



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, 2 June 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP

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Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (18:16): I rise to speak on the appropriation bills and to make some commentary on the budget that was handed down by the Treasurer a couple of weeks ago. This budget really is disastrous for our nation and for every Australian. It is a budget that has been built on a web of broken promises and twisted priorities and it is a budget that has the wrong priorities, priorities that are focused on making cuts to low- and middle-income earners, and that has not a word about jobs.

During the election campaign Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey promised that there would be no cuts to education, health, pensions, the ABC or SBS. They also made a commitment that there would be no tax increases, that taxes would go down not up. But this month's budget has brought reality back to home. There are broken promises, mean cuts, new taxes and extra costs to low-to-middle-income families. If it was not enough for the Prime Minister to promise that there would be no cuts to health and then bring a \$50 billion cut to health and hospitals to the states and territories, he has also ensured that every single household has more health costs to find from their pocket by putting a \$7 tax on going to the doctor.

This is the greatest attack on Medicare since its inception. It is an attack on universal health care, which has been so critical for our nation. This scheme really makes it more expensive for people to go to the doctor, to get a prescription, to have an X-ray and to get a blood test. The scheme will have the greatest impact on those lower income earners, the seriously ill, those with chronic disease and our senior Australians. This will cost families \$3.5 billion a year. In my constituency of Kingston in South Australia the GP tax equates to approximately \$7 million.

I have been speaking to people at railway stations and at street-corner meetings, and in my electorate office, as well as when I have been out and about, and have been inundated with hundreds of people concerned about the impact of this GP tax. They are concerned particularly about what it means. They are saying to me that this government just does not get it. It does not get what is to work hard for a living, to have a small income coming in and not be able to access universal health care. One of these people is Paula Tonkin from Seaford, who is among 87 per cent of people in Kingston who get bulk-billed. She wrote to me and said:

My husband and I are a single income family, we get nothing from the government in the way that benefits us and work hard to keep things that way. My husband has a life threatening illness, he frequently visits the local GP. Demanding that GPs charge \$7 rather than bulk bill patients like us is only cruel, it is short-sighted and inhumane. We pay our taxes and are law-abiding citizens. It's about time we got a break

Paula is right. This GP tax is a cruel, short-sighted policy, and I am proud that Labor will oppose it.

The co-payments create a disincentive for our most vulnerable Australians to get the health care they need. Last week we saw the Australian Medical Association report that its members are already seeing patients not presenting to a GP because they mistakenly believe the GP tax is already in place. This is just the start of the Prime Minister's assault on universal health care. This country does not need a US-style health system that can be accessed only by the wealthy.

The Prime Minister has also broken a promise, as I have mentioned, by ripping \$50 billion away from Australia's public hospitals. In South Australia it is estimated that this will result in a \$655 million cut in health funding over the next four years. These cuts are the equivalent of the entire Flinders Medical Centre that services my electorate. That is nearly 600 hospital beds and equates to 500 nurses. The Abbott government's own budget papers clearly demonstrate that the cuts to hospitals start this financial year and totally ignore an agreement that state and territory governments signed up to. It is not just in Labor states that the premiers are incredibly concerned and upset about this; it is in Liberal states as well.

The Prime Minister promised before the election that no Medicare Locals would be shut. But, in another broken promise, he is axing the Medicare Locals and replacing them with primary care health networks on 1 July.

However, the cuts have already started, with money being moved away from Medicare Locals if it is not for direct services to the public. Indeed, support, assistance and advice for GPs in running their practices have been ripped away. This is a short-sighted decision and does not recognise the localised nature of these Medicare Locals.

I was recently joined by the deputy leader of the Labor Party, the member for Sydney, to hear firsthand the concerns of the Southern Adelaide-Fleurieu-Kangaroo Island Medicare Local. That is the Medicare Local that looks after my electorate. This Medicare Local was one of the first set up and it has made a huge difference to people's health in Kingston. For example, its childhood immunisation program has boosted rates from 88 per cent to above 91 per cent. We spoke to the senior team there, who expressed deep concerns about the impact of abolishing the Medicare Locals and particularly the impact it will have on front-line services. But it is not only that. They are concerned that it will have an impact on the coordination of health care. One of the critical elements of these Medicare Locals was that they would respond to gaps in health service provision for local needs. I know that the Medicare Local in my electorate has been doing that in nursing homes. Nursing homes were unable to attract GPs and doctors. It has been working hard to fill those gaps. So cutting these Medicare Locals is a real step back in time.

I understand that the Minister for Health did not like them because they were a Labor idea. I ask him to put his partisanship aside, actually look at what these Medicare Locals are doing and, for one of the first times, put patients first. I ask him to put people and the health of our community first.

This budget is also incredibly cruel on those who need our support the most. There is the freezing of the rate of family tax benefit to many. This will have an impact on many low- and middle-income families that will have to foot the bill for the Prime Minister's broken election promises. Then there is the cut to pensioners. The Prime Minister made a solemn promise before the election. He said he would make no cuts to the age pension. He is trying to convince us that slashing and lowering the indexation is not a cut to the age pension. Well, he has a big job trying to convince pensioners of that, because pensioners can tell a trick and spin when they see it. They have said clearly to me that these indexation arrangements and the changes will hurt them over a period of time and will erode their standard of living.

There are also deep concerns in my electorate about the Prime Minister and the Treasurer's plan to ensure that you cannot get a pension until you are 70 years of age. What people have said to me is there seems to be a lack of understanding—there is a huge amount of age discrimination out there in our community. I have many people under the age of 60 who are saying they are trying to find work, but no-one will employ them. They cannot find jobs, because of age discrimination. Without a plan for jobs, this government has condemned these people to a period of unemployment, and this will only get more difficult. Without a strategy to address jobs and age discrimination, their policy is making it more difficult for pensioners.

The Prime Minister is also ripping away Commonwealth support for state and territory based seniors' concessions, leaving the future of these concessional programs in limbo. It does not stop there. The promise of no new taxes quickly changed, with the broken promise of ensuring there is a new fuel tax and an increase in excise indexation. Once again, no-one would have expected the Prime Minister to agree to it in this budget but, of course, it is another broken promise. This will impact my constituents in a more disproportionate way than in many other electorates. Many constituents in my electorate travel a long way to work—in fact, 40 or 50 kilometres. They spend a lot of time in the car going off to work. As a result of this and of the Prime Minister's pledge of no investment in public transport—he does not think public transport is very useful at all—it will cost even more for those in my electorate to get in a car.

We also have the Prime Minister's broken promise of ripping \$30 billion from our schools. The cost of getting a decent education will be put out of the reach of many ordinary Australians, especially through the deregulation of tuition fees. We will see the cost of university courses rise and an increasing amount of student debt. It was interesting to hear the Minister for Education being contradicted by the Prime Minister in question time today. We heard the truth today in question time. The changes in interest rates that go onto student debt will occur to anyone who has a HECS debt. So even if you entered the system before these arrangements were put in place, you will have a new interest rate put onto your HECS debt. There is a lot of concern in my local electorate.

Funnily enough, I took the Minister for Education at his word. When I was out in my local community, people were coming up to me with this concern. I said, 'No, the Minister for Education said it will not apply to new people.' I was then informed about a letter, from a constituent, that contradicted that. She said her son had received

this letter and that, indeed, he would have to pay the higher interest rate, and there was huge concern about what that would mean. So it is good we have the truth now from the Prime Minister that it is not just those students who go in with their eyes wide open, it is indeed many students who are finding difficulty.

There is so much that is difficult about this budget and it hurts my electorate so much, but in the limited time I have left I would like to talk about Youth Connection, which was axed. Indeed, when we talk about youth unemployment, what seems to be missing from this government is support to ensure that young people can get the experience, that they can get the support, to find a job. Youth Connections was doing just this.

Dannika Harrop, a 17-year-old from Aberfoyle Park, credits Youth Connections for turning her life around. Before Youth Connections stepped in, Dannika would regularly skip school and faced the prospect of dropping out of school in year 9. Thanks to the help of Youth Connections she has returned to school, has finished year 12 and is now volunteering at the local youth centre. This is the work that Youth Connections was doing. Of course, that has been cut.

There are also many other organisations that are still in limbo after this budget. Many organisations whose funding is expiring on 30 June were hoping that the budget would give some clarity. It has not. Indeed, the carers support and respite centre was funded by a number of programs in the budget. It supports around 7,000 carers and their families in the south and east metropolitan areas. It is still not sure whether it will be funded. Also the Hackham West Community Centre is still not sure whether it will be receiving funding. All these expire on 30 June. These organisations need some certainty. They thought the budget would give them clarity. Of course it has not.

This is a cruel budget. It is a budget that illustrates that the government is not in touch with the ordinary people on the street. These measures are incredibly disappointing. I hope the government sees sense on many of these measures and will ditch a lot of them that hurt ordinary Australians.