



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

ADJOURNMENT

Department of Human Services

SPEECH

Thursday, 1 December 2016

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Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

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Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (12:10): One of the most important tasks performed by a local member is assisting constituents with Centrelink and Medicare matters. For many, these two services are the face of government; but cutbacks, wage disputes, office closures and a continued push to online services have left that face looking a lot uglier for thousands of Australians and for many in the electorate of Kingsford Smith.

In 2015 the Abbott-Turnbull government, in their infinite wisdom, announced that they would close the Medicare office in Eastgardens, which had been the shopfront and point of contact for Medicare for many in our community for decades. When they closed this service they said: 'Don't worry. We're integrating it with the local Centrelink office at Maroubra Junction, but people will continue to get the same level of service.' Over the last 18 months this commitment has proven to be nothing more than another lie from this government. Lately, constituents have been attending my office—which is around the corner from the newly amalgamated Centrelink and Medicare offices—to complain about the extensive waits and unhelpful service they are getting.

Bernadette Green, from Matraville, began helping her 93-year-old aunt with an age pension application in November last year. When they ran into some technical difficulties relating to assets in the aunt's name, Bernadette decided to attend the Medicare office to try and sort them out. After waiting in the line for an exorbitant amount of time, she was told that they could not help her and she was sent away. Bernadette and her aunt had to go to the extent of hiring a solicitor, and it took a full six months before her aunt's application was processed properly. No-one who is 93 years old should have to hire a solicitor to do a basic dealing with Medicare. But that is the extent that older Australians and pensioners have to go to with the Turnbull government.

Another resident, from Daceyville, needed to change from a carer's pension to an age pension after the man she had cared for passed away. Confused with some of the questions on the forms, the 90-year-old visited Centrelink for help and guidance. She was turned away and told to try the local library. I do not now how the local library is going to help with a Centrelink issue. She came to our office the very same day quite distraught from the experience.

I want to point out that I do not blame the staff of Centrelink and Medicare. They are working exorbitant hours, they are under a lot of pressure and it is basically non-stop. From when they start in the morning, through until to when they finish, they are non-stop dealing with customers. The cuts to Centrelink and Medicare, the cuts to staff and the pressure on wage levels from the Turnbull government are making their role impossible, and it is leading to a diminution of services in our community. After three years without a wage increase for Department of Human Services staff, the situation at our Centrelink and Medicare offices is reaching breaking point. It is not just overworked and under-resourced staff doing it tough; it is the Australian people who are suffering.

Mr Turnbull has pursued a cruel anti-worker industrial agenda, with thousands already losing important workplace rights and many more facing the loss of vital conditions such as family-friendly provisions and the prohibition on the inclusion of domestic violence leave.

A government member interjecting—

Mr THISTLETHWAITE: The member over here says there is a deal on the table—2½ per cent, way under what the market is paying. In fact, what do you think about judges getting 4½ per cent the other day, buster? What do you think about that? Is it any wonder that people are upset with what this government is doing when it comes to workplace relations?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Vasta): Order! The member will resume his seat. I am happy for a bit of banter so long as it does not interfere with the speaker at the time. I call the honourable member for Kingsford Smith.

Mr THISTLETHWAITE: Staff of the Department of Human Services plan to commence four days of industrial action on 5 December, taking a stand against the government's unfair and ideological approach to workplace

bargaining. Rather than seeking to fix the blowouts in Medicare processing and Centrelink waiting times and the increasing number of unanswered calls, the government is pursuing policies that are making the situation worse. It is time they acknowledged the importance of these services and, rather than letting it worsen the impact on ordinary Australians, actually worked to fix these problems. The government could fix the problems of waiting times at Centrelink and Medicare by sitting down with the workers involved and negotiating a fair and reasonable pay offer. That is what they should do immediately.