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Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Australian Public Service

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Leigh, Andrew, MP

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Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (12:09): I rise to speak today about the dire plans the coalition has in store for the Australian Public Service and to contrast them with Labor's optimistic plan for a strong Public Service. For the 11th time, the member for North Sydney on 16 May 2012 has gotten wrong the growth in the size of the Australian Public Service. For the 11th time, the member for North Sydney, Mr Hockey, has claimed that the government has grown the Australian Public Service by 20,000 when he knows in fact the true growth is 12,000.

The member for North Sydney's inability to grapple with the facts about the size of the Public Service speaks volumes about the coalition's attitude to the Public Service. Last August the member for North Sydney was offered a briefing at the Australian Public Service Commission to get his numbers right, to cease using a number that includes Defence Force reservists as public servants. But he has so far refused to take that up.

The opposition, if they are to be believed, have a plan to cut 12,000 public servants. In fact, repeatedly, when the opposition are asked how they will fill their \$70 billion black hole, they point towards slashing the Public Service as their plan for meeting their budget black hole.

The member for North Sydney is a little like Rick Perry, the inept Texas governor who ran for the Republican nomination for President, saying that he would get rid of three US federal departments. The only difference is that the member for North Sydney, unlike Rick Perry, can actually remember the three departments he intends to scrap: they are the department of health, which he says is out of control, despite the fact that it employs about as many people as when the Leader of the Opposition was health minister; the department of climate change, despite the fact that, under a coalition direct action plan, more administration would be required than under the government's much more straightforward carbon pricing plan; and the Defence Materiel Organisation.

So the coalition has said that they will scrap 12,000 Public Service jobs, but it is entirely possible that they will scrap many more than that. Asked on 7.30 on 8 May whether or not the coalition would get rid of 20,000 Public Service jobs, the member for North Sydney refused to rule it out. At the same time, the coalition has plans for a 15,000-strong standing green army without any detail whatsoever as to how that proposal would operate. But, of course, they are only the numbers that are formally placed on the table.

The opposition has formally placed on the table plans to cut 12,000—or maybe 20,000—Public Service jobs, but it is entirely possible that this is the tip of the iceberg. I am fortunate to be in the position of having a copy of the Liberal-National Party's public administration policy, which the coalition took to the 1996 election. That policy said:

Our plans to reduce department running costs by 2 per cent will involve not replacing a proportion of those who leave, up to 2500 positions over the first term of Coalition Government, a process of natural attrition with no forced redundancies.

What did the coalition actually do when they came to office? In 1996-97, they retrenched 10,070 public servants; in 1997-98, they retrenched 10,238 ongoing employees; and, in 1998-99, they retrenched 9,061 ongoing public servants. In total, upon winning office in 1996, the coalition retrenched 30,000 public servants—that is in clear contrast to their election policy's statement that said they would be not replacing 2,500 positions. Indeed, the number of public servants who eventually lost their jobs after the coalition won office in 1996 was more than 10 times the number whom they said would be made redundant.

It is interesting to note, if we turn to the bottom of the 1996 election policy, that it is printed and authorised by a Mr A Robb, who is now the shadow finance minister. He is the shadow finance minister under Mr Abbott—the man who says that you do not trust anything he says unless he writes it down—and he is the person who said, prior to the 1996 election, that there would be only 2,500 Public Service job cuts. In fact, upon winning office, the coalition got rid of 30,000 public sector jobs. When asked why they would want to get rid of Public Service jobs, the member for Dickson noted that the federal department of health does not see one patient; does not run one

hospital; does not employ one doctor, nurse or pharmacist. It might surprise the member for Dickson to know that that is exactly how things have always operated in the Department of Health and Ageing, which administers a vast health promotion program, oversees health research and maintains a network of public hospitals throughout Australia. The coalition may be surprised to learn that the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations does not have schoolchildren walking its corridors. They might be shocked to learn that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry does not regularly partake in office fishing trips. We can only hope that the coalition does not call on the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism to demand room service and more towels.

Those opposite simply do not understand the important work of public servants. They do not understand the critical work that is being done to support Australian prosperity by the hardworking public servants in Australia, including the many public servants in my own electorate of Fraser. On this side of the House, we are proud of public servants. It was public servants who did so much to get us through the global financial crisis with a temporary, timely, targeted fiscal stimulus program that was recognised by international economic authorities, such as the IMF, as being a world-beating fiscal stimulus program because it was put into place quickly and efficiently. When those opposite see public servants, they only think of how to beat them up and how to win votes.

It is true that in the current budget we have made savings across the board. In the process of making savings across the board, there has been an impact on the Public Service. For example, there are redeployments from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations across to the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education. There have been changes in the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency as result of some of the pre-carbon pricing programs coming to an end. We have been honest about those changes, which will take total Australian Public Service numbers back to about where they were in 2009. Having had modest growth year on year in Public Service numbers under the Rudd and Gillard governments, this budget now sees Public Service numbers returning to about where they were in 2009.

This has been difficult for some public servants, including those in my electorate of Fraser. I have been keen to work with departments to make sure that redeployment policies are followed and to make sure that unfilled vacancies are filled. Where we are able to, we will redeploy across federal agencies and the ACT government, which is often struggling to find talented public servants. The cuts are difficult in the ACT, but they do come at a time when, according to the latest vacancy survey, there are around 4,900 job vacancies in the ACT. I do hope that the Canberra Business Council, which has spoken of the skills shortage in the ACT, is able to employ anyone who has taken on, for example, a voluntary redundancy and is able to grow and prosper in the current environment. In conclusion, Labor appreciates the value of a strong Public Service. Those opposite believe only in cutting it. *(Time expired)*