



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

BILLS

**Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2011-2012,
Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2011-2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 14 February 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Page 1306
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Speaker King, Catherine, MP

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Ms KING (Ballarat—Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Transport and Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing) (20:56): I rise to support the appropriation bills that are before the Main Committee. These bills reflect the government's commitment to delivering on responsible budgets that strengthen our economy. We are focused on bringing the budget back into surplus in 2012-13, in contrast with the opposition's \$70 billion black hole. The break in the parliamentary sitting calendar over the last few months has been a great opportunity for me to spend time at home with families throughout my own electorate, and there have been some constant messages as I have spent time with them. Local families want a government that will, first and foremost, support the Australian economy and support jobs. They want a government that understands the cost-of-living pressures faced by families across the economy. Families want a government that invests in health, education and infrastructure for all Australians, not just those who live in wealthy electorates.

When it comes to the Australian economy, supporting jobs, addressing cost-of-living pressures and investing in health, education and our nation's infrastructure, the government is delivering. It is important to remember where we were four years ago and the challenge former Prime Minister John Howard left us. In terms of jobs, who could forget the legacy of Work Choices, the Liberal Party's policy that left over four million Australians without basic protection in the workplace? That is a policy we know members opposite are working to reintroduce at the next election.

Ms O'Dwyer interjecting—

Ms KING: I note that the contribution of the member for Higgins during the course of this debate was very much focused on, again, engendering fear in the community about an issue that has not even been decided on or released. I would say to the member for Higgins, as she is a relatively new member in this place, that interjections do not actually make up for substance and good policy development.

In terms of jobs, who could forget the legacy of Work Choices? The Liberal Party's policy did leave over four million Australian workers without basic protection in the workplace. While those opposite continue to support Work Choices, the government continues to stand up for working Australians and their entitlements in the workplace. Our focus has always been on supporting jobs. One of the first things we did was to abolish Work Choices and its anti-worker provisions. Members on this side have been firmly focused on jobs. Our response to the global financial crisis was all about keeping people in work, and our upcoming budget will once again will be focused on supporting our nation's economy and employment for Australian families.

Since Labor came to office, around 700,000 more Australians are in work. A Liberal-National government on the other hand, who opposed our global financial crisis stimulus package which created 200,000 jobs, would not have seen that number of jobs created. Members opposite voted against supporting jobs during the global financial crisis. Only last year, the Prime Minister visited my electorate to turn the first sod at the new Manufacturing Technology Training Centre in Ballarat. In my own electorate that is a very important initiative. We have provided over \$18 million through our Education Investment Fund to support the future of Ballarat's economy and its economy in manufacturing. This centre will accommodate around 100 more apprentices in manufacturing, which is very important for the skills development of our local economy. It is good for industry, it is good for jobs and it will be good for the Ballarat economy. Our record on jobs and our record on the economy continue to be the envy of the Western world. In Australia our unemployment rate is 5.3 per cent, comparable with 8.5 per cent in the US and 8.3 per cent in the UK. Our interest rates are 2.5 points lower than when the Liberals lost office—4.25 per cent now compared with 6.75 per cent in November 2007. But we understand that, although our economic record is the envy of the world, there is still a lot more to be done. One thing that distinguishes members on this side from those opposite is our support for hardworking and struggling families to assist with the cost of living and to support their quality of life. In July this year, low-income earners will benefit from an increase in the tax-free threshold from \$6,000 to \$18,200. This means less tax will be paid by those on low

incomes and for over one million Australians there will be no need to lodge a tax return. Our income tax cuts mean that a person earning \$50,000 a year now pays \$1,750 less in tax than they did in 2007.

We have assisted parents by increasing the childcare rebate to 50 per cent, providing families up to \$7,500 per child per year. It has now been over one year since Australian families began taking advantage of our nation's first Paid Parental Leave program—over 125,000 Australians so far. This is giving parents the opportunity to spend those important early months of their baby's life together.

Two years ago it was a Labor government that delivered the most significant reforms to the age pension in its 100-year history. Our reforms have delivered increases to the maximum pension of around \$148 per fortnight for singles and \$146 per fortnight for couples combined. The Labor government will deliver pensioners a net increase in their pension over and above any impact on the carbon price, whereas under the Liberals 3.4 million pensioners will lose about \$338 per year for singles and \$510 per year for couples combined. We have also helped by expanding the education tax refund to include school uniforms from 1 July 2011. I know a 50 per cent refund on education expenses goes a long way for parents in my electorate. Over \$5 million was paid out to over 8,780 families in my electorate as part of the education tax refund in the 2009-10 financial year alone. That was \$5 million back into the pockets of Ballarat families.

For working families faced with cost-of-living pressures, we are delivering tax cuts, education tax refunds, childcare rebates, paid parental leave and increases in the pension. Also, through our appropriations we have focused on addressing the Howard government's lack of investment in education. Many schools across my electorate never thought they would have the opportunity to upgrade their old buildings that were in desperate need of investment. Students were learning in 19th century classrooms and facilities in the 21st century. One of the key elements of our economic stimulus plan was the \$16.2 billion investment in Building the Education Revolution. This has funded some 24,000 infrastructure projects in 9½ thousand schools across the country. Across my own electorate, 85 schools have benefited from almost \$116 million—168 projects in total. I have been out and seen the majority of the completed BER projects, and many of the school principals, staff and school councils I have spoken with have said these new facilities would never have been built without the Gillard government. Students now have access to 21st century learning spaces. We have invested in schools and transformed them. These are learning spaces that were built during the global financial crisis and supported local jobs and these projects have transformed regional and rural schools in particular.

Let me be clear: under an Abbott-led government, these schools would not have seen a cent. There would have been no new buildings in schools and no local jobs supported—nothing. Our commitment to education does not end with Building the Education Revolution. Under our Digital Education Revolution, every Australian student in years 9 to 12 now will have access to a computer, with over 750,000 computers being delivered under the program. We are continuing our hard work to transition Australian schools to be the best that they can. We have improved transparency in our schooling system with the introduction of My School. We are implementing the first ever national curriculum. It is under our government that schools have received record investment—over \$64.9 billion over four years, almost double the investment that schools received from those opposite.

The Gillard government support for education continues through to higher education. At the University of Ballarat, we have not only funded the manufacturing technology centre but we have also funded many other projects: the science and engineering precinct, the equestrian centre at Mount Rowan, the primary industries training facility, and a new childcare centre that we are soon to open at the SMB TAFE campus.

Ballarat and regional students will be able to access independent youth allowance in the same way as students from outer regional remote and very remote areas under our new legislation. That means that more students in my electorate have access to youth allowance. This is especially important for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In addition to giving more regional students access to youth allowance, the Gillard government has removed the restrictions on the number of places available at universities. That means that more students have access to universities than ever before. We saw university offers up by more than four per cent at the beginning of 2012 and an additional 100,000 students are now attending university compared with 2007.

In health, for over a decade under the Howard government families across Australia experienced a lack of investment. Sixty per cent of Australians lived in areas with doctor shortages. Those opposite failed to end the blame game between states and territories and the Commonwealth, they ripped funding out of hospitals and they

failed to address those 88,000 Australians waiting far too long for elective surgery. The Gillard government has started to turn this around. We are investing to support the Australian people by building a better health system. The Gillard government is investing heavily in our health system through the Health and Hospitals Fund and we are seeing record investment in my own electorate in vital infrastructure projects, such as the Ballarat Regional Integrated Cancer Centre, the Ballarat Dental Clinic and the Ballarat Central Primary Care Facility—not to mention a number of GP practices and the GP superclinic in Ballan, which has been a very important facility.

Under this government we have seen Australia's largest ever mental health package. We have appointed our country's first ever mental health minister. And we are investing \$2.2 billion over five years to ensure that mental health is a key health priority. Under our mental health package we are seeing real examples across Australia through the establishment of headspace centres. Back in October last year I had the pleasure of announcing that my electorate was successful in its campaign to have the Ballarat region listed as a location for a new headspace centre. The government has also been building the GP superclinics, one of which, as I mentioned, is in the Ballan. The Ballan GP Superclinic has been up and running for some time now and have really transformed health services in that small rural community.

Members on this side of the House have shown their strong support for private health insurance, and we are supporting a private health insurance rebate that is fairer. Why should low- and middle-income families subsidise health insurance for those households earning over a quarter of a million dollars a year? With our reforms we are bringing fairness back into our health system.

Mr Haase interjecting—

Ms KING: I do not think you get it, actually. I do not think you actually get it at all. Certainly, in terms of the private health insurance rebate, we are making it fairer. We are making sure that low- and middle-income families are not subsidising the health insurance of people like myself whose combined family income is over \$250,000.

Mr Haase interjecting—

Ms KING: I actually do have private health insurance; thank you very much. But, anyway, we will leave that interjection aside. I am quite happy to lose my rebate. Why should I get a rebate when someone in my electorate earning \$50,000 is subsidising me? Why should I get a rebate? I should not. This is all about entrenching privilege again. In the area of private health insurance we are making it fairer. Our reforms are bringing fairness back into our health insurance rebate scheme. And that money is important. It is important to spend on other health priorities, like dental. I would much rather that money go into assisting low-income people who have chronic dental conditions and are in desperate, desperate need. You only have to look at the dental issues for some of the people in my electorate—which is an area where we have not had fluoride in the water for a long, long time—and what that actually means in terms of their health outcomes. It is a significant issue.

One of the other significant investments that the Gillard Labor government is making across this country is our investment in the National Broadband Network. On Monday I spoke in this House of the great benefits that the NBN will deliver to businesses and families across the Ballarat electorate. Our current telecommunications network has served us well for the past 100 years. But that is exactly what it is—it is 100 years old—and it is going to strangle our economy if we do not change it. If we do not invest in this infrastructure today, it will cause us significant economic problems into the future.

Ballarat Central and Bacchus Marsh residents are awaiting the early rollout of fibre to their homes, which is starting to occur in Bacchus Marsh, and business owners well know the benefits of fast broadband access in today's digital economy and are keen to be part of this new network. The NBN is yet another measure the government is taking to set up our economy for our future. While those opposite have outlined over 20 failed broadband plans, the Gillard government has got on with the job of building this nation's largest single infrastructure project. While we support farmers, business, families and our education and health systems by providing access to the NBN for all Australians, the Liberals would cancel the NBN and cost Australian jobs. Unlike the attempt to create a patchwork solution to our slow broadband speeds that the opposition had in terms of their OPAL solution, which in essence would have, as the member at the table said, almost result in regional and rural people having to be communicate by carrier pigeon, the NBN will have a significant impact, particularly for regional and rural Australians.

There are a number of other things I want to mention in this debate. One of the things I am most proud of is our contribution to the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Mr Haase: Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask to make an intervention, for the opportunity to ask a question of the speaker.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott): Will the member take a question?

Ms KING: No, I have little time left.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Durack will resume his seat. The member for Ballarat.

Ms KING: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I always find it amazing that those members opposite do not want to hear about any of the achievements. What they want to do is spread fear in the community. They want to tell mistruths about what the government is actually doing. The National Disability Insurance Scheme will be a significant initiative of this government and will leave a very important legacy for those people who have been struggling with disability services for such a long time.

I am very proud of the achievements of this government since 2007: abolishing Work Choices, paid parental leave, the National Broadband Network, the clean energy package, the National Disability Insurance Scheme—very important initiatives. *(Time expired)*