



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2013-2014,
Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2013-2014,
Appropriation (Parliamentary
Departments) Bill (No. 2) 2013-2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 5 March 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Hayes, Chris, MP

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Mr HAYES (Fowler—Chief Opposition Whip) (10:23): I too rise to speak on Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2013-2014 and Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2013-2014. In doing so, I note that one of the main items that the government is seeking to achieve through these appropriations bills includes the funding of an \$8.8 billion injection into the Reserve Bank. This government has said on many occasions—at least while it was in opposition and in the run-up to the last election—that, if debt is the problem, more debt is certainly not the answer. I am wondering: how do you justify an \$8.8 billion grant to the Reserve Bank from the Commonwealth from a government that finds itself in a \$17.7 billion deficit and a \$54.6 billion deficit in the government's forward estimates?

I know we went through the charade a little earlier this year about doubling the capping on the government's debt. As you will recall, Mr Deputy Speaker Mitchell, the government brought a proposition to this House that it wanted an unlimited debt ceiling. It was not until it did a deal with the Greens that a debt ceiling of \$500 billion was implemented. Before an election, the rhetoric about debt is wonderful. When you put it in terms of what this government is doing now, it is hypocritical in the extreme.

This grant under the appropriations bill is to ensure that the Reserve Bank is adequately resourced to conduct its operations. I would not normally be troubled by that if the bill did not also seek to cut millions of dollars out of the Health and Education portfolios. These cuts clearly demonstrate where the priorities of this government lie. Ensuring that our children have the best start in life, the best opportunity to secure their future, and improving the health system are clearly not the priorities of this government. The cuts that are being made clearly indicate that the government is backflipping on a number of key electoral promises that were made. That can be no clearer than in what it is putting forward now in cuts to health and education.

I will just concentrate a little on education. We heard before the election campaign, with a lot of hype, about the issue of education. Certainly the opposition, as they then were, were reeling not only from Labor's education revolution but from its plan to improve school funding. You will recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that they used the words: 'When it comes to education, we are on a unity ticket.' They tried to indicate that there was not a hair's breadth between what the then Labor government were doing in respect of the school-funding initiative, the education revolution, and what they purported to do if they were given the opportunity to form government.

But I ask you to reflect upon what has occurred. If they truly had been on a unity ticket with Labor, they certainly would not have abandoned the school improvement initiative. This is scrapping a historic funding agreement with the states. This was the first time where the federal government not only increased exponentially the investment in education but also sought to achieve co-funding agreements with the states and ensure that they would also maintain their levels of funding as required under the agreement.

What has occurred now is that the states have been formally released from their co-funding responsibilities, so they are now free to go out and, if they so choose, cut their funding to schools. I put it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, by announcing recently that the growth in education spending is unsustainable, the Abbott government has now signalled that there will be further cuts to school funding. And, by the way, what that is going to achieve is not so much the bottom line of budget here; it is going to compromise the prospects for the future of our young people.

Local families have already been disadvantaged because of the decision to cut the schoolkids bonus, to cut the payment of \$410 for primary school students and \$820 per year for high school students. It certainly has directly impacted on some of the most vulnerable families in our community. It certainly impacts on their ability to provide for their kids at least the basic necessities for a successful education. The provision of stationery, books and other essentials which are so important at the beginning of a school term was taken away. This is very much directed to the most vulnerable families in our community.

As you are aware, my electorate—which I am particularly proud to say is the most multicultural electorate in the whole of Australia—is, regrettably, the second most disadvantaged electorate on socioeconomic rankings. That means that it is an area of disadvantage, and I know full well that almost 14,000 families were directly affected by this one change. These are families who are in great need and who require assistance, and it is their children who are being punished through this measure.

One of the other significant things about my electorate is that it has a disproportionately high number of people who live with various disabilities. Within a 20-kilometre radius of the Liverpool CBD are 52 per cent of all the families in New South Wales who live with autism. Obviously, what comes with disability is financial disadvantage. This is another thing that has heavily impacted upon my community. The state government have been allowed to withdraw funding. We have seen this played out in a very practical way in New South Wales at the moment when it comes to kids with disabilities. The New South Wales Liberal government have now slashed \$1.7 billion from education funding. They have been allowed to make these changes to the funding agreement and that has impacted across the board. It not only impacts government, private, Catholic and independent schools; it impacts the kids with disabilities. It is the ones who have special needs who have been impacted the most.

Some of these kids have been forced from special needs classes into mainstream education. I know it is always the ambition for any parent to ensure that their child will be in mainstream education, but it is not always in the best interests of the child. Because of these cuts, we are seeing those special classes abandoned. We are seeing young people, many on the autism spectrum with special needs and requiring special attention, now being forced into mainstream classes. It is not the system that is suffering; it is the kids who are now suffering. I know from my own experience within the electorate that there are many families this year alone who have withdrawn their kids from school. They are now opting for home education because of the difficult position that the families now find themselves in, principally because the kids are struggling in mainstream education.

In this bill, \$4.8 million is to be cut from education programs. I suppose this adds to the \$1.5 billion overall cuts to education and there are cuts to health of \$13.2 million. What also affects my area is the \$11.5 million cut to the Building Multicultural Communities Program. I said earlier that I have the honour of representing the most multicultural electorate in the country. As such, I am very disappointed with the Abbott government's decision to withdraw funding under the Building Multicultural Communities Program. In my electorate, 11 organisations were successful in going through the very detailed, exacting and competitive application process for a grant. After receiving formal advice from the Commonwealth that their projects were approved and grants would be provided at the specific funding level, there was certainly much excitement in the community. People had put in a lot of hard work to help get these projects up and on their way. Consequently, plans were established, architects engaged and engineers drew up detailed work plans for these projects.

When the new Liberal government decided to withdraw funding it was like Armageddon for a lot of these organisations. They were deeply disappointed that the Commonwealth had reneged on what had been approved. Also, they were financially engaged, in many cases, in arrangements for the commencement of these projects. The government's attempt to cover this up is just a breach of faith. The Building Multicultural Communities Program was never an election promise. However, these grants were fully funded and included in the previous budget.

There are many organisations around my electorate that provide much-needed assistance to people settling in Australia and contribute to maintaining harmony and social inclusion. These grants would have helped them very much in the work that they undertake. What they do is good for our whole community. One such organisation whose funding was withdrawn is the Australian Chinese Buddhist Society, which is in Bonnyrigg. It was originally awarded \$150,000 to go part way to the construction of the new community hall. James Chan is the chairman of the organisation. He recently wrote an impassioned letter to the department expressing his grave disappointment and also that of the community. This organisation has been providing a great service to our community for the last 32 years. After being initially advised of the approval of the grant, it was greatly encouraged that it was being supported by the Commonwealth and was confident that it was conducting its responsibilities appropriately on behalf of a very significant multicultural community.

I was honoured to announce the grant on behalf of the government at the 32nd anniversary celebrations of the society. There were over 1,000 people present, including various local dignitaries, departmental officers and the leaders of the Chinese community. After the widely publicised and celebrated announcement that the grant would go ahead, regrettably, the organisation was kept in the dark for many months as to the future funding. This was despite their attempts to try to see when the cheques would be issued. But they were assured, not so much that

the cheque was in the mail but that the approvals had been given and they felt suitably encouraged to engage architects and engineers to commence the planning work for the project. Part of the condition of the grant was that work must be completed by 30 June 2014. It was another imperative why they could not delay in ensuring that the planning process was properly entered into and that the DA process through council had been achieved. As I said, these projects are not only community projects but ones that engage a whole series of organisations helping to support them, as well as the Australian Chinese Buddhist Society. Indeed, the local council ensured that every step was taken to assist in terms of the approvals of these projects as well.

This again goes to a government that was prepared to say one thing in the lead-up to the election and then do something entirely different after the election. This is not the government that people thought they were electing.