



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Social Security Legislation Amendment (Stronger
Penalties for Serious Failures) Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 17 July 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 17 July 2014
Page 8336
Questioner
Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (12:44): Can I commend the member for Shortland for her contribution to this, because I believe in her comments she touched on some real issues that affect families when they are dealing with matters relating to the welfare system of this country. I endorse the comments of those speakers from this side of the House who have already spoken on this legislation. It is my view that this legislation is simply another example of a consistent theme that we see from members of the government, a theme which would have you attack those who are the most vulnerable in our community—the young people of the country, the elderly, the Indigenous people, the people with disabilities, the homeless and, in this case, the unemployed.

It is a theme that resonates not only in respect of this legislation but in what the government has done with respect to a whole range of other pieces of legislation, where we have seen health cuts, cuts to housing which affect the homeless, cuts to education and cuts to other social programs. It is always those people who are in the worst financial situation—the people on low incomes, the people who are already doing it hard—who are hit even more so. It is a theme that I believe is also consistent with the policies of this government, which are driven by those within the Abbott government who have an extreme right-wing ideology when it comes to implementing policies on behalf of the Abbott government. These measures are in addition to a whole range of other measures that are already making it difficult for people who are unemployed, on parenting payment, on special benefits and the like.

I note that not too many members from the government side were prepared to come into the chamber and speak in support of their legislation, but those that did did two things. They stuck to the scripted lines that were obviously given to them by their party office, by their minister's office. They also tried to paint this as a measure that was good for the unemployed because it was about mutual obligations, it was going to get them back into the workforce and it would assist them to get back into mainstream life within Australia.

There is nothing further from the truth than those remarks, because this is not necessarily good for the unemployed at all. It is essentially another measure aimed at trying to make it tougher for anyone who has not got a job to get any kind of welfare support from this government. We have already seen other changes making it tougher for them. We already know that, if you are under 25, you will be taken off Newstart and put onto youth allowance. You will have your benefit cut by \$48 a week. If you are under 25, the cost of living is no different than if you are just over 25, and yet you will be entitled to \$48 a week less.

I will come back to that, because the argument there is that you should be earning or learning and if you cannot get a job then you should perhaps go back to education. There are a number of young people in this country who have already had their education. They have the qualifications. They have done the studies they need to but they simply cannot get a job. Yet, because they are under 25, they are not even entitled to the Newstart allowance. But it goes further than that. It goes to the heart of one of the other policies of this government, to make education more expensive for young people, and I will come back to that if time permits.

The other serious change to the provision of unemployment support to people in this country is that anyone who is between 25 and 30 years of age will only get Newstart allowance after they have been unemployed for six months. Then, if they are entitled to it, after another six-month period it will be reviewed again and they will be taken off the benefits and allowances for another six-month period, after which they can then reapply to go back on it—in other words, six months on, six months off. So, even though they might be getting a little more than the youth allowance, the reality is that over a period of 12 months they are getting half the amount of the Newstart payment that they would otherwise be getting.

I do not know how anyone in this House can seriously suggest that someone can live off Newstart allowance for six months of the year and have it carry them through for the full 12 months. In terms of how they will manage to survive, it is bad enough for the six months when they are not getting anything. But, when you consider that you really only get a six-month payment for a 12-month period, the real question is: who on the government side has done the costings to work out how these people are meant to survive? I would challenge any member

of the government who is supporting this policy to come into the chamber and say that they could do it, because with today's cost of living I personally do not believe it is possible. It simply highlights just how cruel and how callous some of these policies are.

Government members have come to the chamber and tried to create an impression that the unemployed of Australia are unemployed because they want to be, that they are simply rorting the system and if they really wanted to they could go out there and get a job. I do not think anyone from either side of the House will deny that there might be some people who fit that category, but there would be very few by comparison to the broad number of people across this country.

I want to quote some statistics. Currently we have unemployment across Australia running at around six per cent, and youth unemployment sits at around 13.5 per cent. So youth unemployment—and this is the group that is going to be primarily the target of these laws—is already running at more than double the normal unemployment rate. In my own region, where I come from, the north-east and northern suburbs of Adelaide, unemployment is sitting at just over eight per cent and youth unemployment is almost 19 per cent. The actual figure is 18.9 per cent. So almost one in five young people are looking for a job. Across Australia right now, I understand that there are some 740,000 people who are looking for work, and around 280,000 of those—in other words, a third of them—are 15- to 24-year-olds.

The reality is that the jobs are simply not out there. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, for every vacant job in Australia there are five unemployed people. So even if they all tried to get that job, even if they were forced to do so because they had to get a job or be taken off their unemployment benefits, the jobs are simply not there. There are five unemployed to every job going. In South Australia the figures are even worse because there are seven unemployed for every job going. I understand in Tasmania—and I see my colleague Julie Collins, the member for Franklin, in the chamber right now—the figure is 22 per cent. I can recall a young person on *Q&A* being asked this very question and coming back with the response, 'I am educated. I am looking for a job. The jobs are simply not there.'

I will quote statistics on some of the examples that have occurred in only the last year or so about people trying to get work. I understand that there were 25 police officer positions available in Tasmania, and there were 800 applicants for those 25 positions. There were some 40 warehouse positions available in Davenport, and I understand that hundreds of people applied for those jobs. Acting Deputy Speaker Mitchell, in your own state of Queensland, there were about 70 positions going for an IGA store in Bli Bli and hundreds of people lined up to try and get that work. These are only some of the examples that I have heard of in recent months where people have genuinely and desperately been trying to get work, but the jobs are simply not there.

I also turn to a comment made by one of the coalition members—in fact, he is the Leader of the Government in the Senate—Senator Abetz. He said something to the effect of, 'These people can go out and pick fruit if they really want a job.'

Mr Hartsuyker: What is wrong with picking fruit?

Mr ZAPPIA: There is nothing wrong with picking fruit, if it is practical and possible for you to do so. The reality is that it not always is. The member for Shortland touched on this. There are often family circumstances where people cannot leave home or should not leave home because they are in some way contributing to the household from which they come. A good example of that is a young person living at home who partially cares for one or both of the parents in that home. The young person does not get paid for it but without that care that household could not continue. I have spoken to people who fit that very category.

I have another example and I say it to the member opposite who interjected: if you had a young daughter and you were living in South Australia and there was a fruit-picking job going in Western Australia or Queensland, would you suggest to her, 'Look, just leave home, get your backpack and go there to pick fruit.' I certainly would not ask my daughter to do that if she did not feel comfortable doing so, yet my daughter may well be one of these people who is genuinely looking for a job. It is not always possible or practical for these people to simply go and pick fruit or do those kinds of jobs. Quite frankly, that kind of heartless comment is based on nothing but ignorance and arrogance.

Mr Hartsuyker: You are just making excuses.

Mr ZAPPIA: I will take that interjection from the member opposite, who says that we are just making excuses. What I say to the member opposite, who I believe should know better, is that he should go and speak to some of these families and he should go and speak to some of these people who are genuinely wanting to get a job but who are not prepared to leave their family home for very good reasons. Quite frankly, I believe he is totally out of touch with some of the communities that I have gone through when he says that young people, and in particular vulnerable young people, should simply leave home if that is what they need to do to get a job. The better answer is to try and help those people to get a job within their own homes by providing additional kinds of support and job opportunities in the industries that there are there.

We know that, as a result of these kinds of policies, the people who are going to be hit the hardest are those who already have some kind of problem within their lives, whether it is a mental health issue, whether it is homelessness or whether they are Indigenous people living out in rural and outback Australia. These are the people who are most likely going to be in a situation where they find themselves having breached their Centrelink requirements. These are the people who are most likely going to be hit the hardest.

I note that over 13,000 notices were issued last year to these very people who had known vulnerabilities. My concern is that it is these people who are going to be hit the hardest under this legislation. If you are homeless or have a mental health problem, it is not always possible or practical for you to respond to the obligations that are put upon you by Centrelink. If you are homeless, you may not have access to an IT system to be able to respond and get your forms back. You may not have even received the very notices from Centrelink that will be sent to you because you do not live in any particular location. All of this makes it very, very difficult for someone who does not live in and does not fit into what I call normal society. It is all well and good for those who do; but, for those who do not, it makes it very, very difficult. Certainly, it can be very, very difficult to always get rational thinking from someone with mental health problems such that they comply with the responsibilities that are put upon them.

I want to quickly talk about one more matter in the time that I have—and that is that this all comes down to people having to go to Centrelink and comply with all of the requirements. In recent weeks, I have had numerous people contact my office about the difficulty they are having contacting Centrelink. They have been asked to telephone Centrelink and, when they do, it rings out or they get no answer at the other end. If they do manage to get through, they are kept on hold for hours on end. I have been told by some that it is for hours on end. How can they comply when, on the other hand, the government, I suspect, is cutting staffing levels in Centrelink and making it almost impossible for people to get through to them? That is the clear message that is coming back to my office—that people are finding it almost impossible to get through to Centrelink.

If they go to Centrelink, as the member for Bowman suggested earlier on, they are told, 'We will not deal with you at the front counter. There is a telephone over there. Here is a telephone number: ring it.' When they ring it, they are kept waiting for hours—if they can get through. We are asking them to comply but then making the office that they have to comply with impossible to get through to. This legislation, as I said from the outset, hurts the most vulnerable in the community and is another example of this government attacking those who can least afford to be attacked by the government.