are taking in the funding of schools. The point that David Gonski made was that it is not just the level of funding in school education that is important. What is also very important is where the funding is going and what the funding is targeted towards. In Australia at the moment we are seeing students fall further and further behind in international comparisons. Why? It is not because of the students at the high end. Our very talented students in wealthy schools are doing very well. They are above, or at, international comparisons. It is our kids in low-socioeconomic areas, our kids from an Indigenous background, our kids with disabilities and, our kids from non-English speaking backgrounds who are the ones struggling in schools. They are the ones who the Gonski funding would specifically target. That is the point that David Gonski was making. It is not simply about the overall amount of the pie but it is about where the pie is allocated. This budget is a dud because it does not fund the Gonski reforms in the fifth and sixth years.

A \$38.4 million cut for an online diagnostic tool program, to help teachers assess the learning and assessment outcomes under NAPLAN, has been cut under these bills. It comes on top of the Schoolkids Bonus being cut, a vital support for families on family tax benefits to ensure that their kids can meet the costs of going to

school. These are unfair outcomes in education. They are unfair and will leave our kids, particularly some in my community, much worse off.

The Prime Minister made a commitment a couple days before the election that there would be no cuts to the ABC or SBS budgets. But that is exactly what we have seen in these appropriation bills—\$43.5 million cut from the ABC and from SBS and the abolition of the Australia Network, representing a \$196.8 million cut. People in my electorate are particularly angry about this cut to funding for the ABC and SBS, particularly because of the commitment that was given by the Prime Minister a couple of days before the election. Close to 9,000 constituents in my community have signed a petition opposing the cuts to the ABC and SBS because they believe in a well-funded, independent public broadcaster as the hallmark of a modern, healthy democracy. The ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott, has pointed out this week that, unfortunately, because of these funding cuts there will be redundancies and there will be closure of services. That will affect rural and regional communities. That will mean that the broadcasting services that are delivered to rural and regional Australia will be cut by this government's callous approach to communications.

In the arts budget, \$87.1 million has been cut from arts programs—in particular, funding for the Australia Council and Screen Australia. Some may not believe that arts funding is important, but I do. Arts is the carrier of Australian culture. Arts is the way we tell the story about who we are—about our history, our heritage, our place in the world and the sort of society we live in. To callously cut this particular element of the budget through these appropriation bills is not in our nation's interest.

In the environment, \$483 million is being cut from Landcare initiatives, putting the future of Landcare at risk. What will this mean for Landcare? What will it mean for people who have been employed under that wonderful program that has achieved so much in conservation for communities such as mine—particularly along the coastline—over many, many years? We do not know, because that funding cut has put the lives and welfare of many of those employees at risk.

These appropriation bills foreshadow \$7.6 billion in cuts over the forward estimates to Australia's overseas development aid commitment. I recently travelled around the Pacific with the foreign minister, Julie Bishop. She gave a clear commitment to the leaders of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Nauru: no cuts to the overseas development aid budget for our friends in the Pacific. Then MYEFO was released, and then the budget was released, and what do we find? That is exactly what has occurred under this government. They have cut funding for overseas development aid. That funds programs such as the Vanuatu Women's Centre that I visited with the foreign minister, which is providing important support for women living with domestic violence, important support for education and important support for immunisation and health outcomes in those communities.

We do not know where those cuts are going to come from. We do not know which particular programs are going to be cut. I call on the foreign minister and the Prime Minister to at least have the decency—at least have the gumption—to outline to our friends in the Pacific which of their programs that are importantly funded and supported by Australian aid are going to be cut. Are any of those programs going to be health programs? Are they going to be education programs? Are they going to be programs such as Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development? The leaders of those nations and our friends in the Pacific deserve to know.

This government has taken a disgraceful approach to international climate change initiatives. It is one of the key and most pressing issues facing the world economy, and what is Australia's view? We will pull out of all international climate change initiatives. What we are saying, particularly to the Asia-Pacific community, where we are a leading economy and a leading society, is that climate change does not matter; that climate change initiatives and clean energy initiatives do not matter. What sort of a message does that send to our friends in the Pacific and Asia about this nation's approach to climate change?

In the Pacific, climate change is not a looming threat; it is a present danger, and we are seeing already the effects on communities, particularly in low-lying states such as Kiribati, Vanuatu, Nauru and the Marshall Islands. We are seeing people being displaced because of climate change already, and what is Australia's approach? We have pulled out of those international initiatives. Recently, the foreign minister of the Marshall Islands, Tony deBrum, said this about Australia and its government:

Australia has always been our friend, but the change in their government last year has resulted in problems.

That is extraordinary. That is the view of the foreign minister of the Marshall Islands. In diplomacy, words such as those are very powerful.

That is the view that our friends in the Pacific have of the Australian nation—that we have let them down and ignored them when it comes to the crises they are facing relating to climate change. We are ignoring that their crops are drying up, their infrastructure is being inundated, they are not receiving any rain anymore in particular regions and, importantly, they cannot feed themselves. We are sending the wrong message, and it is enshrined in these bills that we are taking the wrong approach when it comes to overseas development aid. We will continue to hold the government to account for the disgraceful approach that they have taken on overseas development aid.

All of these measures have been put in the budget on the basis of a confected budget emergency. The government is out there campaigning and scaring the public into believing that there is a budget crisis in Australia. I pose this question to the government: how on earth does a nation achieve three AAA credit ratings from independent ratings agencies when you have a budget crisis? We are one of only 10 nations throughout the world that have a AAA credit rating and I do not see any of those other nine nations having newspaper headlines or discussions within their national parliaments about a budget crisis. There simply is not one in Australia, and for this government to go out and claim that there is, to add \$68 billion worth of expenditure to government programs and then claim that there is a budget emergency and have to cut to the bone on programs such as Medicare, health and education, and pensions, is an absolute disgrace. It is the wrong approach to be taking with the Australian public.

Labor have said that we understand the need to ensure that the budget is sustainable. When in government we took an approach that ensured that our budget was sustainable and met the Charter of Budget Honesty commitments to run surpluses over the medium to long term. We did that by ensuring that we had sufficient revenue coming into the budget, and that meant that there was a minerals resource rent tax, that meant there was a price on carbon, that meant that we means-tested the private health insurance rebate and that meant that we were proposing to tax people with whopping superannuation accounts of more than \$2 million earning more than \$100,000 a year. It also meant that we were not undertaking outrageous expenditure like an overrated paid parental leave scheme, like direct action, which has got no funding source at all in the provision of subsidies to polluting companies, and like some of the changes to veterans' pensions being introduced by this government. Labor had a plan for sustainability in our budget and it did not involve the cuts that are being undertaken in these appropriation bills. It is a disgrace that this government has put them forward in this budget.

Debate adjourned.