



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Former Member for Dobell

SPEECH

Tuesday, 25 February 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Tuesday, 25 February 2014
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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (16:46): I rise today to speak on a very serious issue. As the Leader of the Opposition has said more than once, for us in the Labor Party, Craig Thomson's actions are an unforgivable betrayal. They are contrary to every principle of Australia's trade union movement and everything it stands for, and they are contrary to everything the Australian Labor Party stands for. Of course, like any Australian, the former member for Dobell was entitled to the presumption of innocence. I was disappointed to hear the member for New England's contribution that suggested that any Australian should be prejudged. But, Craig Thomson has had his day in court and he has been found guilty. His actions were wrong and his use of parliamentary privilege was wrong too, and that is why the opposition have twice supported a reference of this matter to the Privileges Committee. It is up to this House now to apologise to the people who were wronged. It is absolutely right that people who are sent here by their constituents are held to the very highest standards. The people who elect us expect us to act with honesty and integrity at all times. If you do not, it is quite right that you suffer the consequences.

We should not forget that the former member for Dobell let down the people who placed their trust in him as their member of parliament, but we should also remember those from whom he has effectively stolen hundreds of thousands of dollars. They are the members of the Health Services Union—hospital cleaners, orderlies, aged-care staff, radiographers and admin and clerical staff. I have heard a number of members opposite talking about the difficult work that these workers do. As health minister, I met many of them and I admired them a great deal. They are the people who keep our hospitals running. They are the same people who are being attacked by state governments around the country slashing hospital budgets and sacking these very workers. These people, hardworking as they are, pay the wages of their union leaders. Union leaders are there to represent them, to win them a better deal in their workplaces. It is 100 per cent wrong that someone whose salary and benefits are paid by union dues would abuse the trust of the members of that union and his colleagues of that union. I believe that every union member and every union leader would feel the same way, and certainly we feel the same way on this side. As well as betraying his HSU members and his constituents, Craig Thomson has betrayed the union movement itself. His actions have provided an excuse for some to attack the union movement as a whole, to suggest that this behaviour is somehow common or acceptable or the norm. It is absolutely not and there is no-one who has been more betrayed by this behaviour than the union movement—the members of the HSU—and Craig Thomson's constituents.

The Labor movement has been so important to the history of workplace relations in Australia. Historically, it has won some of the features of our industrial relations system that I think everybody in this chamber would hold dear—the eight-hour day, sick leave, holiday pay, job security and decent and safe conditions to work in. I hope that all members of parliament would see these things as important and acknowledge the role of the union movement in winning these great battles over time. But you do not have to go so far back into history. You do not have to go back to the struggles of the Hungry Mile to know how important the union movement has been in Australia. More recently, the Australian Services Union has campaigned to win equal pay and fair pay for community service workers across the country, most of whom are women, many of whom are in that same low-pay bracket that members opposite have described for the Health Services Union workers. These are people who work in very difficult circumstances. They work in drug and alcohol rehab. They work with victims of domestic violence. They work with children who are victims of sexual abuse. They work in some of the most difficult and most underpaid jobs in this country. The Australian Services Union was able to win a much deserved pay increase for their workforce because of changes that the previous government made to allow work of equal value to be remunerated equally. The Australian Services Union campaigned with its members and encouraged its members to make submissions to pay cases, and to stand up and speak up on the value of the work that they do every day in our communities. That is a recent and most important win for a union, showing exactly the sort of campaign that unions around Australia are engaged in.

Another very important campaign right at the moment is a similar pay claim for childcare workers. Childcare workers do some of the most important work in our community. They are early educators. They are carers for our

children. Before the election, the minister at the table told those childcare workers that the government would support their claim for better pay and conditions. She has betrayed that commitment to childcare workers who do phenomenally important work for Australia's children.

Ms Ley: Have you read the submission?

Ms PLIBERSEK: Are you saying you do support the pay claim?

Mr Pyne: A point of order, Madam Speaker; this is a motion about the matters to do with the Health Services Union and the statement that Craig Thomson made to the parliament. I can understand that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has run out of material, given her silence on this matter over the last three or four years, but this has nothing whatsoever to do with the motion before the House. She should be asked to come back to the matter before us.

Mr Dreyfus interjecting—

The SPEAKER: The member for Isaacs will withdraw.

Mr Dreyfus: I withdraw.

Mr Burke: In his speech, the Leader of the House went a long way around and the concept of relevance to this motion was accepted to have a very broad brief. He was not interrupted once. The discretion the chair observed during that first speech should appropriately be observed for the remainder of the debate.

The SPEAKER: I have been tolerant in the breadth of material being covered, but the Leader of the House does have a point when asking that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition return to the substance of the motion in that it is a pretty far stretch to say that an application for a raise for childcare workers is relevant to the current debate. Please return to the subject of the motion.

Ms PLIBERSEK: As I have said very clearly and as the Leader of the Opposition has said very clearly on a number of occasions, we condemn Craig Thomson's actions, but without the union movement victims of asbestos would never have got the justice they deserve. They would have had high-paid lawyers sitting in courtrooms dragging out their cases. These are just a few examples in very recent times of the importance of the union movement.

When we offer our apology to the people Craig Thomson has wronged we say also that under this government 63,000 jobs have been lost since its election and pay and conditions are being attacked. No imputation should be attached to the union movement as a whole through the appalling behaviour of Craig Thomson. With those job losses has come a meticulous and deliberate attack on the pay and conditions of Australian workers. We will not allow the reputation of the whole union movement to be dragged through the mud by one person who has absolutely done the wrong thing. He has done the wrong thing by his members, done the wrong thing by his electorate, done the wrong thing by his colleagues here, done the wrong thing by his family and his community. He has clearly done the wrong thing, but he is not representative of the Labor Party, the labour movement, his constituents or our members.